

## BOOK REVIEWS/КНИЖНЫЕ РЕЦЕНЗИИ

Mary A. Nicholas. *Writers at Work: Russian Production Novels and the Construction of Soviet Culture*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2010. 358 pp. \$75.00. ISBN: 978-1-61148-334-5.

Despite the fact that the Soviet production novel is the most common literary form of the Stalinist era, critical discussion of the production novel often centers on the genre in its canonized form, a product of late 1930s Socialist Realism. Mary A. Nicholas' book *Writers at Work: Russian Production Novels and the Construction of Soviet Culture* examines this most Soviet of genres as a fluid form that evolved across two decades, just as Socialist Realism was not a clearly defined doctrine when first introduced. In this work Nicholas seeks to close a gap in the understanding of the critical transitional period of the 1920s and 1930s. Nicholas argues that the decades of the twenties and thirties should be viewed more as a continuum, rather than distinct cultural periods falsely dichotomized by the imposed five-year economic plans. She draws on new archival research to expand our understanding of what motivated authors to take up the production novel, and examines the production novel as a crucial component in the construction of Soviet culture. For Nicholas, the very topic of this genre, which "focuses on construction as a theme and relies on the metaphor of building to make its case" (p. 19), reflects the idea of production that was at the heart of Soviet culture in the 1920s and 1930s. Thus a clearer understanding of the development of the production novel allows for a more comprehensive picture of the creation of Soviet culture.

Working from this assumption that the production novel did not spring forth fully-formed, Nicholas suggests:

Not merely a 'genre from above,' the production novels served as the locus for often surprisingly candid discussion of their authors' ambivalence, disorientation, and doubt about this process of self-construction. Early production novels are, thus, essential documents in the history of the process of (re) building Soviet writers. They are compelling evidence of contemporary authors' evolving responses to the questions of how life was to be interpreted and lived in Stalin's Russia. (p. 20)

Nicholas demonstrates that as Russian literature was transformed into Soviet literature, authors from across literary and political spectrums pondered the new world under construction all around them. By investigating the production novel as a genre that developed in tandem with the transition to Soviet culture, one gains insight into these "writers at work." Nicholas writes of this transitional period:

We know from hindsight that their imagined universe differed dramatically from the completed totalitarian project. By the end of the Soviet period, millions would have suffered, many sent to unfair, lonely, and painful deaths in the name of the very project these writers seemed to champion. (p. 38)

By forcing a false dichotomy between the decades of the 1920s and 1930s, we lose sight of the aspirations of those involved in the process and their genuine engagement in the reshaping of Soviet society.

Nicholas' work draws on an excellent range of literary scholarship – both primary and secondary resources – that informs her work. Her selections of authors and novels for this study are not predictable, but even bold. In all of her examples, Nicholas dissects the ways in which even well-established examples of the genre fail to meet certain specifications of Socialist Realist doctrine and she gives a solid reading of some unlikely choices as strong examples of the genre. Nicholas dissects Iurii Olesha's *Envy*, one of the first production novels, but a work often overlooked as not conforming to later specifications of the genre. According to Nicholas, Olesha captures the excitement of shaping a new society and the anxiety about where to fit in, while he charts the shifting boundaries, roles, and landscapes of the production novel. In the chapter on Marietta Shaginian's *Hydrocentral*, Nicholas explores the idea of a culture's willingness to sacrifice in human costs in order to accomplish a significant re-construction of self and society. Across six chapters, she covers seven authors, including the writing team of Il'f and Petrov, Boris Pilniak, Valentin Kataev and Andrei Platonov, whose lives and works present the production novel across the spectrum of the genre, both chronologically and in relation to the later standards of the form. One of Nicholas' more exciting contributions is her final chapter on Andrei Platonov and the deconstruction of the production novel. Nicholas remarks that Platonov is often excluded from the discussion of the genre, as if including him would "taint his literary production and deny its genius." (p. 239) While Platonov is often read as anti-utopian, Nicholas argues that Platonov, at his core, still examined the metaphor of building and embraced utopian aspirations as he simultaneously opposed bureaucratic and political excess. Nicholas combines a close reading of each novel with a discussion of the author's intentions and creative inspiration, drawing on letters, diaries, interviews and other recently revealed archival material.

Nicholas delivers a convincing argument proposing that adhering to the arbitrary demarcations of the five-year plans does not particularly benefit an understanding of the lives and motivations of the Soviet authors at work or the organic arc between the two decades. Nicholas concludes,

Both those engaged in the work of construction and those tasked with chronicling that process believed they were building a new and better world. To understand the production novel, we need to explore the alternative space

that its earliest examples imagined. On closer inspection, that space reveals a landscape devoid of the easy dichotomies we have associated with this genre and the period. By building a better metaphor for the writers of this complex era of literary history, we have a chance at understanding what Platonov called their 'destroyed lives' much better. (p. 280)

*Writers at Work* offers a strong reexamination of the production novel in this carefully researched, well-written volume. Nicholas makes a compelling case for early production novels as a reflection of these authors' desire to contribute to building a better world – believing in its possibilities and weighing the human cost of such an undertaking.

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