

**Men without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction,
1917-1929**



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will inevitably be incommensurate with them. Throughout the first part of his book, Eskin lays out the intricacies of each theorist's understanding of ethics and connects it to other ideas central to their understandings of language: dialogism and answerability, architectonics, saying and said, and—perhaps most important—the “other” or otherwise than Being. It is Eskin's contention that Lévinas saw ethics as a first philosophy, prior to epistemology or ontology, in that it understood our relations with others (and the negotiation of language it entails) as the necessary ground on which to theorize Being in the first place.

The second part of the book is an extended analysis of the dialogic character of Mandel'shtam's poems and Celan's translations of them, particularly of *Die Niemandrose* (1966). It considers translation less as a task or even as a metaphor than as the ethical activity par excellence. Translation, as in Walter Benjamin's sense, forces interlocutors to engage with one another's language, not so that one becomes a window or prism for the other, but so that their interanimation makes clear what lies beyond or prior to either of them. As Eskin puts it, speaking of *Die Niemandrose*, “Celan's idiosyncratic poetic idiom explodes the linguistic system(s) which it engages, on whose resources it constantly draws, without, however, ceasing to be traced and haunted by it (them)” (267).

There are times, particularly in the third chapter on Bakhtin, Mandel'shtam, and Celan, where the author makes perhaps too much of connections that are not there: Eskin worries about Bakhtin's apparent denigrations of poetry as monologic, and his favoring of prosaic language; and I think his attempts to establish the influence of Bakhtin's thought on Mandel'shtam are unnecessary (since, after all, there is virtually no influence at all between Lévinas and Bakhtin and yet their shared understanding of language is uncannily similar). I also had the uneasy sense that Lévinas's theoretical understanding of witness was being emptied of its traumatic content: Eskin's understanding of witness and testimony notes Lévinas's redemptive purpose but seems to ignore the possibility—admitted everywhere in Lévinas's writings—that our encounter with the other will result in suffering, misunderstanding, and violence. And yet these are quibbles with what is otherwise a brilliant book. What Michael Eskin has provided, in *Ethics and Dialogue*, is an indispensable consideration of the work of two theorists whose names are not often mentioned in the same breath, and a highly original study of the poetry of Mandel'shtam and Celan. No one who reads this book will think about the connection between poetry and ethics in quite the same way again.

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Men without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917–1929. By Eliot Borenstein. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. xvi, 348 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$59.95, hard bound. \$19.95, paper.

Eliot Borenstein, in his study of Russian literature in the first decade after the Bolshevik revolution, has, to use his own words, written “a book about comradeship” (ix). It is Borenstein's contention that the “rhetoric of ‘manliness’ remains only partially recognized in traditional criticism of Soviet literature” (38). He sets as his task “to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the topos of masculinity throughout early Soviet literature, to show that the concern with masculinity transcended the boundaries of party affiliation” (38). Rather than surveying all fiction and poetry, Borenstein chooses “texts that address revolutionary masculinity in a particularly productive fashion” (38). Among a number of texts given more than cursory attention, three authors stand out. “It is my contention that [Iurii] Olesha, [Isaak] Babel and [Andrei] Platonov, more than any of their contemporaries, simultaneously create and interrogate revolutionary notions of masculinity” (39).

American Slavists who examine Russian literature of the Soviet period have tended to a sociological approach, even when their studies are in the best cases informed by close attention to the texts of the artistic works. In this respect Borenstein's book is a worthy suc-

cessor to classics of the genre by such authors as Rufus Mathewson, Robert Maguire, and Katerina Clark. Each of these authors had touchstones in the literature of social analysis. Borenstein's references to the literature are extensive, but he depends above all on those thinkers who combine psychoanalytic orientation with anthropological speculation, beginning with Sigmund Freud of *Totem and Taboo* and continuing down to Eve Sedgwick and Luce Irigaray. He is not the prisoner of any theoretical orientation, however, but rather uses theory opportunistically as it proves advantageous for illuminating a problem or a text.

The book opens with a detailed introduction in which the many influences that bore upon the myth of comradeship are examined. Among these are the real collapse of family ties in the chaos of revolution and civil war; Bolshevik ideology, which presupposed the disappearance of the family and the creation of new social structures; the fact of men's isolation from women and family and close association with other men in the conditions of war; the utopian vision of commonality inherited in various forms from the nineteenth-century intellectual tradition; the elevation of comradeship and the cult of masculinity in early modernist discourse; and the predisposition to asceticism in the Russian revolutionary movement. In addition to examining the cult of masculinity and comradeship as such, Borenstein returns frequently to the problem created by the denigration or exclusion of women and family from masculine society.

In a chapter entitled "The Ladykillers," Borenstein traces the creation of a specifically Bolshevik myth of male comradeship and exclusion of women from Aleksandr Blok's "The Twelve" through the story "Salt" from Babel's *Red Cavalry*. Borenstein shows how the paradigm becomes complicated in the conclusion of Platonov's novel *Chevengur*, in which a utopian brotherhood establishes a new society, only to see it destroyed when the men demand brides. Although as Borenstein points out, the theme coincides with a social campaign for the empowerment and equality of women, he asserts that it would be wrong to read the texts as primarily a hostile response to a female threat: "male comradeship is one of the primary myths of early Soviet culture, a myth that, though connected to the changing status of women, does not depend on women for its power" (72).

The body of Borenstein's book is devoted to the three authors whom he has singled out for particular attention. The discussion of Babel's *Red Cavalry* focuses on the theme of its subtitle, "Dead Fathers and Sons." "*Red Cavalry* describes the increasing dominance of the 'brothers' or 'comrades' at the expense of the 'fathers' and 'mothers'" (76). Tracing the narrator Liutov's failed attempts to bond with the Cossacks, Borenstein shows the power that the myth of comradeship holds, particularly for outsiders who have no hope of penetrating the masculine commune. In his discussion of Olesha's novel *Envy*, the failed protagonist Kavalero long to join the new socialist family of men created by the commissar Andrei Babichev. Engaged in revolutionizing the kitchen along production lines, Andrei "attempts to replace the feminine, domestic sphere by incorporating it into the masculine public order" (165). Kavalero, while alienated from the values of the new society, sees that there is something in the comradeship and teamwork of the new order that he cannot help coveting. Here Borenstein again shows his ability to frame an accurate and subtly nuanced assessment of the play of opposing forces in these works.

Platonov is the central figure in Borenstein's paradigm. It could almost be observed that the historical period and work of other authors is seen retrospectively from the vantage of its conclusion in the work of Platonov. Platonov particularly engages Borenstein's attention because his works of the 1920s demonstrate the myth of a utopian masculine commune in its purest form and, at the same time, grapple with the problem of the exclusion of women.

Borenstein accepts that the part of Bolshevik ideology that most influenced Platonov had to do with the nature-culture opposition, in particular "the classic myth of early Soviet ideology . . . the scientific triumph of humanity over the harsh, inhuman conditions of nature" (197). As nature is assimilated to the masculine sphere, the question of woman's role becomes problematic. While in *Chevengur* the family must somehow be integrated into the society of men, the ending of the novel does not confirm an "unequivocal acceptance of family ties and rejection of comradeship" (262). Platonov dares to explore the most difficult problem for the society of men, but he does not foresee a solution.

A brief review cannot do justice to the variety of Borenstein's text, with its wealth of commentary on every aspect of the question, each subtopic marked off by a subtitle. The notes are also extensive, almost constituting an essay on the relevant literature. The work's very fullness sometimes leads to satiation. It seems that the author is not only reiterating much that has already been said but even exploring the surface of works and topics in aspects that would already be known to most readers. Perhaps that is an inevitable flaw of the study's ambitions.

Borenstein also has the annoying habit of pursuing an argument in a single-minded fashion, only to introduce a caveat in his summation. While these more nuanced and considered formulations are valuable, it would have saved the reader from misunderstanding had the author shown his hand more throughout the argument. Borenstein often seems to assume that because he knows where he is tending, the reader must know too.

Nevertheless, this book is indispensable for specialists who study the literature and culture of the early Soviet period. It covers familiar ground but casts a new light on the period, bringing important features into relief that may have been slighted or unnoticed in earlier studies.

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Voices from the Void: The Genres of Liudmila Petrushevskaia. By Sally Dalton-Brown. Studies in Slavic Literature, Culture and Society, vol. 7. New York: Berghahn Books, 2000. x, 214 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$35.00, hard bound.

The laws of inevitability dictate that within any academic sphere we will occasionally encounter a book that prompts ruminations about the state of our profession, the logic of publishing decisions, and the fate of language in the contemporary world. Sally Dalton-Brown's study of the contemporary writer Liudmila Petrushevskaia is precisely such a book.

As the first Anglophone monograph on Petrushevskaia, *Voices from the Void* faces a daunting task, for Petrushevskaia is a prolific and sophisticated author of highly intertextual prose, to which she insistently, though inconsistently (and "there's the rub"), attaches genre labels that the conscientious critic cannot ignore, yet should not misperceive as the First or Last Word. Unquestioning reliance on an author's extratextual personal signposts, in my skeptical view, betrays a critic's incomprehension or desperation; it bespeaks the naive presumption not only of creativity's complete self-awareness but also of a fantasized seamless continuity between author and self-commentator. Of all writers, Petrushevskaia should elicit doubt and distance, given that her authorial pleasure derives partly from being "misunderstood." Dalton-Brown, however, unquestioningly accepts Petrushevskaia's Word. Taking her cue from the author, she organizes her study according to Petrushevskaia's taxonomical "system."

The monograph poignantly illustrates what happens when a gratifyingly complex writer appeals to a critic whose analytical skills may not be adequate to the hermeneutical enterprise, let alone more sophisticated ambitions. Well-intentioned and thorough, *Voices from the Void* nonetheless reveals nothing new to seasoned and criticism-savvy readers of Petrushevskaia, while those unfamiliar with her works might benefit by consulting sources listed in the first-rate bibliography compiled by Dalton-Brown.

Finding the nature of Petrushevskaia's work "harrowing" (vii), Dalton-Brown ascribes to it the matrix of silence; her study concludes: "Petrushevskaia's texts speak and yet are silent, because the void of which they speak is too vast. The void is our own fear. How can we listen to it for too long without going mad?" (197). On a more prosaic note, genre and voice comprise Dalton-Brown's declared conceptual and organizing categories. Her reluctance to draw distinctions within these categories, however, obscures or ignores narrative strategies on which many of Petrushevskaia's major effects hinge. For instance, echoing