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(Review) Rewriting Capitalism: Literature and the Market in Late Tsarist Russia and the Kingdom of Poland

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Rewriting Capitalism: Literature and the Market in Late Tsarist Russia and the Kingdom of Poland by Beth Holmgren

Review by: Andrea Lanoux

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the moment of a crucial choice with profound insight into a character's psychic mechanisms; he thus elucidates both the choices and the circumstances that surround them.

As an example of Seeley's astute sense of character, one can refer to his analysis of Natasha's vulnerability to the Kuragins. Natasha — we recall — has just experienced humiliation and rejection during her visit to Prince Andrei's father and sister. Used to admiration and love, Natasha has to deal with the lack of both for the first time. In such a situation, one's need for love and admiration becomes more pronounced, and this is precisely the moment when the Kuragins step in. Furthermore, such unjust treatment is bound to produce a sense of confusion, hence Natasha's values and priorities undergo a quick revision, which make her much more susceptible to Anatole's charms (30). In terms of Dostoevsky's characters, Seeley ties the oscillations of Ivan Karamazov's thoughts and actions to his attempt to reject the heritage of both his father (lust, violence, cynicism) and his mother (religiosity, spirituality, obedience). Likewise, Smerdiakov's "rebellion against his birth" manifests itself not only in metaphysical or social spheres, but also in his squeamishness, a direct reversal of his mother's hygienic indifference. In fact, Seeley's approach to complex characters consists primarily in presenting the algorithm of their behavior through the split in their personalities, then in interpreting that split as the result of their childhood traumas in general, and the impact of their parents in particular. A rather convincing procedure, whether we like it or not.

Most of the essays, while not breaking new ground in Tolstoy or Dostoevsky scholarship, and failing to engage other aspects of the novels or the contributions of other scholars, nevertheless contain plenty of useful psychological insights into the characters and their actions. Such insights, even if familiar to some scholars, would clearly be of help to anyone who teaches Tolstoy and Dostoevsky on the undergraduate level. Students are interested in human personality and its choices, and rightly so, since they are at the stage when they want to learn about themselves and other people, rather than about opaque theories of limited, frequently esoteric, applicability. A reason, if not *the* reason, behind the continuous appeal of Tolstoy's and Dostoevsky's novels to the audiences all over the world lies in these novels' inexhaustible wealth of psychological insights realized through unforgettable and complex characters. Frank Seeley's book, valid in its approach and illuminating in its results, will prove rewarding to anyone fascinated by great Russian novelists and their literary heroes, be it Natasha Rostova, Andrei Bolkonsky, or Ivan Karamazov.

Vladimir Golstein, Yale University

Beth Holmgren. *Rewriting Capitalism: Literature and the Market in Late Tsarist Russia and the Kingdom of Poland*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998. 240 pp., \$45.00 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper).

In her examination of the markets for literature in Great Russia and the Kingdom of Poland from 1890 to 1917, Beth Holmgren sets a new standard for comparative study. Her book explores the cultural specificities of the Russian and Polish mass-circulation press through a combination of research methods that includes textual analysis, feminist criticism, and a socio-historical approach to marketing practices. Framed by a comparison of the Russian and Polish literature markets a century ago with the situation in Russia and Poland today, Holmgren's study functions on two planes: contrasting fin-de-siècle Russian and Polish literature markets to each other, and comparing these situations as a whole, then versus now. In the first case, Russian and Polish cultures appear as separate entities reflecting "the enmeshed politics of imperialism and national self-determination"; in the second, they appear as a joint representative of (Slavic) cultures "similarly critical of and self-consciously distinct from the West" (xiii).

As the book's title indicates, *Rewriting Capitalism* demonstrates how Russian and Polish publishers, book sellers, and critics aimed to "rewrite the scripts of capitalist progress" in the face of a growing mass-circulation press that threatened to devalue the higher spiritual and national functions of high-culture literature (12). In this regard, Russian and Polish capitalist practices never represented a wholesale adoption of Western capitalism. Holmgren organizes her study in two parts according to methodological criteria: the first examines attitudes towards capitalism and popular culture as they appear in Russian and Polish literary texts, while the second presents a socio-historical view of literature-as-commodity based on the examination of two serial publications, the Russian *Vol'f Bookstore News* and the Polish *Illustrated Weekly*. An introductory chapter lays the groundwork for later discussion by outlining literacy rates in Great Russia and the Kingdom of Poland, market forces affecting the circulation of intellectual materials, as well as the role of the high-culture writer who historically has enjoyed "a tremendous amount of moral and national authority" in each nation (10).

Chapters 2 and 3 examine the representation of "the merchant" in Russian and Polish literatures as both reflecting and influencing domestic attitudes towards capitalism. In her analysis of several generations of famous literary merchants including Chichikov, Rogozhin, "Raskol'nikov's greasy-haired usurer" and the merchant's wife of Leskov's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, Holmgren argues that the merchant in Russian literature took a back seat to the intelligent hero and was "regularly blackballed" for not being a thinker, a leader, or a virtuous man (23–24). While positive portrayals of merchants also dotted the literary landscape (notably those of Mel'nikov-Pecherskii, Aleksandr Ostrovskii, and Chekhov), Gorky's merchants topped off the century with characteristic, violent cruelty. Polish literature, by contrast, was much kinder to the merchant, as evinced by the 1890 novel *The Doll* by Bolesław Prus. Here the novel's hero, Stanisław Wokulski, appears not only as the most famous of Polish literary merchants, but also as lover, philanthropist, victim, and national hero, thereby broadening the merchant's social and narrative role.

Holmgren points out that despite the fact that neither Russian nor Polish societies exhibited a Western-style middle class, both sprouted a viable middlebrow culture at the century's end with the development of print capitalism. In Chapter 4, she presents a different kind of literary analysis by comparing two popular novels, *The Leper* (1909) by Helena Mniszek and the six-volume *Keys to Happiness* (1908–1913) by Anastasiia Verbitskaya, as representative examples of the middle-brow romance. Although these works present a positive view of consumption, interpreted by contemporary critics as a valorization of "vulgar materialism," they nevertheless adapt the form of the Western popular romance by ending with the heroine's death (rather than her marriage and eternal happiness).

The following two chapters (5 and 6), the most innovative in the book, compare marketing techniques in Russia and the Kingdom of Poland. *Vol'f Bookstore News*, ostensibly a marketing pamphlet that promoted its stock to a wide readership, also aimed to promote a commercial literary culture through its articles on such varied subjects as the joys of book maintenance, Pushkin's earnings, literary museums, and the biographies of writer-celebrities. The *News* aimed to reassert the book's higher worth, the author's value as a "refined collectible," and Russia's imperial might by reiterating Russia's cultural superiority over the West, and in this manner projected "a 'serious' Russian soul onto a Western body" (149). In the Kingdom of Poland, the commercialization of literature did not reflect the same descent from "sacred to secular" as in Russia, but rather served as a means of national unification. The illustrious *Illustrated Weekly* represented the broader Polish cultural scene in its coverage of Polish national monuments, landmarks, architecture, and especially national writers as "patronized saints." Holmgren aptly points out that the Polish press exhibited its own frustrated imperial ambitions by regularly suggesting Polish cultural superiority in its presentation of Mickiewicz as a cut above Pushkin.

In her attempt to come full circle by comparing the nineteenth-century context to the

present day, Holmgren exhibits less sensitivity to cultural difference in her closing remarks than in the rest of the book. By discussing present-day socio-economic developments in both Russia and Poland as evidence of “the positive embrace of bourgeois mentality” (185), she overlooks the fact that a viable middle class appears to be on the rise in Poland, while no such group appears to be forming in Russia; this disparity arguably already has, and undoubtedly will, affect future patterns of literature consumption in both countries. In her mention of New Russians “and similar groups in Poland,” she implies the existence of cultural analogues; yet these “similar groups” do not have a similar name in Polish precisely because they do not represent so prevalent a social phenomenon. To treat the tables of used books on the streets of Russia and the well-regulated deluge of new bookstores in Poland as comparable phenomena is a stretch of the comparative framework—one that does not diminish, however, the overall value and contribution of this compelling study.

Andrea Lanoux, Connecticut College

Michaele Colucci and Riccardo Picchio, eds. *Storia della civiltà letteraria russa*. Three volumes. Turin: UTET, 1997. 789 pp. (vol. 1), 897 pp. (vol. 2), 405 pp. (vol. 3).

This three-volume survey of Russian culture is a synthesis of many historical moments, many thematic arguments, and the most diverse critical approaches—and it constitutes a fundamental contribution by Italian Slavists to Slavic studies in general. While written in a language that has limited international resonance and bearing the fruit of a collaboration largely by Italian researchers, *Storia della civiltà letteraria russa* is a stimulating text that goes far beyond national boundary and bias. While discussion of Italo-Russian cultural connections takes pride of place and informs the deliberations and conclusions of each essayist, the overall result provides a valuable web of cross-references that ensures the compactness and usefulness of this exposition for both the specialist and the educated public.

The structure of the text is both logical and lucid. Part I, dedicated to the literature of mediaeval Russia, starts with Riccardo Picchio’s introduction (“Tradizione russa antica e tradizione slava ortodossa”) which is followed by his four chapters (co-authored with Michaele Colucci) on the codification of literary genres during the 12th and 13th centuries. This section forms a solid basis upon which Harvey Goldblatt elaborates his essay on the Slav and Orthodox Renaissance in the late 14th through 16th centuries, and which dovetails in turn with Cesare De Michelis’s assessment of the heretical movements during the 11th through 16th centuries. What is especially striking here is the establishment and analysis of the intricate connections between the Russian texts and their parallels in other languages, including Byzantine Greek, Polish, Latin, and French—something that relates directly to the subsequent discussion of the issue of Russian borrowing, translation, and interpretation.

In his three chapters in Part II Picchio approaches the literature of Muscovy via three avenues, i.e., “Chiesa, Stato e Società,” “Crisi e restaurazione della slavia ortodossa,” and “Verso la formazione di un nuovo sistema letterario.” The writer regards the 17th century as Russia’s first phase of “westernization” via the European Baroque and as a vital stepping stone from antiquity to the modern era—typified by the life and work of Simeon Polotsky. Later, in her comparative discussion of literature and the fine arts, Michele Boehming also focuses attention on Polotsky—both as an accomplished writer of the Baroque and as a precursor to the experimental visual poetry of the 20th-century avant-garde.

Picchio also introduces Part III—on the “new literature”—with an essay on the Petrine crisis which is supplemented by chapters from various scholars on the definition and practice of literary norms, the society and culture of Catherine the Great, Russian literature in its