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Review: A Convenient Territory: Russian Literature at the Edge of Modernity

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Kopper, John M., Michael Wachtel, eds. 2015. *A Convenient Territory: Russian Literature at the Edge of Modernity. Essays in Honor of Barry Scherr*. Bloomington, IN: Slavica. 393 pages.

The Festschrift is an odd, performative genre, and it tends to comprise loose collections of gestures—gestures of gratitude, gestures of respect, gestures of celebration. Not so with this Festschrift. With only a few exceptions, the works here are very form- and literature-centric, something as rare these days as it is welcome. This is as good a reflection as any of the honoree's place in our field. As the astonishing bibliography of Barry Scherr's works at the end of the book attests, he has been a strong force in formal analysis, poetics, exact methods, and, in general, empirically minded literary scholarship since the 1970s. Unlike most Festschriften, this book could stand on its own (that is, even without the honoree): it has a scholarly unity of purpose, and it is meticulously and expertly edited. That is not to say that there is not a broad range of topics taken up in the book, however—articles that explore other aspects of Scherr's scholarly legacy on Soviet film and science fiction appear alongside formal analyses. Like the best Festschriften, it provides a snapshot of our field at this moment in time.

Lacking the space here to engage every one of the twenty-one superb articles that compose this book, I will touch on just a few of the pieces that I found particularly intriguing. Michael Wachtel, one of the volume's editors, takes on an astonishingly understudied subject in his "The Russian Caesura: Rhythm, Syntax, and Semantics." Moving from Lomonosov through Sumarokov to Zhukovsky, Pushkin, and Blok, Wachtel addresses a simple but difficult question: "Does the caesura contribute to the meaning of poetry and, if so, how?" (21). While he provides a number of intriguing answers to this question, I think the more important point of the article is a methodological one. By focusing primarily on how poets innovated by manipulating the connection of caesurae to syntactic breaks within the very narrow constraints of the hexameter line, Wachtel argues by example that syntactic analysis reveals

aspects of the “link between form and semantics” that quantitative analysis cannot.

Another of the volume’s standout articles in the realm of formal poetics is Evgeny Kazartsev’s “The Rhythmic Structure of *The Tales of Belkin* and the Peculiarities of a Poet’s Prose.” (As it happens, by the way, this article contains the only serious editorial lapse I have discovered in the book—the orphaned note 6 on p. 58.) By employing up-to-date quantitative methods for the analysis of prose rhythm, Kazartsev is able to challenge a longstanding assumption about prose rhythm, namely that, since it hews more closely to “natural language,” it is much more homogeneous than verse rhythm. Not so, according to the numbers. Not only is the rhythm of Pushkin’s prose different than that of, say, Pasternak, the rhythm of the *Belkin Tales* is much different than the rhythm of “The Queen of Spades.” And by “different,” I mean to say that there is a statistically significant difference in the frequencies of the rhythmic figures (monosyllabic words, “iambic” words, etc.) Kazartsev has analyzed. This reader was a bit troubled by a certain lack of methodological clarity (e.g., why choose the Pearson chi-squared test over other tests of significance, and why not compare Pearson test output to the results of other tests?). Nonetheless, the article offers both some stunning fundamental findings as well as some very tantalizing, if perhaps a bit speculative, explanations for these findings—as when Kazartsev suggests that as Pushkin developed as a prose writer, his prose rhythm grew farther and farther away from his verse rhythm. This allows us to really put some meat on the bones of old commonplaces about how poets write prose.

Among other highlights of the volume are Alexander Zholkovsky’s characteristically sparkling close-reading riff on Pushkin’s “Gorod pyshnyi, gorod bednyi,” Alyssa Dinega Gillespie’s thoughtful exploration of arboreal imagery in Tsvetaeva’s poetics of nostalgia, and David Bethea’s evolutionary approach to Brodsky’s “Lullaby of Cape Cod.” But nearly every article here has something profoundly new and arrestingly original for the reader, which makes this one of our field’s finest Festschriften published in recent memory.

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