

BOOK REVIEWS

L. Michael O'Toole

STRUCTURE, STYLE AND INTERPRETATION IN THE RUSSIAN SHORT STORY

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982. Pp. 272.

Reviewed by Paul Debreczeny

In our age of runaway abstract theorizing, a book that combines theoretical discussions with analyses of concrete texts is certainly welcome. Moreover, Professor O'Toole's choice of text in this attempt to reach students of literature at large is a felicitous one, for the Russian short story of the nineteenth century not only transcends national boundaries but has also drawn an impressive array of commentary.

The central part of the book is divided into chapters each of which explains a different critical concept, offering two examples of analysis. "Narrative Structure" is illustrated on Leskov's "The Man on Sentry Duty" and Gogol's "The Overcoat"; "Point of View" on Dostoevsky's "The Gentle Spirit" and Tolstoy's "Father Sergius"; "Fable" on Korolenko's "Makar's Dream" and Pushkin's "The Post-Stage Master"; "Plot" on Pushkin's "The Pistol Shot" and Gorky's "Twenty-Six Men and a Girl"; "Character" on Turgenev's "Asya" and Chekhov's "The Black Monk"; and "Setting" on Turgenev's "Bezhin Meadow" and Chekhov's "The Peasants." Although there are some gaps in O'Toole's references to secondary sources, his discussions are generally informed, and he moves with ease among a range of critical approaches, from the formal-structural to the semiotic, with no particular axe to grind.

Yet there is something wrong with this book. Some of O'Toole's critical analyses are perceptive and original (that of "A Gentle Spirit" is perhaps the best), but critical theory and practice coexist in a strange shotgun marriage in most of his chapters. In some cases a critical apparatus is provided, then valid conclusions that have little to do with that apparatus are drawn. The sub-chapter on "The Post-Stage Master," for example, begins with an elaborate discussion of time sequences, which leads the reader to believe that the chronological arrangement is the story's most crucial feature. Then, through several steps, O'Toole arrives at an interpretation of the story, showing that the narrative has subverted the sentimental myth epitomized in the Parable of the Prodigal Son and in the implicit image of Poor Liza. One should not quarrel with this interpretation, but it is difficult to see why we had to learn so much specifically about time sequences in order to arrive at it. Similarly, O'Toole's analysis of "The Pistol Shot" begins with a detailed listing of the story's episodes and a discussion of which of these episodes could be categorized as cardinal functions, catalyses, indices proper, or informants, according to Roland Barthes's system. Then, once more, a perfectly acceptable conclusion is drawn—that Silvio fails to achieve full revenge—but it is not a direct logical outcome of the preceding structural analysis.

In other cases a much too mechanical construction of patterns prevents O'Toole from analyzing stories in their full complexity. A case in point is "Asya," whose construction he sees as a series of riddles about the heroine's nature, eventually turning into the hero's puzzled questioning of his own motives. This is a neat enough pattern (suggested by Chernyshevsky's interpretation), but it fails to take into account the fact that Asya threw herself on N. N. impulsively, out of a sense of social and psychological insecurity. If N. N. had done the same thing, all the admirers of the "strong Russian woman" would have celebrated Asya's firmness in not rushing into a relationship headlong. For another example, let me mention O'Toole's analysis of "The Black Monk." He begins with an impressive outline of the topographic spheres that define the natures of the three central characters: Pesotsky's sphere is the orchard; Kovrin's, the study; and Tanya's, the house in general. Their undoing is that they are forced to operate outside their own spheres, their topographical movements getting entangled with their sliding up and down a scale of varying states of health. Having set up this interesting schema, however, O'Toole fails to proceed to an interpretation of the story. No attempt is made to integrate into the structure what all the *indices* seem to be pointing to: the poetic nature of Kovrin's hallucinations, the life-sustaining force of illusion, the beauty of inspiration however absurd.

The problem is that O'Toole superimposes his theoretical concepts on the stories. A better strategist would not have displayed a fascinating box full of new tools and invited the reader to watch him use them, but would have produced them sparingly as the interpretation of the texts called for them. The choice between such procedures actually involves, not just different ways of presenting material, but a basic principle. O'Toole battles against what he calls intuitive criticism, proposing "coherent and rule-governed systems" instead (p. 37), which he claims are more objective and scientific; but in fact his best analyses are governed by his overall understanding of the stories. It would indeed be strange even to imagine a wholly independent "scientific" system of criticism that would be infallible in relation to any text. For the critical enterprise, after all, is an attempt to articulate the complex of emotional and intellectual responses that is the aesthetic experience; putting the analysis before the experience is like putting the cart before the horse.

Grace Radin

*VIRGINIA WOOLF'S THE YEARS: THE EVOLUTION
OF A NOVEL*

Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981. Pp. 188.

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Reviewed by Ethel F. Cornwell

The Years has never been considered one of Virginia Woolf's best works, neither by the author herself nor by the majority of her critics. Grace Radin's study, *Virginia Woolf's The Years: The Evolution of a Novel*, does much to explain why. Virginia Woolf's attempt to write a novel of "fact" rather than one of "vision," such as *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, or *The Waves* (see p. 15) for an explanation of Woolf's terms), went against the grain. Eventually the polemicist yielded to the artist, but the result, despite endless cuttings and revisions, was a work which is neither fish nor fowl.

The original idea for the book came when Woolf decided to convert what was to have been a feminist essay into an "Essay-Novel", to be called *The Pargiters* (see p. 13). Each scene was to be followed by an interpretive essay which would place the events in historical perspective and indict the politics, economics, and sexual mores of male-dominated English society. Believing that history ignored the lives of the obscure, particularly the lives of women, Woolf determined that *The Pargiters* would treat the minutiae of their daily lives "with a seriousness and a penetration usually reserved for momentous affairs of state" (p. 31).

But long before she completed the first draft of the novel, Woolf lost confidence in her original plan and began to revise. The manuscript was too long and her ideological attacks too shrill. The first to go were the interpretive essays, discarded after completion of the first chapter as an obviously clumsy device. Much of this material was (properly) relegated to *Three Guineas*.

Later, finding herself unable to live with a novel of fact, Woolf decided to combine fact and vision and hit upon the idea of using alternating scenes, such as those contrasting the factual Eleanor with the visionary Elvira. But still the book would not gel, and the revisions continued. *The Pargiters/The Years* was to prove the most problematic of all Virginia Woolf's novels.

Radin traces the evolution of the novel from the eight manuscript notebooks which constituted the first draft of *The Pargiters* to the final publication of *The Years*, noting the major changes from the cuttings and revisions, which continued right through the galley proofs to publication.

In the process, the novel of feminist protest becomes a much milder novel of manners; many of the radical ideas contained in the original draft are watered down or omitted entirely, especially those regarding male and female sexuality; and the characters of Delia, Eleanor, and Elvira (now called Sara) lose something of their original force. The whole tone and thrust of the novel have changed.

Of particular interest is the opening scene of the book. In *The Pargiters* this focuses on