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Changing Landscapes: The Provincial Text in Russian-Soviet Culture. Introduction

Ornella Discacciati,¹ Emilio Mari²

¹Università degli Studi di Bergamo, ²University of International Studies of Rome

Abstract – Introduction to the monographic section “Changing Landscapes: the Provincial Text in Russian-Soviet Culture.”

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Changing Landscapes: The Provincial Text in Russian-Soviet Culture. Introduction

Ornella Discacciati,¹ Emilio Mari²

¹Università degli Studi di Bergamo, ²University of International Studies of Rome

Widespread opinion among historians of Russian literature holds that one may only speak of a ‘provincial text’, at least in the strict sense, in relation to the pre-revolutionary period.¹ In the 1990s, when this concept began to be elaborated, a large group of Russian and Western scholars focused on identifying what might be called ‘invariants’ in provincial discourse: semantic elements whose recurrence in different genres and authors suggests (in analogy to Toporov’s interpretation of the ‘Petersburg text’) the existence of a macrotext – or better, hypertext – regulated by principles inversely analogous to those of the capital. A provincial paradigm (or canon) was constructed in a series of international conferences and essays that satisfies, with all its variations, the Toporovian conditions of “coherence and unity of semantic structure” (27). This phase was necessary in defining the identificatory traits of the pre-revolutionary provincial landscape and did not impede (in keeping with Lotmanian semiotics of culture) comprehension of the weathering and creolization of the ‘provincial idiom’: exchange relations with the capital, liminal spaces, and insular architectural elements (*usad’ba* – country estates), i.e., shifts (*svigi*) along the horizontal axis.

In this initial phase, issues of diachronic transformation were necessarily pushed into the background: how History has intruded upon Myth, modifying its meanings and possible interpretations. It is only in a recent series of publications² that the attempt has been made to supplement the synchronic approach with a more forthright diachronic perspective, aiming to measure the long-term consistency of provincial discourse across the syntactic caesurae of huge political and social upheavals. We might say, drawing on the categories that Hans Günther (286) applied to Socialist Realism, that geo-criticism has increasingly shifted toward ‘decanonization’ of the provincial text.

This monographic section is thus dedicated to the Soviet period and, in a broader sense, to the violent historical ‘explosions’ of the twentieth century. In propagandistic rhetoric, the deconstruction of the provincial myth (or anti-myth) was touted as one of the greatest achievements of the Bolshevik cultural revolution. In 1928, Mayakovsky, returning from a long tour that had taken him from Kharkov to Baku, announced ‘at the top of his voice’ in the *Leninsgradskaia pravda*:

The province is exploding! [...] Those who have never been to the so-called ‘province’ can scarcely imagine it. Those who were in the province before the Revolution cannot imagine it at all. First of all, the very designation as ‘province’ is horrendously outdated. The old language is still inclined to consider as provinces even cities such as Minsk, Kazan, or Simferopol, whereas these cities, which have become capitals by will of the revolution, grow, build themselves, and – what counts the most – breathe the independent culture of their liberated land. (Mayakovsky 1958)

¹ “The events following 1917 radically transformed provincial reality. In substance, the Russian provincial town was replaced by a new phenomenon. The history of the ‘province’ came to a close, and that of the periphery and hinterland began”. (Klubkova, Klubkov 29)

² We refer you to the bibliography for a basic overview of the ongoing debate.

Changing Landscapes

Ornella Discacciati, Emilio Mari

And yet, just as the remnants of the old *byt* resisted the attacks of the Bolsheviks, the province as a concrete place and mytho-poetic space did not completely crumble under the blows of the Revolution, but persisted underground as Soviet history unfolded. Literature, especially that most hostile to the emphatic tones of the Party, took survival as one of its themes (as well as its subversive potential with respect to the new order) as we see in the ‘second prose’ (*vtoraia proza*) of the 1920s (Rizzi, Tsivian, Weststeijn) and the works of Vsevolod Ivanov, Andrei Platonov, Boris Pilnyak, and Leonid Leonov. It is true, the remote provinces in these texts often seem to have lost the qualities of impermeable and totalizing microcosm of the literary tradition, transformed instead into the negative pole of a more comforting old/new dialectic. We see this, for example, in Aleksei Tolstoy’s *Golubye goroda* (*Blues Cities*, 1925), where the entropy of the *petit bourgeois* world finds some redemption in the fervid imagination of a young builder of Socialism. However, it is also thanks to these authors that Soviet art, shortly before degrading into totalitarian art, elaborated original strategies of representing and challenging different cultural identities, as new forms of domination and subordination – proletariat/peasants, Moscow/periphery, centralism/regionalism, modernization/ruralism – found progressive legitimization in official discourse. The historical evolution of twentieth-century Russia, marked by unexpected ‘thaws’ and new stagnations, begs inquiry into the relations between individual and habitat, rebuilding the symbolic geography of territories whose inhabitants have laboriously developed a sense of national identity.

The contributions we present address some of these issues, laying out possible paths to reconstruct the various hypostases of the provincial text in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Following her important monographs on the issues of regionalism and provincial identity, Edith Clowes explores changes in the idea of the province in the first decade post-Revolution. In that tragic and tumultuous period, authors of different political and literary leanings and of greater or lesser renown contributed to the emergence of a new awareness of provincial origins, no longer felt as a stain of backwardness and indolence. The proud reaffirmation of such roots left an important mark on the literary culture of the time, stimulating a new vision of Russia outside its capitals. Although Clowes focuses on the Volga region, she addresses a more general and less Manichean trend in the interpretation of the center vs the periphery. In the early 1920s, the Bolsheviks inaugurated a new phase in the assertion of the supremacy of the center, but the new vision had become ingrained into cultural memory, creating an alternative mental map of Russia.

Kathleen Parthé poses the question of peasant identity in a period when the Bolsheviks were preached an identity based not on geography but on class. She has provided us with a clearer and more insightful picture of the relationship between the province and farmlands in the 1930s. The changes emanating from the center were received by most peasants with diffidence, considered intrusive when not overtly aggressive. An understanding of the mentality of the provincial rural space is indispensable in reconstructing Russian identity, and Parthé underscores the need to recognize differences and contradictions in the configuration of Russian space when studying peasant identity.

Ornella Discacciati examines the role of the members of the journal *Na Postu* and the government in the liquidation of the fertile and prolific vein of *derevenskaia literatura* (village or countryside literature). Although the fight was still on in the early 1920s for a protagonist role in the cultural arena, the *napostovtsy* already held prominent positions in the leading cultural institutions and exercised decisive influence on the consolidation of organizational practices aimed at regulating mentalities and social behaviors, a process embodied in Michel Foucault’s concept of *gouvernementalité*. The cancellation of a fecund literary tradition and the ostracism of writers branded as ‘residues of the past’ were the first steps in applying a political and cultural

Changing Landscapes

Ornella Discacciati, Emilio Mari

strategy aimed at diminishing the importance of the rural component in what was termed a 'worker-peasant revolution'.

Olga Bogdanova, recognized for her research on the *usad'ba*, examines the novel *Man is Canceled* (*Chelovek otmeniaetsia*, 2007) by Aleksandr Potemkin. This particularly interesting work revolves around the idea of a key change in the mentality of the mass-man. Her analysis brings out the continuing relevance of the *usad'ba* in contemporary literature. In Potemkin's novel, the identity of the mass-man unfolds in a newly built estate. Although this modern *usad'ba* is located in the province of Orel, evoking passages from Turgenev and Bunin in the reader's memory, it recalls more the Soviet myth of hell on earth (expropriated *usad'bas* used as Gulags) than the myth of paradise on earth from the Silver Age of Russian poetry. This complex interweave of suggestions spanning the nineteenth century, early twentieth century, and Soviet period allows us to deconstruct the various manifestations of the myth of the *usad'ba*, transforming this semiotic space into a setting suitable for exploring the characteristics and behaviors of mass-man in the twenty-first century.

Otto Boele introduces a novel vision of the province through the work of the contemporary journalist and writer Dmitri Danilov (1969). The scholar examines the prose collection *Twenty Cities* (*Dvadcat' gorodov*, 2007-2009), 'alternative local studies' in the words of the author, and the novel *Description of a City* (*Opisanie goroda*, 2012), spotlighting the strategy adopted by Danilov to elude a stereotypical conception of the province. In the former work, Danilov re-elaborates the symbolic geography of Russia, replacing the traditional negative vision of the province as monotonous and empty with the specificity and uniqueness of each town. In *Description of a City*, on the other hand, he returns to the more traditional vision of the provinces as symbolic territory characterized by backwardness and ennui, testifying to a reluctance of collective imagery to accept an alteration of the canonical notion of the province.

Lastly, Dmitry Zamyatin's contribution is of a more theoretical nature, introducing new and simulating thoughts on methods of analyzing the provincial text. Having contributed in a determining way to the elaboration of a meta-geography, the scholar investigates the heuristic possibilities of trans-semiotic studies applied to provincial texts. The purpose of such studies is to negotiate apparently conflictual phenomenological terrain in comparing texts and discern specific transformations that make it possible to combine them in newly formulated meta-symbolic spaces.

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Changing Landscapes
Ornella Discacciati, Emilio Mari

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Changing Landscapes
Ornella Discacciati, Emilio Mari

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