

2 focuses on the aesthetic theories of Viacheslav Ivanov. The center of attention is meant to be Ivanov's famous "Two Elements in Contemporary Symbolism," but West often bogs down for long stretches in tedious summaries of peripheral essays by Ivanov. He concludes the chapter with a comparison of Ivanov's theories with those of Ernst Cassirer. It is a clever but misguided tactic, inasmuch as the comparison works more to Cassirer's advantage. Ivanov had moments of brilliant critical insight; and more than the other Symbolists, with the possible exception of Bely, he developed these insights into a theory of art. But he was no systematic thinker in any accepted sense, as Cassirer was, but an often great, never less than magisterial poet. West is to be congratulated for doggedly grappling with the notorious vagueness of Ivanov's central ideas and for his clear exposition of them, even if he occasionally distorts or oversimplifies. Still, one wishes that he had not been so modest in his refusal to point up the many contradictions in Ivanov's thought, as he does in his treatment of the much better known nineteenth-century critics in chapter 1.

This same reluctance to evaluate and criticize, and the inevitable overreliance on exposition and description, weaken chapter 3, which reviews the theoretical writings of the other Symbolists in the light of the topics raised in chapter 2. The chapter, entitled "The Symbolist Debate," also exposes a flaw in the structure of the book as a whole. Although it ostensibly treats Ivanov's aesthetic theories in relation to those of the other Symbolists, it actually contains very little of Ivanov. For the most part, it is left up to the reader to compare Ivanov's ideas with those of his fellow Symbolists. Given the spate of seriatim quotations from a wide range of authors, this is difficult and requires far too much flipping back and forth between chapters 2 and 3. The result is impressively encyclopedic but hazy and unfocused. We require a point of view, something to sift through the clutter (fascinating though it may be) of the Symbolists' contradictory pronouncements on art and set their most important achievements in high relief, as Balakian and Lehmann have done in their books. This and some attention to the Symbolists' theories in the light of their poetry (which, after all, is why we continue to read them) would have been appropriate. West's cautious forays into both areas in the book's conclusion touch on the matter; but it is a case of too little too late.

West is obviously in command of a vast body of material. If I am complaining of shortcomings in this study—among them a very sketchy index—it is because it will be much consulted by those interested in the wranglings about aesthetics in Russia between 1890 and 1917. Every writer should, of course, have the privilege of defining his subject; but when he (or his editors) entitles the result "Russian Symbolism"—in bold letters on the cover and dust jacket—readers have the privilege of questioning the narrowness of the approach even while admiring the attempt to grapple with a most difficult topic.

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THE PREMATURE REVOLUTION: RUSSIAN LITERATURE AND SOCIETY, 1917–1946. By *Boris Thomson*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972. vii, 325 pp. £3.95.

This volume is broader in scope than its title suggests: it attempts a survey of Russian culture, with an emphasis on literature, during the first thirty years of

Soviet rule. Although the approach appears to be straightforward and basically chronological (part 1 covers the years 1917–28; part 2, 1929–46), the actual structuring of the book results in somewhat erratic and uneven emphases on the materials. An opening chapter on Marxism and Bolshevism is followed by one called “The Other Tradition: Two Writers,” which couples a rather general discussion of Alexander Blok with a quite specific discussion of Zamyatin’s *We*. An admirably succinct survey of social and political history through the NEP period precedes a curiously unfocused chapter (“Intellectual Life”) devoted mainly to trends in scientific and humanistic studies; this is followed by a lucid, though necessarily brief, description of the main literary groups of the first postrevolutionary decade. The author then turns to drama and the cinema, inserts a chapter on the peasantry which eventually returns to a discussion of literature (here, the peasantry in literature), and completes part 1 with a separate chapter on Mayakovsky. The second part has a similar though not identical design: a chapter on social and political history, one on the cultural scene which covers literature, the theater, and the cinema, and a chapter on the peasantry, again with a section on the peasantry in literature. As in the first part, certain authors are singled out for special attention: Gorky is given a separate chapter, evidently because, in the author’s view, he wielded considerable influence on the cultural life of the 1930s; Leonov, because the author considers him the major novelist of the Soviet period; and Pasternak for reasons that remain obscure; at least if one accepts the author’s judgment that Pasternak not only stood outside official literature but “wrote no works which succeed in catching the spirit of an age, or are universally accepted.”

This study in some ways achieves both more and less than the promise of its title. It is more than a survey of literature and literary developments, and at the same time much less than that: though necessarily abbreviated and condensed, the unnecessarily uneven and checkered presentation of subject matter produces something less than a connected and coherent general view of the main cultural and literary trends. (Yet the accounts of social and political developments are, for all their compression, remarkably comprehensive and clear.) Another disappointment is that the “premature revolution” of the book’s title, which may seem to intimate an underlying theory of Soviet cultural development, turns out to be little more than a catch phrase which at best gives the study a superficial thematic unity but does not develop into a serious thesis about the subtle and complex linkages between political, social, and cultural change.

Whatever its shortcomings, this volume should prove useful as supplementary reading in basic courses on Soviet literature or Soviet culture.

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SELECTED POEMS. By *Joseph Brodsky*. Translated by *George L. Kline*. Foreword by *W. H. Auden*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973. 172 pp. \$5.95.

“My consciousness whirls like a spinning fanwheel / about the steady axis of my past,” writes Brodsky (“To a Certain Poetess”) in an image that hits off the distinguishing characteristic of his mind: a restless, passionate, but perfectly controlled awareness which, reaching out to a thousand things, is never permitted to wander on its own, firmly reined in as it is by a quality of philosophic insight that unifies its diverse adventures. There are no loose edges in Brodsky’s work, no