

THE RUSSIAN'S WORLD: LIFE AND LANGUAGE. By Geneva Gerhart.  
New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974. xiv, 257 pp. \$6.95, paper.

This is an uncommon little compendium of Russian "common knowledge." Not all readers will find everything in it valuable, but most students of Russian culture will find much that is worthwhile. For example, *literaturovedy* will find useful stylistic notes and descriptions of peasant households; those involved with technical literature will appreciate the thorough discussion of linguistic phenomena associated with mathematics; travel-study participants will value the descriptions of leisure use and the educational system; teachers of introductory culture classes will welcome all of the above plus the explanations of holiday customs.

The material, presented with wit and clarity, is divided into twelve sections covering areas such as "Clothing," "Education," and "Speech." The sections and subdivisions are not cumulative, so that any can be consulted at random. There are numerous appropriate illustrations, documents, charts, vocabulary lists, and short Russian passages, with translations provided in an appendix. Frequent reference is made to stylistics and other connotations. The layout is pleasing, the type is large and clear, and the Russian vocabulary is accented and in boldface. Misprints and spelling errors are remarkably rare.

Although the work contains many succinct and useful explanatory passages, it tends to center on vocabulary and factual detail rather than on broad unifying concepts. Even so it is useful, but could have been far more accessible had a Russian-language index been provided.

There are occasional passages which are misleading, such as the statement on page 76 that "at the end of eight grades the pupil, . . . has several choices." No mention is made of the testing program at this point which in the past has eliminated for many the choice of a college-preparatory track. There also is no mention of the role of *blat* and social class at each selection point in the educational process, nor of the emphasis on memorization.

Despite these and similar minor flaws, the work contains a wealth of useful and generally accurate detail. It should be considered obligatory baggage for *stazhery* and exchange teachers as well as a useful reference for any student of things Russian.

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RUSSIAN ART OF THE AVANT-GARDE: THEORY AND CRITICISM  
1902–1934. Edited and translated by John E. Bowlt. The Documents of 20th-Century Art Series. New York: The Viking Press, 1976. xl, 360 pp. Illus. \$20.00.

This is not a history of the Russian avant-garde. It is a useful collation and translation of selected theoretical statements, written between 1902 and 1934, by Russian artists, mainly easel painters. Professor Bowlt's selections range from essays that are little known and hard to obtain (such as Vladimir Markov's 1912 essay "Printsipy novogo iskusstva" from the journal *Soiuz molodezhi*) to those that are well known and already translated (Naum Gabo's "Realistic Manifesto" of 1920). Through the artists' own words the reader is able to witness the image of art change dramatically from a harbinger of a new religion to the revolutionary construction of a new society—the artist as priest giving way to the artist as engineer. In addition to the essays and manifestoes, Professor Bowlt has added a twenty-page introductory essay, biographical data introducing each artist, footnotes, illustrations, and a forty-page bibliography divided into works in Western languages (272 entries) and works in Russian (515

entries). This volume thus provides the best English-language introduction to date to early twentieth-century Russian art.

Professor Bowlt's stated purpose is to "present an account of the Russian *avant-garde* by artists themselves in as lucid and balanced a way as possible." It is the editor, however, not the artists, who decides who belongs to the Russian *avant-garde*, because the term was not employed by artists at the time. Traditionally, the notion of *avant-garde* has described artists whose innovation and antagonism put them ahead or outside of accepted artistic taste and social behavior. Here both the introduction and the documents selected imply a boundary (Russia from 1902 to 1934) which is geographically narrow and chronologically broad.

Geographically, Bowlt defends the autonomy of a Russian artistic tradition from the Wanderers to Socialist Realism which was relatively independent of Western (and Eastern) influences. Yet the Russian *avant-garde* emerged as part of a general European intellectual revolution which helped create such art movements as Cubism, Expressionism, and Futurism. The art and writings of the Russian *avant-garde* are full of allusions to the paintings of Leger and Picasso, or to the ideas of Ernst Mach, Walt Whitman, and the Theosophical Society. As in Europe and America, the movement included not only painters, but poets, linguists, theater people, sculptors, film makers, musicians, and architects. The appearance of a Russian *avant-garde* is inconceivable when viewed apart from the waves of Western thought and art which inundated Russia from the 1890s through the 1920s with the aid of relaxed censorship, the return of art students from Munich and Paris, increased travel abroad, and visits to Russia by such admired luminaries as Matisse and Marinetti. Bowlt's suggestion, for example, that Italian Futurism "did not constitute a key element of the Russian *avant-garde*" is at least highly debatable, given the familiarity of Russian poets and painters with Futurist rhetoric, manifestoes, and painting after 1909. Cubism was equally influential in Russia, especially in the technique of collage. A Russian "marked tendency toward an intuitive, theosophical fourth dimension (and not toward a Western one)" hardly existed apart from the popular essays of the American Charles Howard Hinton and Western Theosophists, for whom the term "fourth dimension" was a virtual cliché. Finally, the selections in the book omit those many Russian émigré *avant-garde* artists who made their theoretical statements (as found, for example, in the Berlin journal *Veshch/Gegenstand/Object*) as inhabitants of Parisian hotels or Nollendorfplatz cafés, especially after 1922.

Chronologically, Professor Bowlt's *avant-garde* begins more convincingly than it ends. He correctly emphasizes the migration of young provincial (mainly southern) artists to Moscow after 1900 as a causal factor, and symbolically dates the emergence of an *avant-garde* from the "Blue Rose" exhibit of 1907. Nor can one fault his emphasis on Rayonnists, Futurists, Suprematists, Constructivists, Productivists, and other self-proclaimed prophets of the period from 1907 to the early 1920s. The problem is that Bowlt's *avant-garde* never really disappears, but simply merges with the more general story of early Soviet art. Yet by the mid-1920s many *avant-garde* artists had fled to the West, committed suicide, or engaged in more politically enthusiastic efforts; Eisenstein's revolutionary films and the compliant and retrograde (stylistically) realism of the AKhRR painters suggest the disappearance—and not the continuation—of what one generally considers *avant-garde* behavior. Thus, many of the acronymic art groups of the 1920s included here (Proletkult, Komfut, AKhRR) pertain more to revolutionary art than to artistic revolution.

Despite such conceptual problems, Professor Bowlt has skillfully brought together in one volume a large number of previously scattered or untranslated statements by Russian artists before and after the 1917 Revolution. Many are readily available in Russian in I. Matsa, *Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let: Materialy i dokumentatsiia*

(Moscow and Leningrad, 1933) and in V. Markov, ed., *Manifesty i programmy russkikh futuristov* (Munich, 1967). The more than twenty selections also included in Matsa's book again suggest an overemphasis on continuity between the avant-garde and the early Stalin years. In addition, a number of illustrations will be familiar to readers of Mary Chamot's study of Goncharova or catalogs of modern Russian painting that have been available since 1967. Nonetheless, Professor Bowlt has provided us with a comprehensive introduction to modern Russian art during the period when avant-garde individualism gave way to the demands of a revolutionary mass society.

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## LETTERS

### TO THE EDITOR:

Prior to receiving the March issue of *Slavic Review* I had no intention of resuming my exchange with Richard Sheldon. Having read his reply I have reluctantly concluded that a brief rejoinder might, after all, be in order: to my surprise Professor Sheldon has repeatedly misrepresented the tenor and the substance of my argument.

1. "Professor Erlich sums up his case as follows: The habit of intellectual timidity which Shklovsky had acquired by 1930 continues to manifest itself." This alleged summation is presumably given the lie by the "enthusiastic international" response to Shklovsky's "achievements since the Thaw." Now all this is wide off the mark. Conventionally enough, I "summed up my case" in the closing paragraph of my article rather than in the footnote paraphrased in part by Mr. Sheldon. Moreover, the effectiveness of Shklovsky's post-1953 critical studies is largely beside the point. Though I do not share Professor Sheldon's unqualified enthusiasm for these writings, I am prepared to grant their best moments acumen, breadth, and common sense. But then I had made it amply clear that the "painfully acquired habit of intellectual timidity" manifested itself only in dealing with "ideologically charged" subjects. The early poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky—proclaimed posthumously the Soviet poet laureate—is one such subject. The motif of the double in Dostoevsky, or the relationship between linguistics and poetics, is not.

2. In addition to inflating the relative importance of a parenthetical remark, Sheldon attributes to me a statement I never made: "Professor Erlich talks willingly about the moral emptiness of Soviet intellectuals. . . ." The fact of the matter is that I do not talk about this at all, willingly or otherwise. The phrase "moral emptiness"—which in its context appears to suggest a lack of firmly held convictions—is not mine but Nadezhda Mandelstam's. In citing her remarkable if admittedly lopsided memoir, I took care to distance myself from her somewhat intemperate language. ("The Western critic should not be too quick to echo this accusation—or self-accusation—borne from years of misery and travail.") As for the "inner confusion" and the mounting self-doubt which I sense in Shklovsky's autobiographical writings, Mr. Sheldon is willing to see the "disarray" in *Sentimental Journey* while staunchly denying the relevance of any such considerations to *Third Factory*. But once again