

Wandel der Sinngene in der russischen Literatur von der Romantik bis zur Postmoderne. Eine strukturelle Typologie. By Marianna Leonova. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014. xii, 456 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Tables. €74.00, hard cover.

In her book, Marianna Leonova tackles an unusual topic with an equally unusual approach: she tries to conceptualize the history of Russian literature with the help of chaos theory. This is both an innovative and a daring enterprise. Leonova makes the following assumptions: literary texts, and even more so literary epochs, are chaotic systems that can be described by applying analytical concepts from chaos theory such as “strange attractor,” “fractal,” or “bifurcation.” Leonova uses the notion of the “strange attractor” to clarify the link between a given literary text and an epoch. Such a “strange attractor” would define a limited stylistic space of unlimited possibilities of literary expression. Moreover, Leonova juxtaposes the “fractal” structure of a literary text in epochs like romanticism, symbolism, or postmodernism to the “linear” structure in realism or neorealism. Finally, she applies the concept of the “bifurcation” to the diachronic development of Russian literature. Epochs would not replace one another by “canonizing the junior branch,” as the formalists would have it. Instead, Leonova describes literary epochs as unstable chaotic systems that change suddenly due to a “butterfly effect,” for instance.

Leonova tests her approach against five influential novels from Russian literature. Three of them are considered to develop a “fractal” structure: *Chapaev i Pustota* by Viktor Pelevin (postmodernism), *Peterburg* by Andrei Belyi (symbolism), and *Geroi nashego vremeni* by Mikhail Lermontov (romanticism). Two other novels are interpreted in terms of a “linear” structure: *The Idiot* by Fedor Dostoevsky (realism), and *Master i Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov (neorealism). Leonova applies a similar matrix of analytical categories to all texts under scrutiny: She examines the relationship between the author, narrator, and reader. In analyzing the constellation of the literary characters, she draws attention to the ontology of the protagonists by interpreting their names, and finally describes the aesthetic organization of space and time in the text.

While Leonova’s interpretation of the five novels proves to be insightful, it would be a stretch to apply her findings to fit any given text in the entire epoch. Leonova does not justify why she chose to reduce the stylistic epochs to one single novel that is supposed to represent romanticism, realism, symbolism, or postmodernism. Leonova’s endeavor ultimately dead ends: the notion of “neorealism,” which should characterize such a complex and even fantastic novel like *Master i Margarita*, is quite problematic.

Unfortunately, the bigger picture of the evolution of Russian literature is lost in due course in the book. Leonova offers a detailed analysis of the five novels, but, unfortunately, she reduces her analytical toolbox to the concepts of “fractal” and “linear” structure. To be sure, Leonova includes a short summary that ought to explain the relationship between the interpreted novel and a given epoch at the end of each chapter. Yet, these subchapters simply summarize the main points from a very detailed analysis of the novel. The complex relationship between the novel and the epoch remains largely unaddressed. Remaining silent about the mechanisms that trigger the change of epochs, Leonova fails to explore the epochal shifts sufficiently, and neglects her own interesting concept of “bifurcation.” As interesting as the opposition of “fractal” or “linear” structures may be, a narrow consideration of these two paradigms eschews other relevant factors that shape the history of Russian literature.

Leonova’s approach is unsatisfactory not because she was too innovative, but because she was not consequent enough in her innovation. Dropping the “traditional”

notions of romanticism, realism, symbolism, and postmodernism might have been more rewarding, not to mention the awkward coinage of “neorealism.” Leonova jails herself without need in the prison of traditional stylistic notions in a situation where she does not speak about style but about structure. It would have been more promising to apply chaos theory to the phenomenology of Russian literary history consistently. Doing so might have given her the freedom to interpret more than just five of the masterpieces of Russian literature. Her innovative approach might also prove valuable to the theory of literary evolution in Slavic studies that has been largely neglected since the efforts of the Russian formalists and the Czech structuralists.

In spite of all the criticism, Leonova’s contribution is relevant. Her book illustrates convincingly that chaos theory may be applied to the interpretation of single literary texts and to the conceptualization of Russian literary history.

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Before They Were Titans: Essays on the Early Works of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.

Ed. Elizabeth Cheresh Allen. Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2015. xiv, 338 pp. Notes. Index. Tables. \$79.00, hard bound.

Readers of Dostoevskii’s and Tolstoi’s early works are often tempted to interpret them in light of the novelists’ later masterpieces. As Elizabeth Cheresh Allen reminds us in her introduction to this volume, however, such works as *Poor Folk*, *The Double*, *Childhood*, and *The Sevastopol Sketches* offer rich rewards when read for their own value. Investigating them with a focus on each writer’s concerns at the time, she suggests, is more productive than reading them primarily as foreshadowing future mature works. The contributors to this collection follow this approach with great success, and in the process arrive at fresh, insightful interpretations.

In the first of the Dostoevskii chapters, Lewis Bagby analyzes *Poor Folk* in terms of agency and desire. Whereas Makar Devushkin is reduced to nearly complete passivity as his romantic desires are extinguished, Varvara Dobroselova discovers a small degree of agency within the limited confines of her poor life as a seamstress. Ultimately for Bagby, this revelation directs readers to contemplation of their own individual responsibility. Gary Saul Morson reads *The Double* as an early attempt by Dostoevskii to explore the philosophical question of what makes us unique and, in the process, to offer a proof of individual subjectivity. He locates the horror of the novel’s absurd premise in Golyadkin’s recognition that his double does not just resemble him but is a copy of him, despite his sense of himself as unique. For Morson, Golyadkin’s view of his double as an extension of himself, rather than a separate person to be treated with compassion, is paradoxically what prevents him from escaping this terrifying trap.

The remaining essays in Part I address less oft-critiqued early works of Dostoevskii. Susanne Fusso, in her analysis of *Another Man’s Wife* and *The Jealous Husband*, demonstrates that Dostoevskii’s revitalization of vaudeville devices elevate the comical stock character of the deceived husband into a darker, tormented figure. She also shows that Dostoevskii’s use of vaudeville is not restricted to his early period, as it reappears two decades later along with the anxiety of identity featured in the early stories, in his novel *The Eternal Husband*. Dale Peterson contextualizes *White Nights* as part of Dostoevskii’s ongoing dialogue with Rousseau on the value of self-contemplation. He terms the narrator’s compulsive escape from real life actions and interactions pathology rather than pathos, as Dostoevskii’s dreamer prefers his fantasies of seduction to becoming an actual suitor, his reveries to living in the real world. Allen, in her