

Regional Literary History: The Case of the Urals*

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[A History of Urals Literature. The Nineteenth Century. 2 Books].

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The review considers the two-volume collective monograph *A History of Urals Literature. The Nineteenth Century*, edited by Professor E. K. Sozina and published in 2020. This work aims to present a regional literary history that transcends the boundaries of a single national tradition and seeks to reconstruct the complex multicultural phenomenon of literary life in the nineteenth-century Urals. The volume's chapters are dedicated to the life and works of authors who lived in the region or visited it, the ways the Urals has been represented in travel writings, the literary traditions of the Bashkirs, the Komi, and the Udmurts, and the institutional infrastructure of Urals literary life (theatres, libraries, publishing businesses, periodicals, and literary societies). The reviewer seeks to determine the main trends in the literary developments behind the multitude of facts gathered by the authors and to articulate these trends in terms of relevant theoretical approaches. A series of biographies spanning the whole century makes it possible to detect the gradual autonomization of the literary field (Pierre Bourdieu). Travelogues and representations of the imaginary geography of the Urals appear to have been connected to the colonization and symbolic appropriation of this region by the Russian Empire. The development of literary institutions is regarded as a part of the history of the Russian public sphere (Jürgen Habermas). The complex interactions between the literary traditions of colonized peoples and Russian colonizers are seen through the postcolonial concept of hybridity (Homi Bhabha). Despite certain drawbacks, the work under review makes it possible to see literary life of the nineteenth-century Russian Empire as a multinational, multiconfessional, and multilingual network of actors and texts beyond the boundaries of the Russian national canon.

Keywords: literary history, regional literature, the Urals, nineteenth-century Russian literature, postcolonialism

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В рецензии рассматривается двухтомная коллективная монография под редакцией Е. К. Созиной «История литературы Урала. XIX век», опубликованная в 2020 г. Целями работы являются представление региональной истории литературы, выходящей за пределы одной национальной литературной традиции, и реконструкция сложного мультикультурного феномена литературной жизни на Урале в XIX в. Главы посвящены биографиям и сочинениям авторов, живших в этом регионе или посещавших его; способам изображения Урала в сочинениях путешественников; литературным традициям башкир, коми и удмуртов; инфраструктуре уральской литературной жизни (театры, библиотеки, издательское дело и т. п.). Задача представленной рецензии – вычленив из множества фактов, собранных авторами, главные тренды литературного развития и артикулировать их в терминах релевантных теоретических подходов. Ряд биографий уральских писателей обнаруживает с их помощью процесс постепенной автономизации литературного поля (Пьер Бурдьё). Путевая проза и репрезентации воображаемой географии Урала оказываются связаны с колонизацией и символическим присвоением этого региона Российской империей. Развитие литературных институций рассматривается как часть истории российской публичной сферы (Юрген Хабермас). Сложные взаимоотношения между литературными традициями колонизированных народов и русскими колонизаторами рассматриваются через постколониальное понятие гибридности (Хоми Баба). Несмотря на некоторые недостатки, рецензируемая работа дает возможность увидеть литературную жизнь Российской империи XIX в. как многонациональную, многоконфессиональную и многоязычную сеть акторов и текстов за пределами русского национального литературного канона.

Ключевые слова: история литературы, региональная литература, Урал, русская литература XIX в., постколониализм

Since its inception, literary history as conceived by its theorists and practitioners has been intrinsically connected to the idea of the nation. As a result of what Pascale Casanova has termed ‘the Herderian revolution,’ literature became to be seen as the purest emanation of the national spirit and the carrier of cultural identity [Casanova, p. 75–77]. However, according to Hans Robert Jauss, by the second half of the twentieth century, literary history, as a discipline whose aim is ‘to represent in the history of literary works the idea of national individuality on its way to itself,’ ‘has increasingly fallen into disrepute’ [Jauss, p. 3]. In the following decades, various approaches to writing literary history have been proposed, with some of them paying much more attention to questions of geography. Thus, in his reflections on European literatures, the highly influential Franco Moretti has sketched ‘the spatial model’ of literary history, in which ‘geography is no longer the speechless onlooker of the —historical— deeds of the “European spirit”. The European space is not a landscape, not a backdrop of history, but a *component* of it’ [Moretti, p. 13]. A similar shift

of focus from masterpieces of the national literary canon to a huge number of divergent texts produced in and partly determined by a specific physical and social environment can be found in the ambitious work under review. Published under the aegis of the Institute of History and Archeology of the Urals Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences and edited by Professor Elena K. Sozina, the two vast volumes of *Istoriia literatury Urala. XIX vek* include contributions from dozens of scholars with various institutional affiliations and research interests [История литературы Урала. XIX век]. Their cumulative efforts have culminated in a work of astonishing breadth that aims to present a history of the multifaceted literary activities that took place in the huge multicultural Urals region of imperial Russia throughout the nineteenth century. The main premises, theories, and assumptions governing the whole work are outlined in the introduction; the authors are open to a multitude of approaches, including cultural geography, semiotics, postcolonial studies, geopoetics, and others. All these methods and concepts form the backdrop for the subsequent exposition of the facts of literary history. Drawing copiously on a wide range of sources, the authors bring to light the complex networks of writers, genres, media, and institutions that together constituted Urals literature in the period. First of all, this multilayered phenomenon consisted of all the people who lived in, or visited, this territory and wrote, translated, and published literary works. Secondly, the volumes take into account the variety of the ways the physical and cultural geography of the Urals region was studied, represented, imagined, and appropriated in scientific works, travelogues, and fictional writings. Last but not least, the work is not confined within the boundaries of the Russian language and literature; three chapters focus on the literary traditions and innovations of the Bashkirs, the Komi, and the Udmurts, and this attention to the texts of colonized peoples marks a decisive break with the tradition of national literary history discussed above.

Still, the majority of chapters are dedicated to the Russian literature of the Urals region, and the outline of its history forms an overarching structure. The reader becomes acquainted with the lives and works of a multitude of canonical writers (such as A. S. Pushkin and L. N. Tolstoy), as well as minor or outright marginal ones, whose appearance in the volumes depends solely on their physical presence in the space of the Urals, whether lifelong or short-term, voluntary or involuntary (the fifth chapter addresses the fates of exiled authors, from the Decembrists to the Poles to T. G. Shevchenko to revolutionary democrats). Approaching this collection of biographies, mostly concentrated in the first and tenth chapters and spanning the whole century, with the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu, it is possible to determine a general trend here, namely, the gradual formation and autonomization of the literary field [Bourdieu]. Indeed, in the first half of the century in towns like Orenburg and Perm, literary activities were predominantly absorbed by the cultural practices of the elite or performed by teachers in educational institutions as part of or in addition to their duties; fictional texts were read and written in the frameworks of the conspicuous

consumption of cultural products, amateurish leisure practices, social confrontations via communication (the case of the satirist V. T. Feonov), patron-client relationships, state service, and so on (in all cases literature being more or less subjugated to the heteronomous principle). By the end of the century, however, the literary field was constituted as an autonomous sphere of social life: internally differentiated, governed by its own rules, and offering professional opportunities to its actors.

The interpenetration of fictional literature with other discourses, forms of knowledge, and social practices is one of the major themes in the reviewed work. The Urals was a colonized region whose appropriation by the Russian Empire was conducted both practically and symbolically through the complex networks of power and knowledge. Citing the works of Michel Foucault and Edward Said, the authors of the volumes consider literature as an integral part in this process. The sixth chapter focuses on travel writings in which the Urals region was described. Oscillating between the poles of scrupulous scientific exploration and vivid literary imagination sometimes dependent on the commonplaces of Orientalist discourses, these texts significantly contributed to the creation of the region's imaginary geography. The Urals were transformed from a physical space unknown to the Russians to a cultural space measured, mapped, and invested with meanings; in particular, it became a subject for literature. Visions of the Urals in fictional and non-fictional writings evolved from images of exotic nature to those of something familiar, domesticated yet at the same time locally rooted and specific, a simultaneous expression of both all of Russia and a distinct regional part. According to the authors, this mode of representation was both practiced by and mirrored the position in the literary field of D. N. Mamin-Sibiriak, the Urals author who made it into the Russian literary canon precisely *because* he wrote on local subjects. His life and works are treated extensively in the closing eleventh chapter, which is dedicated exclusively to him and makes him into a symbol of the Urals' successful integration into Russia.

Along with the chapters structured around individual biographies or genres, the volumes also contain three successive chapters focused on institutions and the social history of literature. The seventh chapter follows the development of theatre in the Urals, starting with the amateur serf theaters created at the factories and leading to the emergence of professional companies (at first travelling) and city theatres. In the eighth chapter, the social conditions, practices, and institutional infrastructure of reading and book selling in the second half of the century are reconstructed; its second section, one of the finest achievements of the whole work, contributes to the history of reading by carefully studying individual readers' responses to different texts and authors, thus shifting for a moment the focus from the production to the reception of literature. The history of media is the subject of the ninth chapter, in which the periodicals of the Urals are described. The press here began with state-run 'provincial gazettes' (*gubernskiiie vedomosti*) in which initially no fictional literature was allowed; they were

followed by church periodicals and, finally, by the private local media, the state being replaced by civil society. The evidence gathered in these chapters corroborates the trend described above — during the nineteenth century, the Urals witnessed the creation of a large-scale literary field with professional writers and journalists, unofficial media and independent theaters, diversified reading public and a system of libraries, developed publishing business and a variety of literary associations. These developments could be interpreted through Jürgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere, recently applied to the institutional history of nineteenth-century Russian literature by Alina Bodrova [Бодрова]; the governmental origins of periodicals, the role of educational institutions in literary life, the flourishing of the literary societies, and other forms of voluntary association all point to complex interplays and interdependencies between the state and society and their ultimate separation in the course of Russia's modernization. What is especially interesting in this process is the fact that state-run institutions and media not only give way to the power of public opinion but also make the latter possible, creating the very communicative structures and models of social interaction by which emancipation from the state takes place.

In nineteenth-century imperial Russia, the literatures of the colonized peoples of the Urals were also rapidly changing. As the second chapter demonstrates, the Bashkirs combined a written literary tradition that was reproduced through a network of Muslim schools stretching beyond the boundaries of the Russian Empire with oral folklore and new secular modes of writing practiced by those who served in educational institutions as a kind of mediators between their own culture and that of the colonizers. As for the Komi, who were baptized and provided with writing by the Russians, their written literary tradition had, since the beginning, been informed by a colonizing impulse that worked through the translations of religious and educational texts. According to the remarkably lucid and informative third chapter, Russian attempts to assimilate the Komi people through the inculcation of Orthodoxy in the Komi language contributed to the emergence of an educated stratum of Komi society and a new secular literature. Somewhat similar processes took place in Udmurtia, as described in the fourth chapter. Here the literary language was also formed through the translations of Christian texts: the institutional foundation of modernization was the school system in which the lessons were held in the native language of the students. All these examples of cross-cultural interactions bring to mind the works of the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha (unlike Said, he is never mentioned in the reviewed volumes), who argued that 'hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable' [Bhabha, p. 37]; instead of self-enclosed entities isolated one from another, there exists a fundamental hybridity and interpenetration between the colonizers and the colonized.

Arguably the most striking example of the hybrid identity generated by the Urals was the writer T. S. Beliaev, who authored the tale *Kuz-Kurpiach* published in 1812. Written in Russian, this text is based on a Bashkir heroic

epic; employing an 'Oriental' style, it also has fragments modeled after Russian folklore. 'Appropriation' of the 'popular culture' by the privileged print culture, to use the terms of Roger Chartier [Chartier, p. 89–90], or an exercise of colonial power, it was actually written by a serf and published by his master N. I. Timashev, whose ancestors were Tatars and who followed some traditions of the Bashkirs. In this case, all the stable categories (orality and literacy, elitist and popular, national and colonial, domination and appropriation, etc.) come into a complex interplay with each other, giving a picture far more nuanced than those of traditional literary histories. What is more, it becomes obvious that it is simply impossible to write a 'pure' history of national literature, because in literary history there are no strict boundaries and everything is hybrid.

Of course, the work under review also has certain drawbacks. While there are several theoretically-charged chapters, generally there is a lack of conceptualization. One can reasonably object to the tendency to downplay the coercive nature of the Russian colonialism and to outmoded Soviet language in the description of Bashkir literature in terms of 'enlightenment' and 'progress' (*peredovoi avtor*, etc.). Finally, the methodological pluralism of the introduction is not far away from an eclecticism in which conflicting methods are seamlessly mixed. Nevertheless, the overall significance of this thought-provoking and unconventional work is beyond question. By shifting away from the narrow realms of the national literary canon and by introducing regional geography as an active component in literary history, the authors have brought into being quite a unique work, one in which there is a place for the social history of literature, the history of reading, and postcolonial optics; for serfs, women writers, and a queer person (N. A. Durova/Aleksandrov); for people of many confessions, nationalities, and social classes; and for printed, written, and orally transmitted texts in many languages. One hopes that this vision of the nineteenth-century Russian Empire will provide directions for a lot of future studies of that period's literature.

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