# *Fiction and Society in the Age of Pushkin* by William Mills Todd III (review)


Thomas F. Rogers

Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature, Volume 41, Number 4, 1987, pp. 270-272 (Review)

Published by Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association

Simon's *Triptyque*. These are all texts in which there is neither chronology nor plot, in which the relationships are textual rather than psychological or causal. Discoherence is the source of the unity of these texts.

In the most extravagant display of invention among contemporary French writers, Sherzer has grouped an assortment of works which demonstrate the inventiveness of multidimensional montages (chapter 3). She considers Butor's *Mobile* along with Roche's *Circus* and Sollers' *H*; these heterogeneous texts, with their mingling of genres from a variety of domains, achieve unity and cohesion within diversity. These texts are controlled, disparate, multimedia structures which call upon the reader's participation, based on his/her personal and cultural experiences.

In a fourth chapter titled "Reflexivities," Sherzer considers works in which the narrator is dominant. Beckett's *L'Innommable* along with Pinget's *Quelqu'un* and Laporte's *Fugue* could all be subsumed under the heading of the narrator-in-spite-of-himself. The reluctant narrator is nonetheless the creator of metafiction (wondering if he can indeed tell a story), the creator of fiction as he does succeed in telling a story, of sorts, and the performer as the enunciation of the story progresses.

Sherzer's fifth chapter on "Postmodern Feminist Fiction" is less about the scriptive techniques of the authors and more about the themes which are raised. One questions why the women authors are not considered in the same chapters dealing with stylistic issues. After all, as Sherzer points out, they write in the same way as their contemporaries. For afficionados of parallel structure, they might well have been considered along with their literary brethren of seriality, multidimensional montages, and reflexivities. Sherzer examines Wittig's *Les Guérillères*, along with Duras' *L'Amour* and Cixous' *Souffles*. Her point is that women have written in the same way about very different subjects, so radically different that they merit separate consideration.

All of the texts considered in Sherzer's study avoid linearity and chronology. They are frankly difficult texts to read. Sherzer has succeeded in grouping an apparently disparate selection of texts into a sensible ensemble. Obviously, she has not claimed to "make sense" of the multiplicity of texts that French fiction has produced during the past 25 years; but she does indeed make a lot of sense. There is not just one meaning of a text, and we all readily admit that this is the case. Sherzer's work helps us understand how this is in fact the reality in the texts of French writers who have shaped postmodern aesthetics.

VINCENT D. PELLETIER

*University of Alaska, Fairbanks*

**WILLIAM MILLS TODD III.** *Fiction and Society in the Age of Pushkin*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986. 265 p.

This work offers invaluable background and insight regarding three seminal Russian novels of the early nineteenth century: Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, and Gogol's *Dead Souls*. It semiotically examines two sets of conventions — literary and social — and, most arrestingly, their interaction. In the author's words, these novels "contributed to the process by which the Russian novel and Russian society discovered each other. The aestheticization of social life and the interpenetration of social and aesthetic conventions during the early decades of the nineteenth century facilitated this mutual discovery" (201). The three novels "participated," moreover, in what

Todd's study reminds us were "intense cultural struggles" (205).

Two long introductory chapters, entitled "A Russian Ideology" and "Institutions of Literature," ably review the period's intellectual history, characterizing particularly the standards of high society which not only severely constrained the novelists and their protagonists but also provoked their diverse responses to it. Focusing on the confining, yet superficially harmonious ideal of manners, with its array of attendant ritual, Todd details the highly syncretic character of the recently Westernized Russian aristocracy — its values, like its language and literary forms, still controversial and in transition. Todd also illuminates the literary circumstances under which the works discussed were written and came to the public's attention: modes of sponsorship (patronage, salons, literary societies); sources of publication (journals, chapbooks, almanacs, and the as yet precarious book trade); literacy and the various levels of elite readership; and the difficulties posed by an interfering and often unpredictable official censorship.

Even those thoroughly familiar with the novels in question can be grateful for Todd's elucidation in a separate chapter each of much that has long been problematic about these works and the intent of their authors. Todd makes an especially strong case for a clear distinction between the consciousness and personal viewpoint of Pushkin and of Eugene. As with the other writers, Todd sees Pushkin responding to the aristocratic ideal of *honête homme,* or the man who, with sufficient training, taste, and savvy, skirts social conflict and avoids all excess. Whereas Eugene and Lensky are shown to fall tragically short of this ideal, Tatiana, of whom Pushkin is most approving, grows into it, becoming his metaphoric muse. According to Todd's analysis, Pushkin, in this respect, endorses conventionality and significantly differs from his hero both by demonstrating, in an essentially traditional aesthetic medium, the many subtle "possibilities for creativity" that still remain to him and by "engaging more powerful human resources — intelligence, heart, delight, knowledge — than any of his creatures" (136).

The chapters which treat the novels of Lermontov and Gogol suggest a quite different and far more critical view of social convention. Lermontov's Pechorin is seen as both the skillful manipulator and ultimate victim of a ruthlessly competitive and essentially theatrical social ritual that only pretends at politeness and harmony. The novel thus raises important questions regarding the "constriction" in such a society of "implied human potential" as well as "the problem of identity" (142). Applying the theatrical model of social theorist Erving Goffman, Todd highlights the novel's many instances of role-playing and deceptive gesture. He also insightfully establishes a meaningful distinction between Pechorin and his creator: where the character rationalizes his cynicism, the author, aware of the discrepency involved, was presumably more genuinely self-aware. Apart from the patent demonstration that Pechorin is an exemplary man of his time (i.e., of a stultifying and cruelly manipulative society), his baffling characterization, with "the ineffability of its intimations" (163), both tantalizes and restrains our impulse to censure or too confidently disapprove.

If the essence of relationships in *A Hero* is "theatricality," in *Dead Souls* it is sheer "performance" (15). In accord with the insight previously expressed by Victor Erlich, Donald Fanger, and others, Todd sees Gogol's world view as the most bleak of all — one in which the array of material objects and the status for which his menagerie of characters, not least his picaresque Chichikov, graspingly assert themselves, amount to sheer emptiness. The individuals who make up Gogol's privileged society are, without exception, spiritually bankrupt

and dead as the souls of the deceased serfs that serve as collateral in their ludicrously venal negotiations. Gogol's person and his oeuvre prove at least as frought with ambiguity as Lermontov's or Pechorin's — including his several suddenly serious rejoinders to critics, sandwiched here and there in his lyrical asides and in earlier drafts, and, reminiscent of his own amorphous and frequently uncouth behavior, the ironic tendency in his characterizations to equate "plentitude" and an "excess of attributes" with "absence of personality" (193). Here the author seems closer than ever to both his hero and his work's elusive narrator.

Todd's study is a most useful and provocative contribution to our understanding of Russian literature at the inception of its great "classical" age.

THOMAS F. ROGERS

*Brigham Young University*

**NOËL M. VALIS.** *The Novels of Jacinto Octavio Picón.* Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1986. 218 p.

Jacinto Octavio Picón (1852-1923) belongs to what may be termed the second rank of late nineteenth-century Spanish realists, the first rank of which would include such writers as Galdós, Valera, Pardo Bazán, and Clarín. A native and lifetime resident of Madrid, Picón published eight novels, including *Dulce y sabrosa* and *Juanita Tenorio*, as well as numerous short stories and essays. Only *Dulce y sabrosa* is available in a recent edition (with an extensive introduction to the life and works by Gonzalo Sobejano, Cátedra, 1976), and in this volume Noël Valis continues to combat the tradition of neglect. Valis justifies her study on the grounds that minor works and authors illuminate the art of the literary giants and help to provide a more comprehensive picture of the social and political climate of the period. In the case of Picón, the specific questions posed in the novels offer a view of the author, as poet and ideologue, and a point of contact with writers of the Generation of 1898. Ultimately, and significantly, the study projects a sense of difference, a differentiation between the novels of Picón and those of his contemporaries.

*The Novels of Jacinto Octavio Picón* is similar in format to the Twayne World Authors Series: chronology, life, historical and cultural ambience, consideration of the works, select bibliography. The first chapter is an impressive mixture of fact, hypothesis, and anecdote. Valis offers a succinct, highly informative portrait of the artist and his circumstance. She foregrounds the events and turns of fate that would affect Picón's education, literary production, and world view. A common denominator in the presentation is Picón's liberalism, a consequence of heredity and environment and perhaps the distinguishing feature of the novels. Without forcing the issue, Valis shows how family background and particular associations are brought to bear upon the content and the reception of the writings. Picón was an early republican, actively engaged in politics and caught in the politicizing temperament of his age. (The story of his election to the Royal Spanish Academy, to cite one example, is a testament to the clash of wills.) The introductory materials set the stage for the major portion of the study, a critique of the novels.

Valis' discussion focuses on reviews and commentaries by Picón's contemporaries and on the themes, characterization, and setting of each work. In part a reflection of Picón's anticlerical stance, *Lázaro* (1882) deals with a crisis of faith while challenging ecclesiastical and social hierarchies. The