



LITERARY-HISTORICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE RUSSIAN NON-RENAISSANCE IN A COMPARATIVE CONTEXT

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Abstract

While the absence of a Renaissance in Russia has been taken for granted, the implications of this fact have not been exploited in seeking to understand the general trajectory of Russia's literary development. "Literary-Historical Consequences of the Russian Non-Renaissance in a Comparative Context" adopts a pan-Slavic and European perspective that refracts it in the light of a key concomitant, the absence of a rationalizing theology, and concludes with a semiotic characterization of the three main modes of representation – iconic, deictic, and symbolic – that seeks to explain the special features of Russian literary production.

Keywords: *Comparative Context; Renaissance; Russian Culture; Slavic Cultures*

The year 1550 in Western Europe already finds Leonardo da Vinci a historical figure – wistfully recalled by Vasari in his *Lives of the Painters*. Rabelais and Montaigne are in the past. The Western Renaissance had come and indeed almost gone. Already long before, Petrarch (1304-1374) had understood the fundamentals of the "middle ages" and revolted against them, had helped usher in an awakening to politics and secular reasoning, to relativism and to an idea of change in the world that could not be governed by the caprices of nature or the weather. The Middle Ages, he had said, were the

time between Antiquity and the great renewal of Antiquity. The notion emblematic of the Renaissance, that mankind stands at the very center of a hierarchy running from God at the pinnacle down to the various forms of animal life, was already so well cherished that it stood in virtual danger of being taken for granted and, accordingly, revised.

A second and probably corollary feature of Russian culture in the year 1550 is the absence of an investigation of the universe based on theology and on Aristotelian methodology. The Aristotelianism which characterized late medieval theology in Western Europe is not to be found in the Russian development. That is to say, no systematic theology or scientific method underlies the Russian expression of Christianity. Throughout the 16th and the 17th centuries there is no movement or document that could be linked to the European ambition to synthesize faith and reason – except for a few Polish and Ukrainian scholars with some Latin learning. There is little if any seepage, not even an importation of foreign techniques or models. This state of things ended very abruptly with the accession of Peter the Great in 1689, which saw the foundation of some sort of verbal art in the literary sense. Foreign models grafted themselves awkwardly onto Russian culture; the secondhand imitation of France, as of this period, becomes something literary history has to contend with. But the “Renaissance” stage had never existed.²

The Italian Renaissance was construed in reaction to the Middle Ages, even by persons still living in them (such as Petrarch, who complained about it). In Russia, either the Middle Ages never appeared – or they are still going on. We want to sketch out some of the consequences of this cardinal distinction within the history of Russian literature. We should stress at the outset that these consequences are largely positive for literary production, and it is the positive side we intend to concentrate on here. To analyze the crucial differences in literary production and influence, in the modern period, between countries that underwent a Renaissance and the Russian situation, one need not go to the extreme of dwelling upon Western Europe. René Wellek discredits the view that the sixteenth century was a Czech Golden Age or “renaissance”.³ Apparently, Bohemia had no renaissance either. Taken together with other factors, Czech literature is all the stronger for that.

By contrast consider Poland, which by 1550 had celebrated its cultural union with Italy.⁴ The marriage of King Sigismund and his second wife, Bona Sforza of Milan, took place in the year 1517 – about the same time as Rabelais was composing *Gargantua*, Ariosto the first edition of *Orlando Furioso*, the young Ronsard his lyrics. For the wedding Jan Dantyszek (called Ioannes Dantiscus, 1485-1543) composed a marriage-celebration poem (*Epithalamium Reginae Bonae*), where Venus rewards the widowed Sigismund for his many recent military victories. Mars is accordingly asked to interrupt the ongoing war between the Poles and the Muscovites so that he may convey the will of the gods to Sigismund: that he remarry the Italian duchess.

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