

## FROM THE EDITOR

As a quarterly the *Slavic Review* can hardly attempt to keep up with the headlines. Our two modestly topical contributions in this issue, those by Thomas W. Wolfe and Ghiță Ionescu, are both sequels in a sense to recent books on the same themes by the two authors. The death of Rumania's Gheorghiu-Dej, while copy was being prepared for the printer, did seem to warrant last-minute acknowledgment in Mr. Ionescu's article, but it is not our intention to register—though we may wish to reflect upon later—the seismographic disturbances of Eastern European politics.

We are pleased to offer in this issue one innovation: Walter W. Arndt's translation of Pushkin's "The Gypsies." Serious translation needs, of course, no justification; it is a branch of scholarship, one that has recently gained increasing attention. Apart from our pleasure at Mr. Arndt's felicitous preservation of Pushkin's metrical and rhyme patterns, we were impressed by our consultant's observation that "an attractive and accurate verse translation of Pushkin's famous poem . . . for future students of Russian culture and literature" had its proper place in the pages of the *Slavic Review*.

Book reviewing in the United States has been the object of a good deal of criticism, much of it warranted: mutual back-patting, cautious hedging (praising with faint damns), pedantic nit-picking, and needlessly personal polemic are among the principal sources of complaint. Somehow the creative function of reviewing is being lost between indiscriminating or flaccid approbation and partisan or personal diatribe.

Certainly Slavic and Eastern European studies are not free of these maladies; indeed, they are particularly susceptible. Our field encompasses many subjects and issues about which tempers run high, and understandably so. The active participants—scholars, teachers, and writers—are still a relatively limited though far from homogeneous group, and in much of the writing one detects echoes of the forthright but highly acrimonious tradition of East European debate. More than most we run the danger of reviewing, whether benevolently or irately, from set positions. The intrinsic merits or flaws of a work may seem of secondary importance.

But precisely because ours is a somewhat circumscribed area, or arena, we may also entertain hope for improvements that will take much longer to achieve on the broad and amorphous American literary and scholarly scene. If we can find ways of surmounting these shortcomings, the results should make themselves felt relatively quickly. The very sensitivities of our field, and the fact that, whatever our discipline, we rub shoulders frequently, suggest a favorable environment for the cyberneticians' "feedback"—self-correction through debate and exchange ("dialogue," if you will).

The tendency to veer from easy praise to even easier polemic is surely remediable, at least in principle—a sharp eye combined with civility ought not to be beyond us. In their concrete application to Slavic and East Eu-

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ropean studies these requirements are more exacting. Because this is a zone of extremely high political pressure, the *bona fides* of all writings cannot, unhappily, be assumed; the "sharp eye" must look not merely for the casually fraudulent but also for the intentionally misleading. Conversely, "civility" requires not simply good manners but a quality of Pauline "charity," a willingness to listen to another expression of judgment or opinion, no matter how contrary, as coming from one's fellow. The tension between these requirements can be severe.

Intellectually more difficult, and in the long run of decisive importance, is the task of achieving, through review and criticism, a cumulative effect: establishing well-recognized canons of scholarly performance; determining in any given field or subject the boundaries between interpretations that are serious, even if debatable, and those that cannot pass muster, even if warmly and widely endorsed; and pointing out what we do *not* know, the fruitful directions for our next rounds of research and inquiry.

A variety of devices may assist in this task—for example, review articles dealing with a general theme or a cluster of books (we should be most grateful for suggestions or proposals along this line). But indispensable for any advance is a general quickening of our sense of relevance, which presupposes both a knowledge of the existing literature and a grasp of the critical but still unresolved issues. We must ask: Where does the book stand in relation to what is already known, or ought to be known? Is there a nugget in the dross? And then the poignant question, Should the book have been published at all?

This last question leads to a host of others, but it is also central to the role of review and criticism. The flood of publication has already reached dismaying proportions, not least in the Slavic and East European fields, which have been rather comfortably supported in recent years. Unless the art of critical review can assist not only in seriously evaluating and selecting but also in eliminating, I foresee a very swampy future for us all.

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