

BOOK REVIEW

Cassio de Oliveira. *Writing Rogues: The Soviet Picaresque and Identity Formation, 1921–1938*.

Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023. xiii, 290 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Figures. CND \$75.00, hard bound.

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doi:10.1017/slr.2024.551

In *Writing Rogues*, Cassio de Oliveira shows that the picaresque in the period between the Revolution and High Stalinism was undergoing transformations that were closely linked to those taking place in Soviet society. The book demonstrates de Oliveira's vast knowledge of secondary literature, while the use of such extra-literary materials as readers' letters, articles, and reviews, complements the literary analysis. The picaresque foregrounds socially marginal characters and plays on the tension between fiction and autobiography, which makes it a promising medium for engaging with dichotomies at the center of political and creative issues for many contemporary writers: the competing utopias of imperial and ethnic nationalism, freedom of artistic expression, and self-alignment with Soviet ideology. The genre's relationship with the Soviet regime oscillated between questioning it through satire and legitimizing it by assimilating marginal characters and spaces into its collective identity. The fact that literature was expected both by readers and critics to construct reality as well as to comment on it implies that the picaresque contributed to the development of readers' subjectivities. De Oliveira asserts that by the end of the period under discussion, the rogue and his authors alike fully integrated into Soviet society.

In Part I, de Oliveira investigates the relationships between the author, the narrator, and the rogue in two purported autobiographies, Il'ia Erenburg's *Julio Jurenito* and Viktor Shklovskii's *A Sentimental Journey*. In Ch. 1, he argues that the true picaro of *Julio Jurenito* is not the eponymous protagonist but rather its culturally sophisticated, socially insignificant, and geographically displaced provocateur of the narrator, "Ehrenburg," who represents a synecdoche, or "part" of the whole—the author, Il'ia Erenburg. Likewise, Shklovskii's narratorial alter-ego is one of the author's selves at a time when his real-life identity is obscured by a fake name. This chapter contains a memorable analysis of the deployment of consonants to mimic an explosion that physically wounds the narrator in a passage from *A Sentimental Journey* and a poignant discussion of the metaphor of the falling stone, to signify the narrator's role as both observer and observed. Both novels play with the notions of their own veracity to complicate the writers' autobiographical selves. Ch. 2 discusses nationalism in the two novels against the background of war and the heroes' forced displacement. In *A Sentimental Journey*, the picaro seeks an escape from history offered by the "East" and rejects the nationalist grand narratives in favor of universal humanism, both of which are ultimately represented by the story of the Assyrians escaping

from their native Persia to Russia. The Assyrians, who are both traditional and nomadic, are a perfect metaphor for Shklovskii's "conservatism," in which the past is made new through estrangement (63). Erenburg's cosmopolitan narrator similarly expresses his admiration for "Eastern" sincerity of conviction, in contrast with stale European imperialism after World War I; yet Soviet internationalism offers both writers a collective identity.

In Part II, Ch. 3 is dedicated to the criminal protagonists whose actions interrogate the NEP's policies against the "pure" ideals of the revolution. Isaak Babel's short story "You Missed the Boat, Captain!" underscores his transition from portraying Odessa as a Mercurian city that thrives on exchange into a place that allows for the Jewish Apollonians to emerge. De Oliveira argues that in the later *Odessa Tales*, the picaresque gradually turns into a ruin upon which the new utopia is built. In Ch. 4, he examines Erenburg's *The Grabber* and *The Stormy Life of Lazik Roitshvanets*, as well as Leonid Leonov's *The Thief* as commentary on the NEP by having their rogues defeated by the corrupt system. De Oliveira links the realism of these works to the prevalence of a confessional culture at the time, an aspect it shares with the picaresque.

In Part III, the author notes the trend toward ideologization and professionalization of literature during the first Five-Year Plan. He begins Ch. 5 by examining the novel *Large Fires*, written by multiple authors and published in installments in *Ogonek*. The novel shares its orientation toward the middle-class readership with the works of Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov during this period of the regime's stability, which was underscored by the debate in *Literaturnaia gazeta* on the possibility of satire under communism. Here, de Oliveira makes excellent use of non-fictional materials by discussion in the "Crime and Punishment" section of the magazine *30 Days*, which invited readers to test themselves and their acquaintances against the criminal code. Ostap Bender starts out in the *Twelve Chairs* as an instrument for bringing wrongdoing to light and ends up embracing the Soviet citizenship in *The Golden Calf*, where he unmasks enemies, investigates crimes, and collects *kompromat* on his nemesis Koreiko, thus engaging in the practices of *oblichenie*. De Oliveira argues that the rogue eventually became "redundant" (165). Indeed, the works examined in Ch. 6, such as *Belomorkanal*, Yuri German's *Two Tales*, and Aleksandr Kozachinskii's *The Green Wagon*, foreground the role of the police in reforging criminals into citizens.

This book places complex literary analysis in the cultural and political context of the Soviet 1920s and 30s. It presents a pessimistic trajectory of genre development, from subversion to submission. In this, it differs from Mark Lipovetsky's *Charms of the Cynical Reason*, where the author argues that Soviet tricksters, from the 1920s through the post-Soviet period, were a repository of popular dissent and the ultimate unmaskers of propaganda's vacuousness.

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