

# H-Net Reviews

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**Mikhail Epstein.** *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture (Critical Perspectives on Modern Culture)*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87023-973-1; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87023-974-8.



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The Epstein book has a provocative title: *After the Future*. The subtitle is less provocative, but more significant. *The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*. The *and* is very significant. The work is essentially two books with *Contemporary Russian Culture* being the first book, and *The Paradoxes of Postmodernism* comprising the second. Of course Epstein may also be applying “The paradoxes of postmodernism” to the portion of the first part where he tries to demonstrate that Soviet Marxism with its socialist realism is actually a form of “postmodernism.”

Mikhail Epstein provides a selective survey of contemporary (non- official) literary activity in Russia for the last ten years, and he also provides a commentary on contemporary literary criticism in the “West.” This analysis of western literary criticism, is especially interesting because it is an analysis from a Russian perspective. It is unlikely, however, that Epstein will be a direct participant in current discussions of postmodern western literary criticism because he has not entirely abandoned any orientation to “reality.”

The book has eleven chapters, most of which were written and published or presented as separate essays. In spite of the independence of these essays, they are centered around two themes. The first six chapters analyze contemporary Russian literature and construct the

author’s perspective or system for evaluating the literature. The last five chapters could each stand alone as provocative essays that contribute to a discussion of contemporary western literary criticism.

In his essay on “Culture-Culturology-Transculture,” Epstein identifies culture as the highest form of human existence. “Thus culture is civilization that has realized its end and embraced its own limit in the perspectives of self-destruction:” (284) “By its very nature, culture is an alternative form of consciousness . . . perhaps it will offer an alternative to science. Yet an alternative to culture itself is hardly possible when we conceive of culture as the totality of alternatives, rooted in human freedom.” (290)

In the past, even (or especially) in the Russian past, religion and culture have occupied separate spheres. “It is well known that the great Russian poet Pushkin and the great Russian saint Seraphim of Sarov lived at the same time, but knew nothing about one another.” (293) “Arriving at the dead end of its autonomous development, culture must now recognize its dependence on the natural and the supernatural, [it] must reconsider its arrogant opposition to the environment and to religion.” (294) Apparently the author accepts some concept of the “supernatural” in his idea of “reality.” In western thought there may still exist a concept of the “transcendental” but the

“supernatural” has been almost entirely eliminated from philosophical, literary, and even theological vocabularies.

It is very difficult to identify Epstein’s operating definition of “postmodernism” in the first six chapters of the book, but he does a reasonable job in the conclusion.

Postmodernism is essentially a reaction to utopianism, the intellectual disease of obsession with the future that infected the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. The future was thought to be definite, attainable, and realizable; in other words, it was given the attributes of the past. Postmodernism, with its aversion to utopias, inverted the signs and reached for the past, but in doing so, gave it the attributes of the future: indeterminateness, incomprehensibility, polysemy, and the ironic play of possibilities. (330)

Unfortunately, that definition only partially fits the use of the term “postmodern” in the first part of the book. Epstein identifies Soviet Marxism as postmodern, and he does so in a negative way. Ironically Epstein does not have a particularly negative view of postmodernism except as it applies to Soviet Marxism and socialist realism.

There is also an idea in Epstein’s conclusion that clashes with the position of nineteenth century Russian literary critic, Belinsky, whom he respects as a major literary figure. Concerning his term “Proto-,” Epstein writes:

Proto- is a new, noncoercive attitude toward the future, in the modality of “maybe,” rather than of “must be” or “will be.” So originality, after being killed off by postmodernism, is reborn as a project that does not assume its own realization, but lives on in the genre of “a project.” [Projects] are understood precisely as potentials lacking any dictates of obligatory existence. (338)

In that statement Epstein promotes a perspective, common to a postmodern literary critical approach to reality and change, but hostile to the social scientists’ perspective. Some years ago, my wife produced an inhouse publication of her social psychology students’ research papers. She titled the book *Social Change: Redistribution of Power or Mental Masturbation?*. In the nineteenth century, Belinsky insisted that literature *must* contribute to social change, understood as a redistribution of power; many social scientists still think “change” is a reasonable objective when analyzing the “inequities” in our society. Literary critics also analyze the “inequities” in

our society, but as Epstein seems to be suggesting, these “projects” should not threaten to become reality, they should merely remain “potentials lacking any dictates of obligatory existence.” That sounds very much like “mental masturbation.”

Historians view “modern” and by implication, “postmodern” as historical periods created by historians to organize history. The modern perhaps began with the enlightenment and is characterized by a secular world view implying considerable confidence in humans’ ability to use rational methods to discover reality and the principles that govern reality. In the course of the nineteenth century, “philosophers” began to codify that knowledge into systems often identified as ideologies. Epstein would agree with that periodization and suggest that the next period, postmodernism, is characterized by a rejection of ideology, and a rejection of the confidence that humans can discover reality. But he modifies his characterization of postmodernism so that it also includes Soviet Marxism as developed by Stalin and his successors. When Soviet Marxism shifted from reality to “ideology” as its reference, it became “postmodern.”

Some postmodern literary critics argue that neither literature nor language communicates because the “reader” can never know exactly what the “author” meant. Therefore, the reader is free to construct his/her own meaning for the written or spoken word. Epstein does not seem to succumb to or endorse that referenceless function of literature; but he seems to take for granted late modern literary critics’ confidence that literature and the methods of literary criticism are alternative avenues to discovering some underlying “reality” that influences human existence. In that sense the literary endeavor can be an alternative to science in the investigation of “reality.”

In his survey of contemporary Russian poetry, Epstein identifies three schools: Conceptualism, Metarealism, and Presentism. These literary styles have developed independently of the official literature, as opposed to developing out of the official literature. These new schools, however, refer negatively to official literature. In surveying these new schools, Epstein provides an excellent introduction to about twenty contemporary artists.

“Conceptualism is the autorepresentation and self-criticism of language, which having lost the second dimension of being able to speak about itself, risks identifying itself with reality and proudly abolishing the latter—an entirely imaginable event, as our recent history shows with its rhetorical “achievements.” (36)

The endnote explaining the allusion to “recent history” says: “A reference to the whitewashing of reality through official proclamation in the Stalin and Brezhnev eras, falsification of production quotas, etc.” Throughout the book, the Stalin-Brezhnev era(s) is the enemy of all Epstein’s literary and cultural “fantasies.” “Fantasy” is necessary in a living culture. (Chapter 10)

While “conceptualism” is reductionist, “Metarealism” could be called expansionist. “Metarealism is not a negation of realism, but its expansion into the realm of things unseen,... Metarealism is the realism of multiple realities,...” (37-38) Only lengthy portions of poems illustrate metarealism but a portion of one of those poems by Olga Sedakova will illustrate the genre:

Where no light can be seen, but breath is more dark  
and the healing of night is more trusty... I know not,  
Maria, this sickness of mine. It’s my garden that rises  
above me. (39)

Presentism seems to be much closer to traditional poetic styles: “Presentism affirms the presence of an object, its visibility and tangibility, as the necessary and sufficient conditions of its meaningfulness.” (48)

Metabole (a variety of supermetaphor) is a device that is especially compatible with Metarealism and Presentism. With “metaphor” the poet transfers the identity of one thing to another, speaking as if the other were the one thing. With “metabole,” the artist does not separate the two objects. “The metabole is an image that cannot be divided into the two halves of literal and figurative meaning.” (44) For example, the following lines link factories and forests:

In the dense metallurgical forests, Where chlorophyll  
production was in progress... (From a poem by Alexander Ermenko. 44)

Whatever Epstein thinks about the literary merit of these contemporary schools, he seems to favor “conceptualism,” but he thinks they should all be encouraged and published to preserve them as a “lyrical museum” to this post-Soviet period. Apparently diverse political factions in Russia would suppress them just as the old regime did.

In his chapter on “Relativistic Patterns in Totalitarian Thinking,” the author vents his most determined attack on Soviet Marxism and socialist realism. He presents this regime as a unique evil in the contemporary world. He seems to be unfamiliar with other ideological systems that govern other portions of the world. Virtually all his criticisms of the Soviet system apply to other ideologi-

cal systems as well. Specifically, Epstein argues that the Soviet system was postmodern—the antithesis of the Soviet claim. He argues that Stalin and Brezhnev shifted the reference of authority from “reality” to ideology, and that makes them postmodern.

Epstein is correct in documenting that shift, but that does not make the system postmodern. All ideologies that claim to provide interpretations of reality and claim to present the laws that govern reality, make that same shift. Surely the conservative Right in the United States has also become an ideological movement that finds its reference in its ideology while claiming the authority of having discovered “reality” and the natural laws that govern it.

In his endeavor to discredit the Soviet era, Epstein has a whole chapter on the Soviet use of words. He points out that words can have a specific denotative meaning, but the connotative meaning can be either positive or negative. For example, in the Soviet system, “internationalism” is positive, but “cosmopolitanism” is negative. The whole chapter analyzing such usage, “Relativistic Patterns in Totalitarian Thinking,” is written as if such use of language is exclusive to the Soviet system. Such is hardly the case. Some years ago, Milton Friedman, an ideologically conservative economist referred to “sweat shops” in New York City as “opportunities” for fulfilling the American dream.

Epstein also has a chapter on “Labor of Lust: Erotic Metaphors of Soviet Civilization.” It is ironic that a book titled *After the Future* has two lengthy chapters dedicated to a negatively critical analysis of a *past* system. The term “Soviet Civilization” is also noteworthy. Epstein denies the label “culture” to Soviet Civilization.

Modernism is the label that best fits systems that claim to have discovered reality. Postmodernism is born of the realization that humans cannot discover reality. There seems to be some emotional press behind Epstein’s determination to define postmodernism in such a way that it includes the Stalin and Brezhnev eras. Perhaps he can most effectively insult the memory of those times by declaring that the Soviet system was representative of the “evil” it most stridently opposed.

Historians of Russian literature will only need to read the first chapter, “New Currents in Russian Poetry: Conceptualism, Metarealism, and Presentism.” However, the historian may have to read the next five chapters to understand the theoretical perspective assumed in that survey of contemporary poets. Literary critics will find the whole book stimulating and provocative.

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