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Window into the World of Old Russia

CHELOVEK V LITERATURE DREVNEI RUSI. By *D. S. Likhachev.* 2nd edition. Moscow: "Nauka," 1970. 180 pp. 47 plates. 1.28 rubles.

Most students of Russian literature, native as well as foreign, associate the Old Russian period with wearisome memories: a dreary array of lifeless, "irrelevant" matter to be crammed for some dread examination, only to be blissfully forgotten in the glorious thereafter. To be sure, a few of the works thus assimilated under duress may ring some bells on one's literary Geiger counter, evoke some shocks of human recognition. But even these few are likely to be brought forward with such overpowering official fanfare, and—especially in the case of the *Igor Tale*—dragging such a heavy baggage train of scholarly controversy and commentary, that most of us have been only too glad to make our official obeisances and move gratefully onward into modern times.

Understandable as such a reaction may be, it does involve serious losses. First of all, there is a loss of perspective. Sharp as the break with the past was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was never total: for most Russians, whatever their conscious beliefs, the Orthodox Church has remained to this day a direct, if sometimes subliminal, link with the Middle Ages. Russian literature cannot be fully understood apart from its medieval Christian roots. Second, there is loss of artistic and intellectual pleasure. If we can seldom find in medieval literature precisely the same kinds of aesthetic and psychological stimuli we derive from its modern successor, we may with experience and imagination learn to appreciate the very real satisfactions it *can* offer. It is a window into another—often beautiful—world, another mentality; and moreover, the window itself is often exquisitely designed. If we can take delight in icons with saints' images, albums of which have found their way to so many Western coffee tables, why not enjoy the same saints' literary portraits? Finally, there is an important secondary loss: the intellectual stimulation to be found in some remarkable writings *about* Old Russian literature. Outstanding among these writings are the works of Dmitrii Likhachev.

For most of us the model (if hardly the exemplar) of the Old Russian literary scholar is the late N. K. Gudzy, whose *History of Early Russian Literature* was so ignorantly and badly translated into English. Plodding relentlessly down the centuries, Gudzy takes up each text in turn, discusses the obvious questions of provenience, authorship, and "ideology," summarizes its contents in great detail, and then moves on to the next. It is, alas, a pretty dull trip. As a compendium of information Gudzy's book obviously has its uses; but it is not likely to bring in any converts.

Likhachev is different. If Gudzy is the reporter, the factographer among Old Russian scholars, Likhachev is the columnist, the writer of "think pieces." To be sure, Likhachev too has done his share of "reporting," or scholarly leg work, earning his letter as a scholar's scholar with meticulous, elaborately annotated editions of the *Povest' vremennykh let* (1950), the *Slovo o polku Igoreve* (1950), and the *Poslaniia Ivana Groznogo* (1951), not to mention a spate of learned articles. But a great deal of Likhachev's work over the years has been devoted precisely to *thinking* (not necessarily a common scholarly activity), to seeking new ways of interpreting his subject, new insights into its causal patterns.

In the early part of his career Likhachev's avenue of exploration was the borderline between literature and history. Literature was perceived mainly as a response to the "social demands" of its time: *Natsional'noe samosoznanie drevnei Rusi* (1945), *Russkie letopisi i ikh kul'turno-istoricheskoe znachenie* (1947), *Vozniknovenie russkoi literatury* (1952). Stimulating and original as these early works often are, they were nevertheless strongly affected—and considerably marred—by the strident nationalism and xenophobia prevalent in the late Stalin period. They also contain energetic and dutiful exercises in Marxist class analysis, sometimes illuminating, but often arbitrary and obfuscating—for instance, the unconvincing theory that the followers of Nil Sorsky were the ideological spokesmen of a reactionary "boyar class opposition" to the Muscovite autocracy.

Although these tendencies are not wholly absent from Likhachev's later books, since the thaw they have become much less obtrusive. Furthermore, Likhachev's recent work more and more has been taking on another, highly significant dimension. In this new phase Old Russian literature has become something on the order of a sample, a specimen case for studying literature per se, the literary process itself, the very nature of man's need for, and uses of, verbal art. Likhachev's *Tekstologiia* (1962) and *Poetika drevnerusskoi literatury* (1967), though they draw mainly on the Old Russian materials Likhachev knows so well, are in fact important contributions to the general theory of literature. The alert Germans have already recognized this fact with the publication of a volume of Likhachev selections ostentatiously entitled *Nach dem Formalismus: Aufsätze zur russischen Literaturtheorie* (Munich, 1968, edited and translated by Alexander Kaempfe). The obscure Old Russian specialist may thus yet become a name for the Fryes and Hartmans to conjure with. The title *After Formalism* is apt. Likhachev has managed to take full advantage of the vital insights of the Formalist school while avoiding some of its errors, especially its attempt to evade the whole problem of literature's relation to "life."

Literature and life is the question that Likhachev confronts head-on in *Chelovek v literature drevnei Rusi.* Since the original edition of this book appeared in 1958, it belongs to a transitional period in the author's development: thawing, but not yet wholly thawed. On the one hand, the Marxist strait jacket, which Likhachev had always managed deftly to shed from time to time, is now worn even more loosely. The relative autonomy of literature as part of the "superstructure" is silently acknowledged; many phenomena are given purely intraliterary causal explanations that would have been branded "idealistic" a generation ago. For instance, the extraordinary and abrupt transformations, so characteristic of medieval literature and so unconvincing from the point of view of modern psychology, of "bad" characters into "good" (or vice versa) are persuasively explained (p. 73) by the precepts of "Byzantine church ideology" (rather than interpreted as repercussions of the class struggle)—in this case by the doctrine that it is never too late for a Christian to repent of his sins and be redeemed.

There are, however, many frozen lumps left over from the Stalin-Zhdanov days. The nationalist drum-beating is more muted, but it is still audible; xenophobic distortions still abound. Byzantine, South Slavic, and Western influences are minimized as much as possible, and Russian literature is confined in an almost hermetic national vacuum. The so-called *Russian Chronograph,* for example, actually almost entirely a compilation of Byzantine and South Slavic works of widely varying dates, is repeatedly cited without qualification as specifically illustrative of *Russian* stylistic and ideological tendencies of the fifteenth century. Likewise, Likhachev never cites or acknowledges any foreign or Russian émigré scholarship in his field. (As a matter of fact, he is rather less than generous even toward other Soviet scholars.)

Chelovek v literature drevnei Rusi is thus by no means flawless. In spite of its faults, however, I found it one of the most stimulating books about literature, Russian or otherwise, that I have read in a long time. One need not always wholly agree with the solutions advanced; it is the novelty and significance of the problems confronted and the ingenuity with which they are attacked that continually evoke admiration. Likhachev deftly begins, for example, by "naïvely" noting the dismay of Karamzin and other "bourgeois" historians, such as Soloviev and Kliuchevsky, at the colorlessness of Muscovite rulers before Ivan the Terrible. Why should Muscovy have produced such a line of look-alike princes? In a fascinating chapter Likhachev shows clearly that the problem is not the rulers' lack of character, but the style of the sources, their genre, the prescriptions for human representation in the historiography and royal biography of the period—in which individual character had about as much place as a realistic assessment of a candidate's faults and limitations has in a nominating speech at one of our political conventions. Only in the seventeenth century do writers begin to interest themselves in personality as a complex phenomenon and in particular to admit the possibility that good and evil may coexist in the same individual at the same time.

Period by period, Likhachev singles out and demonstrates the connection between the purposes of a literary form, as conceived by its producers and consumers, and the ways human beings are represented in it: the "monumental historicism" of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries; the traces of (quite different) oral epic style in the same period; the "expressive-emotional" style of the end of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; the "psychological pacificity" of the fifteenth century (of which there is apparently only one usable example, *Petr i Fevroniia*); the "idealizing biographicism" of the sixteenth century; and the emergence for the first time in the seventeenth century of admittedly fictitious characters. Throughout this procession of varied forms and purposes the problems discussed are extremely interesting and the examples chosen and analyzed with consummate skill.

Another of Likhachev's innovative efforts is his attempt to perceive connections between the verbal and the visual arts. His book contains some forty-seven black-and-white plates (fifty-four in the 1958 edition) from Russian medieval art—mosaics, frescoes, or icons. These illustrations are supposed to demonstrate Likhachev's conception of the common stylistic (and of course ideological) determinants governing all the arts in a given period. His pictures are suggestive and his arguments on the whole convincing, although it must be said that in his own book the links between picture and text are rather weak. Art works discussed at some length are sometimes not illustrated at all, while many of the plates are not mentioned in the text. The illustrations are apparently to be taken as a group, forming for each chapter a vague graphic analogy to the author's generalizations about the prevailing literary style of a given period; but the gears never quite mesh. It is noteworthy that it was possible to make a good many changes in the illustrations of the two editions without any corresponding changes in the text; in some cases the dating of a picture could be changed by as much as a century without affecting Likhachev's argument.

Obviously, only the barest beginning has been made in this whole field of the relation between literature and the visual arts in Russia. Whatever his inadequacies, Likhachev deserves great credit for having made this beginning. Too many literary historians—among whom Kirill Pigarev is also a notable exception—have been guilty of another kind of intellectual provincialism, voluntary ignorance of art history. (The art historians, I think, are less often guilty of the reverse sin.)

Other than the illustrations, the changes in the new edition of *Chelovek* are not substantial; the author apparently did not care to invest the time and energy required for a thoroughgoing revision. A few "passport" quotations from Marx and Engels have been eliminated; and a good many new paragraphs have been added to amplify or point up the author's arguments. But essentially the book remains what it was: a remarkable display of erudition and intelligence, lucidly written and accessible to many whose interest in Old Russia has yet to be aroused.