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Socialist Realism and Literary Theory

For understandable reasons, most discussions of socialist realism resemble elegies more than analyses. They usually lament the passing of the pre-revolutionary tradition, deplore the brutal methods by which literature has been emasculated and writers silenced, and condemn the government policies that have rewarded a Fadeev with a Stalin prize and removed Dostoevsky from the secondary school curriculum. Now, I also prefer Dostoevsky to Fadeev and think that literature in the Soviet Union is not fulfilling the social functions I would most like to see literature fulfill. That said, however, I also think that the elegiac is not the only mode for writing about socialist realism. There is, or should be, room for the sort of analysis that would treat socialist realism as a literary fact, not simply an unfortunate political consequence, without being accused of apologizing for it.

The aim of this essay is to suggest some fruitful ways of looking at socialist realism and the socialist realist novel—fruitful, that is, for our understanding of the nature and function of literature as a whole. However poor socialist realism may be when judged by the standards usually employed in the West to praise Dostoevsky and Dickens, it can still serve as a useful test case for thinking about key problems in contemporary literary theory, literary history, and comparative literature.

Accordingly, I will suggest how the study of the socialist realist novel could profit from recent work in literary theory and, in turn, how literary theory could profit by considering the special problems raised by that peculiar Soviet genre. I will consider two problematic subjects: (1) the definition of socialist realism and the implications of such a definition for a broader question, the definition of literature; and (2) the theory of the novel.

I. The Definition of Socialist Realism and the Definition of Literature

Most attempts to define the socialist realist novel do so in terms of a set of features that distinguish it from Western or pre-revolutionary Russian novels. Lists of such defining features usually include all or most of the following:

1. The two-dimensional psychology of its heroes, especially its “positive heroes,” in contrast to the psychological complexity of Western counterparts. It might be said, for example, that whereas Western novels tend to depict a quest for personality, Soviet novels usually depict the hero’s quest for impersonality, his struggle to “become one with” his Marxist-Leninist role.

2. Highly formulaic plotting and style. Socialist realist novels often seem to be assembled from interchangeable parts, to be as pre-fabricated as the factories their heroes construct.
3. Themes that seem to Western readers to be singularly unamenable to novelistic treatment. Rather than rivals in love, for example, a socialist realist novel might deal with rival plans for constructing a machine to be used in the centrifugal casting of sewerage pipes (the plot of Not by Bread Alone).

4. The inclusion of political sermons, often in high-flown rhetorical language, even in fiction about apparently apolitical themes.

5. Perhaps most disturbing to Western readers, a lack of irony. In possession of the Marxist-Leninist method for solving all problems, the socialist realist novel eschews the kind of ambiguity and limited or individualized point of view that readers of Western novels value and in terms of which they often define literary art.

6. Strong closure and a mandatory happy or "constructive" ending.

There are numerous problems, however, with this method of definition. For one thing, the catalogue of features will not characterize equally well all socialist realist novels. For example, that Soviet showpiece, The Quiet Don, ends relatively ambiguously and exhibits romantic themes and the sort of psychological complexity typical of pre-revolutionary novels; it resembles T olst oy's Cossacks more than Ostrovsky's How the Steel Was Tempered. Moreover, some of the "new writers" of the 1960s have produced psychologically complex fiction that makes The Quiet Don seem an exception only to Stalinist fiction, but not to socialist realism as a whole. Nor does this catalogue, derived as it is from Soviet fiction, fit (or fit as well) the literatures of other socialist countries. Socialist realism is, after all, an international, not a Russian, phenomenon, and although Chinese and Soviet novels may seem pretty much the same to Western readers, the frequency of Chinese attacks on Soviet fiction would suggest that, to the Chinese and Soviet reader, the differences are considerable. From one country (and one period) to another, both the "defining features" of socialist realism and, for that matter, the hierarchy of importance of the same features may vary. For this reason, the official literature of the Soviet Union may resemble Soviet dissident literature more than it resembles the official literature of, let us say, Poland or Czechoslovakia. Though not entirely useless, definitions in terms of features tend to prove both too broad (the catalogue above applying well to much of the late Tolstoy) or too narrow (given the variety of socialist realist literatures).

There is a more important objection to be made, however, to defining the socialist realist novel in terms of a set of features. Such a definition must overlook what, to its creators, was most essential to the new Soviet novel: namely, that it was not the product of just another literary school, but a different kind of art from its Western counterparts. It was widely hoped that this new proletarian literature would be "qualitatively" different from its bourgeois predecessors, which, in turn, would come to be seen as representing but one period in the history of culture, one literary tradition among many past and possible literary traditions. The aesthetic and literary norms canonized by the bourgeoisie would then be revealed as historical, not universal, norms. "There is good reason to hope," declared Maxim Gorky, "that, when the history of culture is written by Marxists, we shall see that the bourgeoisie's role in the process of cultural creativity has been grossly exaggerated, particularly in literature, and even more so in the art of painting," and Gorky's is but one of many such statements at the time that point to a deep sense of historical relativism in the definition of literature. Gorky is also typical of Russian thinking in the early Soviet period in linking the possibility of new literary definitions and norms with the possibility of similar changes in the other arts. For what was widely felt to be involved was the necessity for a radical rethinking of the nature of the arts generally and, indeed, of all of culture. Whatever new "movements," "schools," and "forms" appeared would simply be the consequence of this rethinking.

Attempts to redefine art were not, it
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should be emphasized, confined to Marxists. In the 1920s, the Revolution could still be different things to different thinkers, and "proletarianism" was but one of many "slaps in the face of public (i.e., bourgeois) taste." There was, perhaps, almost as much dadaism as dogmatism in the various movements of anti-art of those days, movements that, for all their differences, did have a common sense of the spirit of the age being one of fundamental reexamination of the nature of art. It is no accident, for instance, that Mayakovsky, one of the most important formulators of what was eventually to become socialist realism, also participated in some of these other, non-Marxist literary movements. The most important of these other movements for an understanding of socialist realism is, it seems to me, the one that is most often considered its antithesis: formalism.

Formalism and socialist realism are so often regarded as antithetical that it may be of value to underscore what they have in common: a conviction that, despite the tradition of Western aesthetic theory since Kant, the definition of literature and art was still very much an open question. They shared as well a belief that Russia, as a country that was part of and yet outside of both Europe and its intellectual traditions, was in a good position to formulate new definitions. Russia, they both hoped, would also raise the crucial problem of the social and historical, not universal or God-given, nature of received definitions of literature, literary norms, and principles of literary evaluation. These common bases of Marxism and formalism were, in fact, what Bakhtin and Voloshinov relied on in their synthesis of the two in the late 1920s and the 1930s and a similar synthesis of sociology and formalism is to be found in late formalism as a whole (especially the work of Tynyanov) and in formalism's heir, Prague structuralism (especially the work of Mukafovy).

Those syntheses offer the best framework for considering the theoretical problems raised by the definition of socialist realism—in particular, the problem of the definition of literature. For socialist realism seems to contradict most received definitions of literature—and so it was designed to do! The "common sense" approach of Wellek and Warren, for instance, could easily lead to the observation that socialist realism is not literature at all, an observation that has in fact been common, both tacitly and openly. In a curious confusion of criteria for defining literature with criteria for evaluating literature, Wellek and Warren argue that "we reject as poetry or label as mere rhetoric everything which persuades us to a definite outward action. Genuine poetry affects us more subtly. Art imposes some kind of framework which takes the statement of the work out of the world of reality. Into our semantic analysis we thus can re-introduce some of the common conceptions of aesthetics: 'disinterested contemplation,' 'aesthetic distance,' 'framing.' " If nothing that persuades us, or is designed to persuade us, to a definite outward action, can be "genuine" poetry, then socialist realism is emphatically not poetry. But in that case neither is much of medieval art or, for that matter, much of the late Tolstoy; and Tolstoy, in fact, attacked such Kantian formulations of aesthetics for just this sort of unwarranted generalization from modern European art to Art. He argued, and so have defenders of socialist realism, that most of the world's (not Europe's) art has explicitly tried to persuade us to one or another definite outward action based on one or another explicit religious or ideological system. In Russia of the 1920s, arguments like Tolstoy's were commonplace, and it was in this context that the late formalists developed their sociological models of literature, models that recognized the fact that modern European literature was only a literature, and not Literature. Not surprisingly, then, those models are well suited to considering the implications of socialist realism, since they were, in part, a response to socialist realism.

A principal objective of late formalist models of literature, therefore, was to explain the possibility of radically different kinds of literature. Their central concept for such explanations was that of literature as a system, a system that interacts with
other social systems. Because these other social systems differ from culture to culture and from age to age, and because the process of interaction is constant, the literary system will also vary from culture to culture and from age to age. It follows from this analysis that literary norms are social and historical norms, and that the tasks of defining the boundaries of literature and of classifying literary genres are social and historical tasks. To ask, for instance, whether biography, memoirs, or the familiar letter are literary genres is to ask a historical, not a timeless, question: sometimes they are part of the literary system, sometimes they are not. When they are, their presence in the literary system modifies the system as a whole. “The existence of a fact as literary fact,” writes Tynyanov, “depends on its particular relationship with the context of literary development, or with non-literary developments; in other words, on its function.”

Furthermore, Tynyanov argues, one cannot understand the function of particular features of literary works without considering their place in the system in which they function. The function of archaisms, nature description, or political commentary, for instance, is not a constant from period to period. Over temporal and cultural boundaries, foreground can become background, and hierarchies are often inverted; and a different hierarchy of even the same features is a different literature. The study of the influence of one literature upon another, Tynyanov concludes, should not be the study of migrating features, but of interacting systems.

If we do not normally consider these problems, it is perhaps because “comparative literature” has, in practice, usually meant the comparison of European literatures, which do not radically differ. If we are to become students of world, rather than European, literature, however, late formalist models will, I believe, become central and their response to one radically different kind of literature, socialist realism, is likely to prove generalizable to other kinds. In fact, folklorists, who routinely deal with literatures that differ greatly in kind and function from our own and with literatures that interact with other social systems quite different from those with which European literatures interact, have come to formulations quite similar to many of those of Tynyanov, Bakhtin, and Mukařovský, and an important influence of formalist folkloristics on Western folkloristics has consequently begun to be felt.

To consider differing systems is to consider changing systems, and it was, indeed, literary history that was at the center of late formalist thinking (if not of all formalist thinking). Explaining literary history in terms of systems and functions, they stressed the need to speak not of changing features of literary works, but, rather, of changing relationships between the elements of a system. Literary evolution then becomes, according to Tynyanov, “a substitution’ of systems. These substitutions take place slowly or abruptly according to the period, and they involve not a sudden, total renewing and replacing of formal elements, but the creation of a new function for those formal elements. This is why the comparison of any literary phenomenon with another must be made not only in terms of forms, but also in terms of functions.”

Tynyanov’s mention of “abrupt” changes—of literary revolution as well as literary evolution—seems to me to be an allusion to the literary revolution going on in Russia in his own times. I read his remark that “even contemporary literature can no longer be studied in isolation [from the concept of alternative literary systems]” as an allusion to the same ongoing revolution. The creation of socialist realism was, in fact, just such an abrupt “substitution of systems” as Tynyanov describes, and he is implicitly cautioning us not to underestimate how radical the changes are, despite some continuity in formal features. For to understand the literary revolution taking place, Tynyanov implies, we must concentrate not on similarity or difference in features, but on changes in functions—most importantly, in the change in the function of literature itself.

Inasmuch as the formulators of socialist realism conceived of their aesthetic revolu-
tion in terms of a changed social function for the institution of literature, a definition in terms of functions rather than features seems appropriate on historical grounds. Moreover, the functional approach has other, more important advantages. Let us return to the problem of explaining both the diversity and the unity of socialist realism(s). If we approach this problem in terms of functions rather than features, we can identify the unity of socialist realist art in different socialist countries as a common understanding of the proper interaction of the literary (or artistic) system with other social systems rather than, let us say, a common understanding of the doctrine of the “positive hero.” To the extent that the literatures of two socialist countries were similar in features, that similarity could be seen to derive from their common definition of literature. The difference in their literatures could be seen to derive from the fact that the other social systems with which literature interacts in those countries differ for a variety of reasons, including, of course, the differing histories of the countries. Moreover, even an “abrupt substitution of systems” involves a reintegration of old features and the continuity of some hierarchical relationships from the old system. The retention of analogous elements from pre-revolutionary literary systems will mean different things in different countries.

The problem of “continuity and change” within the socialist realism of a single country could also, I believe, be better understood from a functional perspective. In Western analyses of Soviet socialist realism, for instance, it is usual to consider high Stalinist fiction as the socialist realism and to see literature of the twenties, fifties, and sixties as transitional forms between socialist realism and Literature. The result is often to attribute all features that resemble Stalinist fiction to unnatural government pressure, and to regard features that seem familiar to readers of Western literature as the real work; each novel or story is read not as an artistic whole, but as a patchwork of official and genuine literature, a labyrinth designed to be negotiated by the shrewd reader while the censor is led astray. No doubt this is often the case with Soviet writers, especially with those writers that Westerners prefer to read. But it is certainly not always the case, and to approach Soviet literature exclusively in this way is to engage in a kind of Eurocentrism that blinds one to significant changes within the system of socialist realism itself. Like everything else in the cultural universe, socialist realism has a history, and to have a history means to have a tradition—necessarily different from the traditions of other literary systems—against which changes can be measured and innovations felt as great or small. Not all innovations in Soviet fiction are the work of dissidents who would rather not be writing socialist realism at all; many derive from the same kind of dynamics that produce changes and innovations in any literary system. Indeed, many innovations that are radical to the Soviet readership may be invisible to Westerners looking for a return to Dostoevsky. Moreover, even those innovations that are noticeable to Westerners looking for deviations from the system may have a different significance to a Soviet readership that looks for changes within the system.

Defining socialist realism in terms of function will not be an easy task. It will require specifying (1) the place of the literary system within the arts generally and within the culture as a whole, (2) the points of contact of the literary system with neighboring systems, the points at which literature is affected by and affects those neighboring systems, and, perhaps most important, (3) the hierarchy of the several functions that a literary work is expected to serve and the place of the aesthetic function among them. Moreover, defining a literary system as different from ours as socialist realism will mean redefining both its elements and sub-systems, and reexamining terms that seem familiar to us but which, functioning in a different system, have a different significance. The taxonomy and interrelation of genres will also have to be considered; so will such key terms as “plot,” “persona,” and perhaps most crucial, “fictionality.” Stated baldly, in examining a society where the word “objectivity” is
often preceded by the pejorative adjective "bourgeois," where "typical" means not that which obtains but rather what the future is expected to bring, and where the function of journalism is, in Marcuse's phrase, "magical" rather than informative—in examining such a society we must not assume that the nature and function of fiction and fictionality are the same as in our society.

I do not intend in the space of this essay to provide such a comprehensive definition of socialist realism, but I would like to indicate a possible starting point. Socialist realism is one kind of literature, and the socialist realist novel one kind of novel, in which the aesthetic function is not the dominant. If this formulation seems paradoxical, that is perhaps because in the art with which we are most familiar, the aesthetic function is the dominant and because our aesthetic theories are by and large derived from consideration of that kind of art. Those theories, however, are essentially circular and consequently are likely to generate paradox whenever, as in this case, the problems under examination lie outside the circle. Briefly put, the circularity consists in our defining the "aesthetic" in terms of a canon of Western art and, in turn, defining art in terms of the predominance of the aesthetic. Western aesthetic theories, as Tolstoy pointed out, therefore constitute elaborate tautologies and, as a result,
we may also break the circle at the opposite point and, following Tolstoy, ask What Is Art? Art is, to begin with, different things in different cultures and periods, and it is by no means the case that the aesthetic function is always the dominant. In the medieval period, for instance, the religious function was more important than the aesthetic, just as a political function predominates in Soviet art. For that matter, even in modern European art, there have often been periods when art in which the aesthetic function is dominant coexists with forms in which it is subordinate. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russia, icons, which were placed in churches, were one thing, and paintings, which were exhibited in museums, were quite another. Socialist realism may, in this sense, be regarded as an heir of the Russian icon (and saint’s life).

In defining socialist realism, we should consider whether in socialist realism the aesthetic function is secondary or, perhaps, even less important than that, and determine how much variation is possible in the hierarchical position of the aesthetic function relative to the other functions which that literature is expected to serve. We would also have to decide how the aesthetic function coexists and interacts with the other functions of the literary work, and whether a catalogue of those other functions would include functions art is not expected to serve at all in the West. For instance, the presence of a large number of “task novels” in socialist realism—novels designed to inspire workers with enthusiasm for this or that construction project of the day (the prototype is Gladkov’s Cement)—points to the existence of an immediate economic function that is essentially missing from Western art. Western readers therefore tend to regard that economic function as inimical to literature per se.

Conversely, literature in the Soviet Union does not serve, or serves only to a highly limited extent, the function of criticism of prevailing social and political norms. That function has been so central in modern Western literature, and the defense of the author’s right to fulfill that function has been so important in Western political life of the past few hundred years, that we tend to regard its absence as evidence that we are not reading literature at all. It is possible, however, that cultures without a tradition of politically critical art—even in our culture that tradition is relatively recent—may not react to socialist realism as we do. In short, we regard Soviet literature as unliterary not only because the aesthetic function is secondary, but because the entire hierarchy of functions that literature serves in the Soviet Union differs from the modern European hierarchy.

Some variety, of course, obtains even among European literatures, which share a dominant aesthetic function. Variations at lower levels of the hierarchy are, in fact, partly responsible for the distinctive character of particular national literatures (as well as of particular periods) and may, therefore, become points of national pride. Nineteenth-century Russian writers, for instance, identified the tendency towards philosophical speculation in Russian literature as a defining characteristic of their tradition, and, having so identified that tendency, they exaggerated it. It was routine to point out that in Russia the most influential and original metaphysical, aesthetic, and historicist theories were elaborated not in universities and academic journals, but in fiction or in criticism of fiction. The result of this pride in literature that included long philosophical essays was a tradition of novels that Westerners long regarded as “loose and baggy monsters,” but which Russians praised as systematic defiance of Western generic conventions. In defense of that tradition, Russian critics frequently observed that Western generic distinctions, no less than Western classification of their separate academic disciplines, presuppose, in the very way they divide up the literary, social, or physical universes, the answer to aesthetic and metaphysical questions that Russian literature-philosophy takes as its principal subject. Formal neatness, in short, became a mark of intellectual complacency. The creation of works that lay in the interstices between recognized European genres and the development of aesthetic theories that defended formal idiosyncrasy therefore also
became a hallmark of the Russian tradition. When Shklovsky called Sterne the most "typical" novelist and Bakhtin described Rabelais as the key figure in modern West European literature, they were, in effect, rereading Western literature so as to justify the formal peculiarities of Russian literature.12

The tendency towards philosophical speculation and meta-literary defiance of genre in Russian fiction delayed its reception in the West where, as we know, the first Russian writer to be widely appreciated was the one Russians regarded as the least characteristic of their tradition, Turgenev. Only when philosophical speculation also became important in Western novels did it become possible to "discover" Dostoevsky and Tolstoy as "forerunners" of existentialism and of literary "modernism" as a whole. More recently, the increasing interest in meta-literature among Western writers has made the great Russian novels seem less like baggy monsters and more like skillfully wrought examinations of literary conventions—as, in fact, they were intended to be. Moreover, Western interest in the conventionality of art has been largely responsible for the many studies and translations of Russian formalism now being published; no doubt it has also contributed to the attention that has been paid to the art and theory of Eisenstein, Kandinsky, Malevitch, and Scriabin, all of whom played with the categories of perception in a way characteristic of the Russian tradition.

Perhaps the greatest irony of Russian cultural history is that just when the West began to approach traditional Russian formulations, Russia itself rejected them and distanced itself from the West once again. By the twenties it finally seemed possible, indeed likely, that Russia could reverse its traditional role and become a cultural lender to the West. Russia, however, chose to follow its great writers and critics not in their formal experimentalism but, instead, in their defiance of whatever Europe defined as high culture. Rather than become the tradition, Russians founded a new anti-tradition. They rejected the possible role of teacher and reclaimed, albeit in a much changed form, the more familiar one of misunderstood prophet in exile.

II. The Theory of the Novel

It is a commonplace that the defining "characteristics" of the novel have proved extraordinarily difficult to specify: it has even been suggested that the novel should be defined in terms of its unamenability to definition.13 What impresses me about even the most sophisticated attempts to define the novel, however, is not the irreconcilability of the definitions but, on the contrary, their similarity, i.e., (a) the prominence in almost all of them of "psychology" and/or "realism" as defining characteristics, and (b) the tendency to classify prose narratives that are neither psychological nor realistic either as something other than novels or as "pre" (or "post") novels. I would like to consider, in turn, definitions that make psychology or realism central to the concept of the novel as a genre, and note in advance that while neither characteristic applies to the socialist realist novel, the socialist realist novel is nevertheless not simply an unimportant "exception."

a. Psychological definitions. The novel, it is often said, deals with a quest for self and self-definition. It is about an Idiot in the root sense of the word—someone on his own, idiosyncratic.14 That is why, it is said, its heroes are so often adolescents who attempt to understand their particular relation to a world of "great expectations" and "lost illusions." Inasmuch as the quest for self often parallels a quest for an other, romance is central to the novel; so are the kind of moral problems that arise when self-assertion leads to crime or conflict with others. The novel, it is argued, reflects an age in which meaning is not guaranteed by a universal system or soteriology, but must, on the contrary, be sought by particular men in particular social situations with which they are at odds. The world of the novel, it may be concluded, is one of unanswered questions and inconclusive conclusions. "The novel speculates in categories of ig-
norance," writes Bakhtin. "When the novel becomes the leading genre, epistemology becomes the leading discipline."15

This definition usually carries with it a sociology that relates the rise of the novel to the rise of the bourgeoisie and individualism; at its best, it also embraces a sociology of reading and, especially of the new readership of the bourgeois era. This sociology of the novel in turn implies a history, a history that makes the novel the product of middle class Europe and locates its beginnings in, let us say, Defoe. In his insistence on the radical difference between the novel and earlier, or non-European prose narratives, Lukács is typical of this approach to the novel's history. "Only the thoroughly crude ahistoricism of vulgar sociology," he writes, "could be totally blind to these connexions and subsume the Greek or Persian 'novel' under the same genre as the specific modern form of the 'bourgeois epic.'"16

Like many others, Lukács is apparently troubled by the (to him) unfortunate linguistic accident that seems to link the bourgeois novel (roman) to the Greek romance.

b. Realism. The novel has, in an alternative definition, been regarded as the first genre to depict the particulars of experience and to be interested in the "texture" of daily life, in the changing details of speech and dress—in short, in the flux of history.17 The origins of the novel are often related to the rise of empiricist philosophy and the novel's interest in individuals is seen as the logical consequence of its concern with everything particular and unique. This definition of the novel therefore overlaps the first and implies a similar sociology and history.

A unique self must have a unique story and therefore, it has been argued, novels avoid formulaic plotting. Their plots correspond more or less to the way events "actually happen," that is, they represent the unpredictability of experience and the contingency out of which men must carve coherence. A novel's line of action is plotted, mapped out against an uneven terrain that makes detours and digressions inevitable. Readers of novels are suspicious of a plot line that is too neat or predictable; we fault novels where we might praise folktales.

As Dostoevsky often serves as a key example of the novel defined in terms of psychology, then Tolstoy could be said to take to an extreme the novel's concern with realistic plotting.18 Tolstoy, indeed, objected to most European novels on the grounds that they were not realistic enough and that their plots still took a relatively formulaic path to a more or less conclusive ending, the sort of ending that cannot obtain in history. Dissatisfaction with the falsity of narrative, both fictional and historical, lies at the heart of War and Peace, and Nikolai Rostov echoes his creator's opinions when he asserts that all narratives necessarily falsify experience in the very act of imposing a narratable coherence on it and so satisfying listeners' expectations of a familiar shape of events. The lack of closure in War and Peace and Anna Karenina derives, I believe, from this dissatisfaction; and their length resulted from Tolstoy's attempts to provide enough of the contingent and "irrelevant" for the reader to be unable immediately to identify an event as pregnant with future significance simply because it is there. Tolstoy tries to minimize the difference between "living" and "telling," and so to render the experience of reading as close as possible to the experience of experience.

Of course, the fact that events take place in a novel makes it impossible for irrelevant details and contingent incidents to be anything but relatively irrelevant or relatively contingent.19 Tolstoy understood that the novel could not really include anything absolutely irrelevant, and his ultimate rejection of the genre derived from a feeling that the artifice even of such maximally realistic forms as the novel was a kind of falsity to the way things happen (or, rather, do not happen) in an unplanned universe. Based on a historiographical and epistemological skepticism that seems acutely modern, Tolstoy's dissatisfaction with the nineteenth-century novel was more than a personal one. It also looked forward to the similar dissatisfaction of the modern experimental novelists, French and American, who have tried to include the absolutely irrelevant in
an unplanned structure, an oxymoron that describes the paradox on which such novels are based. I view this movement as one of unease with the whole concept of realistic plotting on which the nineteenth-century novel relied and because of which it is being abandoned in the search for a "new novel." The new novel of which Robbe-Grillet speaks must be, in contrast to its predecessors, both nonrealistic (in the traditional sense) and nonpsychological, and must therefore appear, from the perspective of the nineteenth-century novel, to be non-novelistic. I will recall at this point that the socialist realist novel, though hardly the sort of new fiction Robbe-Grillet has in mind, is also nonrealistic and nonpsychological. Its creators also believed that "there are no masterpieces in eternity, but only works in history" and also insisted on the need for and possibility of a radically different and "non-novelistic" novel.

To create a "new novel" is to create the need for a new history of the novel. As novels cease to have the shape they had in the nineteenth century, definitions that center on realism or psychology and histories that begin with Defoe become less and less tenable. "The fact is that every writer creates his own precursors," writes Borges, and Borges's point applies to literary movements as well. In search of precursors of the modern, newer histories tend to be longer histories. In order to be able to regard the novels of Dickens and Dostoevsky as but one type of novel, they treat the nineteenth-century novel as but one central moment in the novel's history. Bakhtin, for instance, includes Cervantes and Rabelais as central examples, not forerunners, of the novel, and even suggests that its origins should be traced to ancient prose works, especially Menippean satire. It follows from such analyses that to define "the novel" in terms of the English novel is to produce a set of norms rather than a definition, and a culturocentric set of norms at that. One might hazard a rough generalization and say that as one goes farther east in Europe, definitions of the novel become more multi-national and cover a longer period. It is harder for a Russian to ignore the English than the reverse.

It is time, I think, to go still farther "east." For in addition to the challenge presented by such post-modernist writers as Borges and Robbe-Grillet, there is another important reason for broadening our definitions and lengthening our histories of the novel, namely the appearance of the novel in non-Western literatures. The novel is now a century old in Turkey and more than half a century in Egypt; and the importation of the novel seems to be one part of the westernization of many non-Western cultures. Since that process of westernization is so widespread and constitutes, perhaps, the most important development of world culture in the modern period, the novel's apparent adaptability gives it a singular importance in the study of world (as opposed to European) literature.

It is to be expected that the emergence of non-Western novels will gradually lead us to regard the "great tradition" of nineteenth-century European novels as simply a special case, a single moment in the history of the novel—though, of course, the most important one for us. Our concept of the novel is likely to change: the westernization of the East means the easternization of the Western genre. I would like briefly to indicate some of the problems that this new "orientation" is likely to raise, and how the study of socialist realism could be important in answering them.

The most general point to be made is that when something is borrowed it is changed. Here again, I would like to mention the formalists' argument that to borrow means to integrate into a new system and to alter what is borrowed in the very process of translating, understanding, or imitating it. Torn from its native soil, imported works (1) "give us the feeling that they are a finished, complete genre," that is, lose their place in the literary and extra-literary controversies of that moment of the lending culture's history, and (2) acquire a new history and are read against the canons and traditions of their new homeland. The same text therefore becomes, in effect, a different work; read in terms of a new hierarchy of literary func-
tions, it comes to serve new functions. Indeed, its ability to be borrowed will depend on this kind of adaptability. If what makes it adaptable is given in its genre or is common to most works of the lending culture at that period, the borrowed work will seem to be characterized by, and valuable for, features and capacities its original readership might not even have noticed.

Moreover, not only will the work change, but so will the system that borrows it. The more central a literary fact the new work becomes, the more the system have to change in order to assimilate it. The work is always imported as a foreign product, and some awareness of its different significance in a different literary system will always be present. Importation is incipient relativism; to the extent that the new readers are aware of the different hierarchy of functions the original readership assumed, they will be obliged to recognize their own as but one of many possible hierarchies. Imports, like quotes, can never be wholly out of context just as they can never be wholly in context. It is largely for this reason, indeed, that totalitarian societies often place an embargo on such imports, and every relatively open societies may use a subtler system of cultural tariffs.

To study the spread of the novel in non-Western cultures, then, would be to study how, in the process of its assimilation, it changes and is changed by its new contexts. One would suspect that, in any culture radically different from our own, the question of just what should or should not be borrowed and assimilated would be a key issue of literary discussion. So it has been in the Soviet Union, which has repeatedly considered its relation to the bourgeois and pre-revolutionary traditions on which it draws. From Trotsky and the fellow-travellers to the present, there have been those who argue for maximal assimilation of foreign forms and there have been those who believe that the new socialist literature must borrow as little as possible and thereby avoid the risks both of generic incompatibility and of trivial imitation of prestigious foreign forms. It seems to me that the patterns of these discussions in the Soviet Union are likely to reappear in any literature faced with a similar question and, therefore, that the Soviet experience could serve as a model for understanding the adjustments considered and made in non-Western cultures. Russia’s attempt to extract the novel from its bourgeois context could be seen as an analogue to other cultures’ attempts to extract it from its Christian context. (It may, indeed, someday be possible to reverse the procedure and study Soviet literary history in the light of non-European literary histories.)

In particular, the socialist realist attempt to produce novels that are nonpsychological and that emphasize formulaic, rather than realistic, plotting may turn out to be particularly exemplary in the study of the novel’s assimilation outside of Europe. A central problem that faced the first generation of Turkish novelists, for instance, was how to depict romantic love, given (1) that a context in which men and women had social relations obtained only among the small, westernized elite, and (2) that the literary tradition so far included only idealized or allegorized descriptions of love. What is a roman without romance? Moreover, psychology itself is often felt to be Western—and what is a novel without psychology? In discussing the new Arabic novel, Edward Said has gone so far as to suggest that the novel, as developed in Europe, is “inimical to the Islamic world-view.” He mentions the Western concept of the author as a creator of alternative visions of the world rather than as illustrator of the prevailing one, and the common Western assumption that the social function of literature is to show “the ways in which the world can be viewed and changed” as reasons for this incompatibility. Nevertheless, there are Arabic novels, and we may ask what adjustments have been made by Arabic writers and how the function and prestige of literature and its particular genres have changed as a result of these adjustments. Which writers have the Arabs found it easiest to assimilate, and what does that selection show about the Arabic novel? Does the Arabic selection differ significantly from the Japanese or Turkish selections?
There is reason to suspect that while some non-Western cultures will find it relatively easy to assimilate European novels, others will find it easiest to borrow non-psychological novels like socialist realism. Like all systems, literatures usually assimilate (make similar) first that which already is similar. Indeed, Said's description of the functions of literature and of the concept of authorship in Arabic countries would apply to the Soviet Union and the “Bolshevik world-view” as well. In Russia, too, the author is, in the root sense, an augmenter of given truths rather than a creator of new ones. Non-Western countries with a tradition of literature that primarily serves a function of religious instruction may also find socialist realism or the novels of the late Tolstoy less “inimical” than those which figure most centrally in our descriptions of the genre. However unpalatable we may find them, Gorky's *Mother* and Tolstoy's *Resurrection* may be more exportable than *Pride and Prejudice* and *Notes from Underground*. Tolstoy, at least, believed so, and foresaw the possibility that his late work, written according to aesthetic theories that classed European literature as exceptional rather than definitive, might prove more important in a world context than his early work, which Europeans tend to prefer. In like manner, socialist realism, which may serve the function of translating genres from east to west, could some day occupy a more central position in the history of world literature than it occupies in the history of European literature. If there is ever a time when we stop using the phrase “world literature” to mean European literature plus the sources of the Bible, then the historical importance of genres and literatures that have served as a bridge will be seen to be great.

When that happens, I believe that the historical importance of Russian literature will perhaps be almost as great in the world context as Greek and Latin literature are in the European context. I see two closely related reasons for this potential importance. Russia was, first of all, the earliest “non-European” country (so it has conceived of itself) to undergo rapid and radical westernization, and therefore its cultural and literary history could provide a model for describing the experience of other countries that have undergone rapid westernization later. It is already clear that many other nations have their westernizers and “slavophiles”; their arguments about whether the necessity of importing Western technology implies the necessity of importing Western social forms as well; and their historiographers who wonder whether “History begins with Peter” and the entry into European culture. They have, as well, their Belinsky's who proclaim “we have no literature!” and their controversies about the assimilation of foreign, therefore culturally marked, genres. The second reason for Russia's importance in world cultural history may prove to be its attempt to distance itself from Europe just when it seemed most thoroughly Europeanized, and its consequent, though not fully successful, attempt to de-westernize its culture and literature. It is too soon to tell if that pattern will also resurface elsewhere, but there is reason to believe that, in many cases, it will.

For both reasons, Russia will have served, or will be able to serve, the function of a mediator between East and West (as it already has in Asia and in Soviet Asia). Whether it is westernizing or de-westernizing, Russia has conceived of itself as occupying a semi-European, therefore unique and favored, position in world cultural history—a conception that is not entirely exaggerated. No doubt, that double identity is largely responsible for the predominant concern with the philosophy of history in Russian thought and, in particular, for two of the central questions in Russian historical philosophy: (1) what is Europe's place in world history, and (2) can one properly speak of world (“Universal”) History, as opposed to the histories of particular peoples at particular times written from a particular point of view, at all. Russia's liminal position with respect to European culture has, I believe, also made Russians especially sensitive to the arbitrariness and conventionality of all social forms. If Peter or Stalin could change those forms overnight, then, Russians had reason to observe, those forms must be historically, not timelessly, given.
The emergence of Russian formalism, with its overriding interest in literary history, its concept of literature as a dynamic system interacting with other dynamic systems, and its consequent historical relativism, is, it follows, an expression of Russian cultural experience. It is, moreover, an expression that, like Russian history itself, is supremely important for understanding world cultural history in the modern period. From that world perspective, the culture that has seemed liminal may prove central. Peter, as the fixed expression has it, built a "window to the West." We may add, however, that just as one can cross a threshold in both directions, one can look both ways through a window.

1 My discussion of the Soviet socialist realist novel is indebted to Katerina Clark's forthcoming study Ritual Form in the Soviet Novel: Socialist Realism in its Cultural Context. I would also like to thank Adele Rickett for her description of Chinese reactions to Soviet literature.


3 Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature, 3rd ed. (New York, 1956), pp. 24-25. Despite Wellek's participation in the Prague Linguistic Circle, Theory of Literature is closer to early formalism than to later formalism and Prague structuralism, both of which emphasized historical and sociological approaches to literature and questioned the viability of distinctions like that between "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" approaches.


6 Tynjanov, pp. 188-89.


13 Bakhtin, Voprosy, p. 459.


16 When Lukács defines the novel in terms of realistic plotting, then Tolstoy becomes his central example. See the chapter on "Tolstoy and the Development of Realism" in his Studies in European Realism (New York, 1964).


20 Tynjanov, pp. 188-89.


26 Bakhtin, Voprosy, p. 459.


29 When Lukács defines the novel in terms of realistic plotting, then Tolstoy becomes his central example. See the chapter on "Tolstoy and the Development of Realism" in his Studies in European Realism (New York, 1964).


34 For my information on the Turkish novel, I am indebted to Ahmet Evin.