

***The Testimonies of Russian and American Postmodern Poetry: Reference, Trauma, and History.*** By Albena Lutzkanova-Vassileva. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. viii, 296 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. Figures. Tables. \$120.00, hardback.

The appearance of this volume constitutes an event that is both exciting and frustrating. It is exciting because despite the rich history of dialogue between contemporary Russian and American poets in the 1980s–1990s, publications on this topic are still rare. It is frustrating because this book does not truly deliver on the promises it makes.

While the author claims that the poetry trends examined in her book “have never been the subject of a comparative analysis” (2), a thoughtful and theoretically astute book by Jacob Edmond, *A Common Strangeness: Contemporary Poetry, Cross-Cultural Encounter, Comparative Literature* (2012), has in fact engaged in precisely such comparative scholarship. The absence of references to Edmond’s work, as well as to that of many other critics who have engaged with this topic, is puzzling. The author relies on the texts by some of her predecessors, like Mikhail Epstein and Marjorie Perloff, as well as on the critical writings by some of the poets she analyzes, like Charles Bernstein and Bob Perelman, to such an extent that her own voice often struggles to emerge from behind the quotations. The book’s structure is peculiar: two chapters on Russian topics (one of them, on Conceptualism, focuses on visual art as much as on poetry) are separated by an “interlude” on Bulgarian poetry. They are followed by five chapters on English-language poetry, of which only one engages at length with the earlier discussion of Russian texts, and one is actually primarily focused on an Australian author. While the individual close readings provided by Lutzkanova-Vassileva are often insightful, and the Bulgarian-themed chapter in particular is highly informative, the overall impression is that the book was put together following the “everything but the kitchen sink” approach.

The structural problems go beyond chapter organization. The author sets up a “straw man” argument, proclaiming that her book seeks “to challenge the belief in the self-referential nature of postmodern writing” (2). The thesis about the alleged self-referential nature of postmodernist texts, supposedly “widely accepted” (5), is repeated over and over again but never backed by references. In chapter 5, the author finally quotes some statements about the “nonreferential” and “antireferential” poetics of the American Language poets and their projects of “de-referencing language” (102, 104); however, her leap from “nonreferential” to “self-referential” never receives an explanation. Overall, it appears that the text received little attention from a copy-editor. For instance, a paragraph on page 103 repeats the same quote twice a few lines apart. The text abounds in hackneyed phrases and purple prose (“Bernstein . . . has recently used the power of YouTube to explain and publicize his poetry,” 137; “The pictorial enframing of Bernstein’s verse . . . is an evocative example of the use of ekphrasis, in which the medium of art adjoins skillfully and complements the vibrant flesh of Bernstein’s poetry,” 139). The author overuses evaluative qualifiers like “perceptive,” “penetratingly,” or “prophetically,” as well as vague statements like “Sedakova’s poetry is deep, profound, and simple” (93); she applies the word “reveal” when describing her own work so frequently—sometimes several times within one paragraph—that her writing occasionally reads like a parody. There is no consistency in the style of poetry quotations (some poets are quoted in English translation in the main text, with the original in the endnotes, others are sometimes given in the original, sometimes only in translation, still others get quotes in both languages). Chronological errors and strange formulations like “the forerunner of Russia’s Socialist Revolution” (171, referring to Lenin) only add to the cascade of infelicities streaming from one page to the next.

Lutzkanova-Vassileva's main thesis is announced early on, but receives clarification only close to the end of the book, in an endnote to chapter 7. She describes postmodernist texts as representing "psychic trauma," adding that she uses this term in a similar vein to Fredric Jameson when he used the term "schizophrenia" to describe them, namely "not in the sense of a clinical diagnosis, but as an aesthetic model for the cultural condition" (266n41). The book would have benefited from an extensive theoretical introduction; instead, the current introduction reads like a dissertation prospectus. In a counterproductive move, the theoretical argument is fragmented; for instance, engagement with the legacies of Russian futurism is repeatedly mentioned cursorily, and finally pursued only very late in the volume.

These numerous problems notwithstanding, readers interested in contemporary writing, especially experimental poetry, in its relationship with wider sociocultural issues, will find a number of potentially helpful insights in Lutzkanova-Vassileva's book. The chapter on Bulgarian poetry is illuminating and concise, and the chapters on Russian Conceptualism and Metarealism help the readers appreciate how innovative poetry from the 1970s–1990s responded to the traumas of Soviet daily experience and later to the collapse of Soviet civilization. The parallels the author draws between Russian and American poetic responses to psychosocial traumas deserve to be explored at greater length. Hopefully, the appearance of this book will stimulate more comparative scholarship on innovative Slavic and Western writing.

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***Degeneration, Decadence and Disease in the Russian fin de siècle: Neurasthenia in the Life and Work of Leonid Andreev.*** By Frederick H. White. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014. xiv, 290 pp. Figures. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. €75.00, hard bound.

At a time when Leonid Andreev and his works are barely mentioned in literary studies, Frederick White's monograph represents a welcome contribution, insofar as Andreev was a figure of unquestioned importance during his lifetime. Using Andreev's letters, diaries, and psychiatric studies available during the author's lifetime and present, and an interpretation called "the illness narrative," White examines Andreev's works and life, particularly his suffering from acute neurasthenia, through the prism of his medical condition. On the one hand, Andreev permeated his texts with themes of madness, degeneration and criminal behavior, clearly inviting his critics to find parallels between fictionality and biography. On the other hand, as White illustrates, Andreev felt compelled to mask the effects of his various illnesses through performance. Because of Andreev's abundant symptoms, such as insomnia, depression, fear of going insane, and anxiety of death, no matter how often he sought treatments in mental institutions, one cannot help but be dismayed by the inadequate care that Andreev received. The psychiatric profession of the day offered him no cure.

Like many other writers of the twentieth century, Andreev's star rose with the help of his mentor, Maksim Gor'kii, who encouraged Andreev to become a member of the Znanie literary group, drawing many admirers and fans. The more Andreev achieved success, however, the more his personal life entered in the public arena. Accounts of his drinking bouts, his depressions and outbursts, not to mention suicide attempts, led the public to believe that his characters' experiences were Andreev's own. At the time of his heyday, medical science believed that neurasthenia was not simply a medical ailment, but also a reflection of societal degeneration.

White's readings of Andreev operate according to two strategies. The first involves