

Max Nordau's theory of degeneration. Before Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Nordau's *Degeneration* was one of the most popular books at the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, Nordau attempted to explain all modern art, music and literature by pointing out the degenerate characteristics of the artists involved. Although now discredited, Nordau's attack on degenerate art stemmed from the societal convolutions of fin de siècle thinking, a topic upon which White spends a great deal of time. This second strategy, namely of associating Andreev's illnesses with decadence, operates on the premise that Andreev's literary works "should be understood as important signposts of anxiety over the decline of civilized Russian society" (265). Thus, the "illness narrative" is an apt explanation of what ailed Russian culture at the turn of the twentieth century. In the history of Russian literature, no writer before (or after) Andreev suffused his texts with more madmen, criminals and alcoholics. Indeed, among the best of White's analyses are Andreev's "Thought," *The Red Laugh, He Who Gets Slapped*, and *The Seven that Were Hanged*.

In his conclusion, White argues that the role of neurasthenia in Andreev's life and works was not the determining factor of Andreev's immense popularity; instead, "he was immensely popular because he wrote about the moral decline of Russian society, interacting with the other decadent strains of modernist culture" (267). This book is well worth reading by not only Andreev enthusiasts, but all students of various disciplines in the twentieth century. It is rare to find Russian literary scholars as well versed in psychiatry and medicine as Frederick White.

White has convincingly shown that Andreev's struggle with mental illness must be understood in the context of the cultural discourse of pathology at the turn of the century. Clearly, Andreev made a therapeutic attempt to, if not cure his ailments, than at least to relieve them considerably through writing. What emerges from reading White's thoroughly researched and fascinating study is a reexamination of a neglected writer, who deserves renewed attention.

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The Imperative of Reliability: Russian Prose on the Eve of the Novel, 1820s–1850s.

By Victoria Somoff. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015. x, 238 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$79.95, hard bound.

In *The Imperative of Reliability*, Victoria Somoff revisits the territory of Russian literature most famously explored in Richard Freeborn's *The Rise of the Russian Novel: Studies in the Russian Novel from Eugene Onegin to War and Peace* (1973). Drawing on a variety of critical theories from the likes of Mikhail Bakhtin and Fredric Jameson, she examines the literary landscape from the 1820s to the 1850s with a probing eye from a distinctive critical angle. She covers prose works by a wide array of authors, some familiar, notably Aleksandr Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, Ivan Turgenev, Nikolai Gogol', Ivan Goncharov, and Lev Tolstoi (curiously, not Fedor Dostoevskii), others not, such as Aleksandr A. Bestuzhev-Marlinskii, Nikolai Nekrasov, and Vladimir Odoevskii, while also drawing lines to west European authors.

Through these works she traces what she calls the portrayal of "character consciousness" (10), from an "external" to an "internal" perspective, by which she generally means a shift from a non-fictional to a fictional standard of truth. She argues that such a shift comes with the change in an author's use of language from external "referentiality" to internal "reliability," that is, from language that verifiably refers to extra-literary reality to language that does not, having "no need of being verified, con-

firmed, or measured, but rather can be safely and completely trusted and depended upon [by the reader]. . . . regardless of the referential relationship between the text and the world outside it" (8). Hence, we might say that in Somoff's view, anonymous omniscient narrators are more reliable than identifiable first- or third-person narrators in the sense that they create a complete fictional world inside the novel, including "character consciousness," to be unquestionably accepted on that narrator's terms. That change toward fictional reality proved decisive in Russia because "the author's search for and discovery of this perspective . . . constitute the substance of the novel's 'rise'" (8).

Somoff sees these things playing out amid historical circumstances that brought the blurring of borders "between the framed and the framing, between characters and narrators, story and discourse" (41), time and space, and romanticism and realism. As she says, "an unprecedented situation" existed in Russia whereby categories converged for readers so "no boundaries can [could] be drawn" between "the object of representation and the representation itself" (16–17). In other words, in a society undergoing cultural transformations of many kinds, the language of fiction began to take on a life of its own, independent of reference to the external world.

Chapters on story cycles and the society tale as precursors to the novel illustrate Somoff's case that "the emergent novelistic author [was] released from the need to justify his or her account with reference to knowledgeable informants or authoritative sources," thereby becoming "self-sufficient and therefore fully reliable" (87). Authorial "claims to authenticity" thus required no external validation. Even "characters' consciousness" became fair game for the novelist. A chapter on Goncharov's *Oblomov*, dwelling on Oblomov's dream, demonstrates the point as the book marked "Waking Up the Novel." An Afterword on Tolstoy's *War and Peace* weaves together the book's themes on literary language and novelistic reality.

The book is far more complex than this summary indicates. This "study in historical poetics of narrative forms" has theoretical ambitions as well as historical purposes in its exploration of "narrative realism" and the structural relation of fictional genres (16). The complexity is not its strength, however. That strength lies in illuminating how Russian authors of fiction in the second quarter of the nineteenth century struggled to find an autonomous fictional language and fashioned a kind of narrative "reliability" that established the novel as the reigning literary form.

Somoff's conception of that reliability might raise some eyebrows, but she makes an erudite case for it. I add that caveat because the book's very complexity impairs its argument. It is laden with a language that aspires to theoretical sophistication but lapses into unintelligibility, as in sentences like this: "In the architectonics of discursive perspective thus configured, any textual action or 'move' carries forward both events and their representation in such a way that, as a matter of principle, no boundary can be drawn between the two" (16–17). Such writing makes the book unnecessarily difficult to follow in places. This is unfortunate, since Somoff is obviously an able scholar widely read in Russian and European literature, and she likely has more of value to say than the writing here allows readers to grasp.

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