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Men Without Women: Masculinity & Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917-1929 (review)

Sibelan E. S. Forrester

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OTHER WORLD LITERATURES

Eliot Borenstein. *Men Without Women: Masculinity & Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917–1929*. Durham, NC and London: Duke UP, 2000. xv + 346 pp.

Modern Russian intellectual history has been famously preoccupied with binary oppositions, usually coding them as positive and negative, while ignoring or suspecting any thinker or phenomenon that fell between the two identified extremes. The 1917 Revolution was largely devoted to reconfiguring and striving to simplify the binary oppositions that were read as the fatal clefs in Russian society, and the central one was class, which after the Revolution drew gender into itself as well. So one might expect to see uneasiness over gender in early Soviet literature, an intense reexamination of sex roles and the personality traits associated with either gender, or a recoding of associated values. As Eliot Borenstein demonstrates in *Men Without Women*, the vexed "woman question" was reconfigured by the negative evaluation of both women and traits previously coded as feminine in this great realignment. Borenstein concentrates on early Soviet male authors who created and described worlds in which women are only incidental characters, or else are written out of the narrative altogether, as dead bodies, idealized abstractions, or threats to an ideal male comradeship, with the inevitable consequences of sterility, narcissism and distortion. The book covers the period from the introduction of radical social and family policy under the Bolsheviks to the beginning of the return of traditional family policy (and the turn to Socialist Realism) as Stalin assumed power, though the author never cuts a line of discussion artificially short to fit those parameters.

Men without Women focuses on Isaac Babel, Yurii Olesha, and Andrei Platonov, with attention to Boris Pil'nyak in the conclusion as well. The overall topic structures the book without limiting it, as Borenstein offers rich, nuanced readings of all the stories and novels he considers, taking gender and its anxieties as a central but not exclusive organizing axis. His brilliantly theorized introduction gives a rapid but informative survey of major works and influences, both western and Russian (Bakhtin, Fyodorov, as well as more recent scholars). After outlining this background, Borenstein continues to refer to his most important sources throughout the book. His use of historical and cultural studies scholarship is constant and responsible, and the book's very solid foundation makes it illuminating for readers from a variety of backgrounds. Pithy close readings alternate with satisfying generalizations, while the whole is leavened with an irrepressible wordplay ranging from dry wit to groaning puns. This effervescence, however, is never just fun for its own sake; it conveys substance even as it engages the reader. For example, in describing Babel's narrator in *Red Cavalry*, Lyutov, as "a postrevolutionary incarnation of the eternal Jewish schlemiel," Borenstein expands our view of Lyutov, reveals the humor interwoven with the cycle's bitterness, and places it all in a broader, more complete historical and cultural context. Lyutov's troubled relationship to the Cossacks he has joined makes the stories a particularly good fit to Borenstein's theme: "It is precisely Lyutov's inability to prove himself that keeps the cycle focused on masculinity, since the cycle's narrator, doomed by the laws of genre to 'arrested development,' will never overcome his almost adolescent fascination for those who never fail the test of manhood." Borenstein is similarly enlightening on the triangular nature of relationships in Olesha's fiction and on the evolution of Platonov's views of gender from a Revolutionary asceticism shaped by Fyodorov into greater complexity. He concentrates on the prose fiction but makes telling use of other sources—Olesha's autobiography and image in literary memoirs by others and Platonov's early journalistic publications.

The range of primary and secondary sources makes for a rich scholarly apparatus. The book is on the whole produced quite well, with the exception of unfortunately frequent typographical errors in the transliterated Russian; fortunately, these accompany adequate English translations, so that the sense of the original citations remains clear. *Men with-*

out Women is an impressive book, a pleasure to read. It deepens the reader's appreciation of Babel, Olesha, and Platonov, some of the most interesting and complex writers of their time, while provocatively engaging the construction of masculinity in Russian literature and in society. Borenstein makes an outstanding contribution to the scholarly literature on Russian literature and society, as well as to the growing and increasingly sophisticated body of scholarly work on masculinities

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