

RUSSIAN LITERATURE – Essay

Overview

The *essay* genre (*opyty*) appeared in Russian literature relatively late, not until the middle of the 18th century. Traditionally, in its early stages, Russian literature was under the influence of Western sources; however, instead of directly copying the western style of writing, Russian writers adapted their writing to this genre. In the 18th century, Russian essayists criticized the social conditions of the serfs and state policies, corruption, the decline of morals and discussed what the Enlightenment brought to the West and Russia. However, 19th century authors began to cast a glance at art, the creativity of artists, aesthetics and criticized their homeland, comparing Russia with Western civilization. They also attacked the ineffective government policies against serfdom and the Russian elite's sympathy towards Western philosophy, values, legalism, positivism and scientism that was imported from the West, while criticizing Russia for not being aware of its "organic" unity and national culture. By the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, Russian authors no longer borrowed from other cultures. A new group of writers began to express their criticism of rationalism, political conservatism and apolitical individualism. They also voiced their concerns and expectations from radical intellectuals who followed an individualistic path, and examined ideological dogmatism, the state of contemporary literature and its development, and the problem of literature in a totalitarian state.

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Russian authors did not directly copy the western style of writing, but they tried to adapt their writings to this new genre as Mikhail Lomonosov did in his essay *On the Usefulness of Church Books in the Russian Language* (1757). He distinguished three styles of Russian: higher, middle and lower, linking them with appropriate themes and genres.

During the reign of Catherine the Great, satirical journals began to publish writings that resembled essays. In 1769, Catherine's satirical journal *All Sorts and Sundries* came out, and she encouraged other writers to follow her lead.

Nikolay Novikov published his essayistic work on leading Russian writers under the title *An Essay on the Historical Dictionary of Russian Writers* (1772). It contained bibliographical information on pre-Petrine Russian writers. Novikov published his first satirical journal *The Drone*, which appeared as a weekly in 1769-1770. His journal contained his writings criticizing the social conditions of the serfs, and targeting Catherine's policies, as well as her government's inefficiency and corruption. In his essay, *The ancient Russian library* (1773–1775), Novikov criticized the French critics and Russian aristocrats' French perspective that saw Russia as a backward and uncivilized country.

Russian writer Aleksandr Sumarokov wrote his own essay *On Versification* in 1781, and examined all five syllabotonic meters and the changes in Russian verse and in their use since 1735.

Toward the final quarter of the 18th century, Russian writers began to show a growing interest in political issues. There were writers, like Denis Fonvizin, Aleksandr Radishchev and Mikhail Shcherbatov, who wrote articles that described how to govern the state. For example, in his essay *On the Corruption of Morals in Russia* (1786–89), Shcherbatov talked about the decline of the morals at the court and criticized Catherine's policies.

Denis Fonvizin, on the other hand, in his *Discourse on the Indispensable Laws of the State* (1784), gave suggestions to tsar Paul to end his favoritism and oppressive rule and to create laws to bring harmony and stability to the country.

Aleksandr Radishchev, in his *A Journey From St. Petersburg to Moscow* (1790), delivered his stinging criticism of serfdom, the political system and the unlimited political power of landowners.

Sentimentalism, inspired by Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782– 89) and the translation of Montaigne's essays written in 1803, gradually displaced Classicism as the predominant literary genre and new genres like confessional narratives soon followed.

In 1792, Peter Plavilshchikov published an essay *Theater* in one of the journals he edited with Ivan Krylov, *The Mirror*. In his essay, he criticized the imitation of French plays and advocated the creation of a truly national drama which could be drawn from real Russian life.

A proponent of Sentimentalism, Nikolay Karamzin, in his didactic essay *A Bit about the Sciences, Arts, and Enlightenment* (1793), criticized Rousseau's claim that the science ruined morals; but at the same time, he emphasized that science, arts and the Enlightenment had brought modernization to the West. His political essays, published in *Vestnik Evropy*, included his remarks on the political and social atmosphere in Europe before the French Revolution.

Mikhail Muravyov was one of the most refined of essayists in this period. In his essay *The Amusements of the Imagination* published in 1797, he used a discussion of Sumarokov's tragedies to praise invention as an honor.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

One of the most famous proponents of Classicism, Gavriila Derzhavin, wrote his essay *A Discourse on Lyric Poetry or on the Ode* in 1811–1815. In this essay, he talked about the gift of a poet, his imagination, his knowledge and experience that he contributed to the history of the Ode.

Vasily Zhukovsky who was one of the leading writers of the 19th century, wrote critical essays that were considered manifestoes of Romanticism. In his essay *Raphael's Madonna* (1824), he presented his views on painting and Romantic artists, and discussed the importance of creativity in an artist's life. Zhukovsky also translated the philosophical essays of David Hume, such as *On Simplicity and Refinement in Writing*, *On Tragedy*, and *On Eloquence*.

The Russian essayist Konstantin Batyushkov collected his philosophical essays in his *Essays in Verse and Prose* (1817). In his essay *A walk to the Academy of Arts* (1814), Batyushkov introduced his aesthetic viewpoint, narrating his story in the person of a painter and gave a broad panoramic depiction of Petersburg. He wrote his essay *A bit about the poet and Poetry* in 1816, in which he depicted a sentimental poet, and claimed that art should be in agreement with real life.

Peter Vyazemsky wrote a number of essays such as *On Derzhavin* (1816), *Mickievich's sonnets* (1829), and *On the Spirit of Parties; on Literary Aristocracy* (1830) that mostly included his critical views on some literary events of his time.

The prolific writer Aleksandr Pushkin wrote many essays that included his remarks on philosophy, education, literature, and poetry. Pushkin, in his first essay *My Observations on the Russian Theater* (1820), talked about professionalism in the administrative committee. In his essay *On the Factors That Delayed the Progress of Our Literature* (1824) he criticized the overwhelming use of French by Russian writers and the aristocrats. In his essay *Objection to A. Bestuzhev's Article 'A View on Russian Literature During 1824 and the Beginning of 1825'* (1834), Pushkin expressed his views on poetic inspiration and the role of literature in a society. He also gave his thoughts on history and historiography in his famous letter (1836) to Peter Chaadaev.

Peter Chaadaev, on the other hand, wrote philosophical essays, only one of which was published in the journal *Teleskop* in 1836. In this essay, Chaadaev directed his criticism at his homeland, comparing Russia with Western civilization, and claimed that Russia had never experienced the Renaissance and Reformation like Western countries.

Nikolay Gogol also wrote many essays. His first essays were included in the volume *Arabeski* (1835). His essays *On the Architecture of Our Time* and *Sculpture, Painting, Music* contained his aesthetic remarks on various arts. In his *The Last Day of Pompei*, he praised Karl Bruillov for the plastic effects on his canvas and complete harmony in it. In *On the Middle Ages*, he criticized the Enlightenment philosophers who saw the Middle Ages as a primitive period, and the Romantic writers who greatly admired it. In *A View on the Formation of Little Russia* and *On Little Russian Songs*, Gogol expressed his views on Ukrainian national culture and folklore.

In his article *Literary Reveries* written on Pushkin, the literary critic Vissarion Belinsky acknowledged Pushkin as a national poet and called Pushkin's Evgeny Onegin an encyclopedia of Russian life. In his article *On the Russian story and Gogol's stories* (1835), he praised Gogol as the leader of the Natural School. His essays *Letter to N.V. Gogol* (1847) included his criticism of serfdom, ineffective government policies, and also Gogol's religious conservatism.

Herzen became a leading writer of the political essay, and in his journal, *Kolokol*, he published his essays such as *Moscow and Petersburg* (1857), *Western Books* (1857), *Very Dangerous* (1859), and *Superfluous Men and Revolutionaries* (1860). He discussed the government policies on serfdom, the illusions of Slavophilism, and the liberals' struggle against tsarism. Herzen included his essays in two books, *Letters from France and Italy, 1547–1851* and *From the Other Shore* (1855). In *From the Other Shore* (1855), he discussed the ideals and views of the European elites and his remarks on the revolution of 1848. His first major works, *Dilettantism in Science* (1842–1843) and *Letters on the Study of Nature* (1845–1846) were published in Russia in the journal *Otechestvennye Zapiski*.

Ivan Turgenev was another essayist who wrote *Hamlet and Don Quixote* (1860), in which he describes two basic human types. Hamlet represented a socially useless person, while Don Quixote, on the other hand, was a man who completely devoted himself to his ideal and was ready to sacrifice everything for it.

Ivan Kireevskiy published his essays in his own journal *Evropeets*. He published his essay *The Nineteenth Century* criticizing 18th and 19th century Western philosophy and values. Together with Aleksey Khomyakov, Ivan Kireevsky was considered as the theoretician of the Slavophile movement.

Aleksey Khomyakov wrote an essay *On the Necessity and Possibility of New Principles in Philosophy* (1856) in which he criticized the differences between Russia and the West, and claimed that Western countries were individualistic and mostly agnostic, and that Russian civilization was superior than the West because it was more unified and more religious. In his two essays of 1845 and 1846, *Foreign Opinions of Russia*, he depicted post-Petrine Russia, criticizing the Russians for being admirers of European culture and their feeling of inferiority.

Ivan Kireevsky wrote his essay *The Nineteenth Century* and published it in his journal *The European*. He criticized Peter's reforms for being against Russia's organic development and the French Revolution for being an age of destruction. His journal *The European* was closed in 1832 after this essay was published.

After the abolition of serfdom in 1861, the gap between the followers of the Slavophiles and the Westernizers increased, because of the Nihilists' extremist political program and their demand to overthrow the tsar. These people had profound influence on the thought and behavior of subsequent generations of writers.

One of the major Russian literary critics, Nikolay Chernyshevsky, wrote essays which appeared in *Otechestvennye Zapiski* and in *Sovremennik*. He published in *Sovremennik* his essay *Essays in the*

Gogolian Period of Russian Literature (1856) claiming that Gogol was the first Russian writer who was concerned about real Russian life and was the father of Russian realism.

Apollon Grigoryev was a leading critic influenced by both the Westernizers and the Slavophiles. He called his aesthetic "organic" and his criticism "organic criticism" which meant an awareness of the organic unity and continuity of national culture. In his essay *On Truth and Honesty in Art* (1856), he reflected his views on Russian poets as being sharp observers of reality who opened the mysteries of life, and the belief of the poet as a prophet and national leader.

In the second half of the 19th century, one of the outstanding Russian writers, Fedor Dostoevsky penned many essays on the social, political, and psychological character of his country and published them in his journals *Vremya* (1861–1863) and *Epokha* (1864–1865), and as editor of *Grazhdanin* (1873–1878). In his essays Dostoevsky criticized the Westernizers' sympathy towards Western civilization. He was against the legalism, positivism and scientism of the Russian elite as a harmful import from the West, and believed that Western civilization had begun to decline, but that it might be revitalized by the spirituality of the simple Russian people.

In the 1860s, Lev Tolstoy began to write his contradictory remarks on art and literature first in his pedagogical journal *Yasnaya Polyana*. He began to live in Yasnaya Polyana, and it was there that he published twelve issues of *Yasnaya Polyana* between 1862 and 1863. Tolstoy wrote his essay *Who Ought to Teach Whom How to Write: We Our Peasant Children, or Our Peasant Children Us?* (1862) and criticized himself and his associates for delivering little to their people and doing severe damage to their pure souls. Tolstoy spent the rest of his lifetime expressing his new religious views in his didactic treatises. In his essay *What Then Shall We Do?* (1882-1886), he stated that people should quit praising modern civilization, that every aspect of modern society should be abolished, and the people should return to their communal farming. In his treatise *What Is Art?* (1893–1894), Tolstoy believed that art should be universal in all aspects and intelligible to people on all levels and all nations, and most contemporary art was unintelligible to the masses.

A religious philosopher Vladimir Solovyev, under the influence of Slavophile thought, wrote his philosophical essays *The Spiritual Foundations of Life* (1884) and *The History and Future of Theocracy* (1887) including his remarks on the introduction of religion into public life. In *The Russian Idea* (1888), Solovyev questioned what type of role on Earth was assigned to Russia by God to be become a part of humanity and the Mystical Body of Christ, and what role Russia should have in introducing Godmanhood in the religiously divided world.

Nikolay Mikhailovsky, in his essay *What is Progress?* (1869), advocated a society that gave the human personality a chance to develop comprehensively. For him, progress meant stages and types of social organization, and the peasant commune was the highest type at a very low stage of development. In his article *Heroes and Crowd* (1882), Mikhailovsky claimed that an ordinary individual under certain circumstances could lead or give strength to a crowd, and the whole event could gain a special power. The role of an individual, here, was reinforced by mass perception.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

Towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, a new group of writers appeared expressing their criticism of rationalism, political conservatism and apolitical individualism as in Dmitry Merezhkovsky's essay *On the Reasons for the Decline and the New Trends in Contemporary Russian Literature* (1893).

Like Merezhkovsky, Valery Bryusov also wrote essays like *The keys of mysteries* (1893) and *Contemporary Thoughts* (1905) criticising those intellectual movements hostile to symbolism. Bryusov expressed his criticism of the poetry of Aleksandr Pushkin in his essay *Pushkin's Verse Techniques* (1915).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the 1905 Revolution became a major event for writers like Nikolay Berdyaev, Sergey Bulgakov, Mikhail Gershenzon, Semyon Frank, Petr Struve, and Alexander Izgoev to express their concerns and expectations from the radical intellectuals and the Revolution in their *Landmarks: A Collection of Essays on the Russian Intelligentsia* (1909).

During the “Silver Age”, there were essayists such as Vasily Rozanov and Lev Shestov who devoted their time only to religious issues. In his essays, collected in his books, *Solitaria* (1912) and *Two Baskets of Fall Leaves* (1913–1915), Rozanov talked about the issues of Christianity, the Christian Church, Jews, and Russian society.

Under the influence of Nietzsche, the Russian existentialist Lev Shestov devoted his criticism to Hegelian rationalism, and the concepts of reason and scientism in his works *Beginnings and Endings* (1908) and *The Great Vigils* (1911).

The symbolist writer Aleksandr Blok was interested in social and political problems in his essays such as *The People and Intelligentsia* (1909); *The Intelligentsia and Revolution* (1918), and *The Collapse of Humanism* (1921). In these essays, Blok discussed the problems of intellectuals and art, and he claimed that the intellectuals followed an individualistic path, wasted their energies in literary and philosophical speculations, and political activities which did not answer the needs and desires of the Russian people, bringing Russia to the brink of catastrophe.

Maksim Gorky in his early years in Capri (1906–1913) published essays of literary and social criticism, rejecting the individualism of the Russian writers and supporting collective creativity. In his essay *The Destruction of the Individual* (1909) he praised the ideals of socialism and the purity of the working class and in *About Karamazovism* (1913) he criticized Dostoyevky's views and his bitter style of presenting the Russian character. During the Revolution, Gorky published a series of articles such as *Revolution and culture* (1918) and *Untimely Thoughts* (1917–1918), in which he expressed his reaction to the October Revolution and advocated the preservation of cultural values.

Osip Mandelshtam, together with Nikolay Gumilyov, Anna Akhmatova, and Sergey Gorodetsky founded the Acmeist school of poetry, and wrote some essays on the idea of acmeist aesthetic such as *François Villon* (1913) and *On the Nature of the Word* (1922) and *The Morning of Acmeism* (1919).

The author Yevgeny Zamyatin penned essays which included his observations and thoughts on the problem of literature in a totalitarian state. He criticized censorship and ideological dogmatism in his essays *Tomorrow* (1920) and *On Today and the Contemporary* (1924). In 1923, Zamyatin wrote an essay titled *On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters* and talked about the effects on Russian Modernism of Nietzsche's Dionysianism, Einstein's relativity, and the campaigns against the illusion of realism. And in his essay *I Am Afraid*, he examined the state of postrevolutionary literature.

Literary critic and one of the main theorists of Left Art, and one of the active practitioners of factography (linking writers to contemporary life directly and encouraging them to turn reporter, historian, memoirist etc.) Viktor Shklovsky expressed his personal views and observations on the theory of literature, theater and film that were gathered in his *Hamburg account* (1928). In his essay *Monument to a Scholarly Error* (1930), under the pressure of the Soviet authorities, Shklovsky tried to embrace the theory of Socialist Realism. Vladimir Mayakovsky's *How to Make Verse* (1926) and his *My Discovery of Amerika* (1925-1926) were also remarkable contributions to this genre.

Theorist of Symbolism, Andrey Bely published his three volumes of essays which included his essay *Symbolism, Green Meadow* (1910) in which he discussed the state of contemporary literature and its development, and *Arabesques* (1913) in which he depicted the modern literary era. His essay *Rhythm as Dialectic* (1929) was about a new method of studying poetic rhythm. Bely also wrote essays such as *Revolution and Culture* and *The Mastery of Gogol* in 1934.

In the late 1960s, Andrey Sinyavsky was one of the Soviet writers who was published outside the Soviet Union. He was arrested and put on trial for publishing his works in the West. In his essays *On Socialist Realism* (1959), *Thought Unaware* (1965), *For Freedom of Imagination* (1971), *The Literary Process in Russia* (1976), and *Soviet Civilization: A Cultural History* (1989) he discussed the classical tradition of Socialist Realism and Soviet literature.

As being one of the supporters of a neo-Slavophile trend during the Soviet Union, Vladimir Soloukhin in his essays, *A Walk in Rural Russia* (1958), *From Lyrical Points of View* (1965) and *Searching for Icons in Russia* (1972) looked back with longing, remembering Russia's native culture, religious art and literature and criticizes the Soviet regime.

Discussion/Questions

- 1-How did Russian intellectuals response to changes in Russia under the influence of Western civilization and values?
- 2- How did Russian writers react to their experiences of socialist realism?

Reading

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