

of modernist poetics (for example, the modernist contributions of self-effacement and of spatial form and technique) shows itself in his superficial and sometimes contradictory statements about the topic, statements that have been influenced, ironically enough, by his reading of the poetry and early literary essays of T. S. Eliot.

I am responding to the bias against modern versification evident in this foreword. Had Brodsky championed *vers libre* or modernist poetics at the expense of classical or Renaissance poetics, I would have been compelled to write a letter defending the latter traditions. As Brodsky well knows, all self-conscious poets participate in a historical tradition that they feel in their bones and that they use out of necessity. He writes that poets are aware of their debts to their predecessors, that “[t]his debt is expressed in the feeling every more or less conscious writer has, that he should write in such a way as to be understood by his ancestors—those from whom he learned poetic speech” (222). In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot comments explicitly on this feeling of indebtedness in a much quoted passage that has recently drawn the fire of ideological and cultural-studies critics. Eliot writes that necessarily having a sense of history compels the poet to compose with the feeling of being supported by the entire literature of Europe. This sense of history, which is timeless and time-bound, makes the poet simultaneously traditional and contemporaneous. For Eliot, the poetry of one generation achieves timelessness as it takes its place within a greater historical tradition composed of generations of poetry. Had Brodsky considered the truth of this paradox, he would not have had to worry about freeing modern poetry from history since that poetry has always been free—history is its ally as well as its enemy.

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Slavists after the Soviet Union

To the Editor:

As a graduate student looking forward to working on the cusp of Slavic and comparative literatures, I welcome Gary Saul Morson’s introduction to the recent Russian cluster (107 [1992]: 226–31). The rapprochement between Russian and Western literary culture and theory has had a long if fitful history of failed encounters and delayed fruition. Morson’s thoughts constitute a timely glance backward at this immediate past,

in the wake of the recent and astonishing collapse of the Soviet Union.

Few would dispute the need for such a rapprochement. I write, then, only to ask whether Morson’s historicization of the currently nervous dialogue between Slavic and Western theory displays the breadth equal to the questions at hand. The anxieties that mark this dialogue certainly merit the attention Morson accords them; yet it seems to me that his manner of articulating them reproduces the ideological polarizations of an era just completed, condemning any future dialogue to yielding little more than the limited polemical truths of the cold war.

Morson’s immediate purpose is to throw light on the skepticism with which literary theory has been met in Slavist circles. This attitude, he clarifies, results from the specificity of the Soviet experience, which makes Slavists resistant to the “politicization of current criticism” (227). To be sure, the Stalinist legacy is an irreducible fact, and Western criticism’s sporadic awareness of it remains a scandal. My only reservation, from which other consequences stem, concerns the way in which Stalinism as a historical burden can be hypostatized as a form of closure within a particular debate. In Morson’s introduction this legacy functions to polarize two monoglot options (us and them) instead of serving as a difference that is negotiated between and through these options and within a global cultural field that is surely wider than he suggests.

Morson’s rendering of the debate certainly reflects real disciplinary hostilities. These tensions could be attenuated in the first instance through a more reciprocal sense of intellectual history, one that would not only communicate to the West the risks implicit in the recent waves of antihumanist theorization but equally reveal to Russians the breadth of Western and Third World socialist cultures, to which, despite appearances, they have had little access since the twenties.

Yet I wonder whether such a resolution, like Morson’s own representation of the debate, ultimately rehearses the nineteenth-century confrontation between the Slavophiles and the Westernizers, as well as the spatial assumptions of that encounter. To be sure, the confrontation has been significantly transformed on American soil, resulting in an occasionally awkward alliance between Russian émigré culture and American academic liberalism. It is surely this intellectual matrix that has, by and large, characterized Slavic studies and carefully marked its distance from the vicissitudes of American literary theory. It seems to me in no way an excessive politicization of academic criticism to regard this configuration as a complex expression of American cold war culture, whose greatest insight—the appre-

hension of Stalinism as tyranny—coincided with an astonishing blindness to the global context in which the United States and the Soviet Union competed as rival imperialisms.

This wider rivalry has had a not trivial impact on vast regions of the world and not always in ways that leave the moral hierarchies of liberal democracy untouched. Global politics may not be all that remote from the present landscape of literary criticism, to the extent that both realms present complexities that are impoverished by cold war polarities. Morson's primary example of a Western literary-critical misreading is the history of the West's appropriations of Bakhtin. His own efforts in giving Bakhtin currency in this country are well known; and it is with great respect for his work that I ask, can the ongoing struggle over Bakhtin's legacy be reduced to the either-or of Marxism versus humanism? To suggest otherwise is not necessarily to opt for a pluralist undecidability. Bakhtin's metaphysics, to be sure, has a profoundly creatorly orientation, although one that appears more theological than humanist in inspiration. Yet in much of Bakhtin this metaphysics seems rather a powerful theoretical *cas limite*. Literature's historicity begins with its secularization, with the loss of an authoritative other, of anything occupying the position of evaluative outsideness. What remains is Christianity's axiological *form*, but with the grace of transcendence displaced by "transgression," the shifting limits of self and other.

Might I suggest that transgression, in a new world order that has moved beyond the collapsed dichotomy of Stalinism and democracy, is no more than the task of transnational literacy, a sensitivity to geographies that escape easy dualisms? Recent studies of Russian orientalism, such as Peter Scotto's in the same issue of *PMLA*, are an early sign of this literacy within the Slavic field. If Russia has been "rarely mentioned in all the literary debates on colonialism" (227), it is surely the Slavist's task to raise the question. It is a problem whose horizon might reveal a Russia as much embedded in the East as in the West, a threshold entity confounding the more orderly partition of disciplines and ideologies.

During the Caucasian campaigns of the 1830s that saw Russia seize the "dagger of Asia," the poet Lermontov intuited precisely this sense of the mutual imbrication of writer and history, self and other (I translate somewhat freely from "Poète"): "The age that seized the blade, did it not take / The mission, poet, that was yours?" Lermontov here intimates to us a language in which to contemplate the shifting geographies of our own time: beyond the polarizations of East and West, a shared idiom of loss that imposes on all the agents

of imperial history the burden of a common, if heteroglot, story. A rapprochement between Slavic and Western theory and culture could well be enacted in the terms offered by this global drama.

HARSHA RAM
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Reply:

Harsha Ram makes some excellent points in this reply to my brief statement. I agree that it would be useful for scholarship to get beyond the truisms of the past and to embrace a broader (more "global") perspective. We also agree about the quality of Peter Scotto's splendid article. And I certainly cannot quarrel with his statement "To be sure, the Stalinist legacy is an irreducible fact, and Western criticism's sporadic awareness of it remains a scandal." Most important, perhaps, is that Ram seems to accept my assessment that Slavists by and large do not share the presuppositions of what I called the "hegemonic" departments of literature. That was the main point of my introduction to the Russian cluster. Slavist theorists feel called on to draw from their own theoretical heritage, which, combined with the best insights of the current scene, could offer an alternative to reigning American models.

I do not, however, think it helpful to describe such a project as a revival of the Slavophile-Westernizer debate. The Slavists I have in mind do not believe, as the Slavophiles did, that Russia has any special historical mission; such thinking is itself a product of the Hegelianism, of the grand belief in History, from which Slavists are alienated. I know no Slavist who, like the Slavophiles, rejects Western democracy in favor of autocracy, believes in the saving powers of the Russian peasantry, or embraces the superiority of the Russian Orthodox church. Ram's analogy here seems to represent rather fuzzy thinking. The mere fact (which Ram acknowledges) that Slavists differ from professors of English and comparative literature does not by itself justify an accusation of Slavophilism, any more than it justifies equating those professors with Russian Westernizers.

The Slavists I have in mind often object to the politicization of literary studies because in the experience of Marxist countries they have seen concrete evidence that politicization leads to mind-numbing dullness and to intellectual conformism of the worst sort. The Slavists' solution, so far as I can tell, is not to replace left-wing politicization with right-wing politicization, as Ram seems to suggest with his repeated mention of