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978-0-521-10675-7 - Cross-Cultural Reckonings: A Triptych of Russian, American, and Canadian Texts

Blanche H. Gelfant

Excerpt

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Introduction: On Waywardness

Il n'est pas subject si vain qui ne merite un rang en cette rapsodie.

Montaigne

The waywardness of the essays in this volume has endeared them to me – but only after it had surprised me, troubled me, and caused me considerable struggle. Seen in retrospect, the struggle seemed to be over linearity, a traditional aspect of the essay hardly worth contention, one would think, though it has troubled feminist critics considerably. Linearity troubled me because the essays I was writing stubbornly refused to follow a single direction – a single theme or purpose – that would lead them to a clearly defined destination. They followed instead unpredictably wayward paths that met and diverged, crossed and collided. Some of the paths broadened into highways that allowed congenial or contending texts to travel together, engaging in dialogues which their critics, confined to the bypath of notes, could comment upon but not control. Some paths crossed boundary lines that defined the oppositions within binary cross-cultural comparisons. Others simply continued – resisting, if only by implication, the closure toward which a linear critical essay conventionally moves.

For example, the first essay, *Days of Reckoning*, refused to reach conclusions even though the texts it discussed, and the various reckonings made within and about them, seemed to demand a final reckoning or judgment. It argued that such a reckoning would be artifactual, produced by the contingencies of a binary cross-cultural critique. By assuming a triadic form it sought to avoid these contingencies and to multiply its meanings. Perhaps it only made meaning itself more indeterminate, but it did not equate indeterminacy with unreadability. On the contrary, it declared itself readable in a number of different ways: horizontally, vertically, elliptically, and crisscross. This became possible, it argued, once it rejected the linearity traditional to academic essays and, by analogy, turned itself into a triptych. As in a painting, a single frame, the essay as a whole, contained and was constituted by three discrete parts or panels, each panel consisting of a cross-cultural critique that was complete in itself but capable of combining

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with the others to form a multifaceted argument moving in several directions at once. A reader following one direction could be diverted to another that ran parallel to or intersected with it, or that cut it off from or changed its destination. One panel read in conjunction with another – the first with the third, for instance – produced a specific cross-cultural comparison, while any combination of panels modulated the meaning of the essay as a whole. Thus meanings became more than usually multiple, coexistent, and cognizant of each other. They deferred to their differences while recognizing their similarity as artifactual products of the shifting contexts the essay created. The shifts took place as the essay's focus changed from panel to panel, and changed again as panels were compared, contrasted, or combined. Each shift defined particular critical issues which, like a triptych's panels, were at once discrete and interconnected – issues pertaining to cultural identity, historical change and continuity, literary representations of gender, postmodern theories skeptical of the truth of fiction (and of truth itself), and testimonials to the writer's truth.

The triadic form that held these issues together gave the essay latitude to rethink oppositions generated by binary comparisons and to resist the teleology of linear arguments. As it tried out – or essayed – a multifaceted criticism, the triptych sought to loosen strictures that conventional forms of academic discourse have placed upon waywardness and the intellectual freedom it can afford. Seeking freedom of form, *Days of Reckoning* began to question the cross-cultural approach it was taking and to engage in literary reckonings that would not come to a final account. In the novellas that the essay discussed, characters literally reckoned; they counted, calculated, and made accountings. The essay itself used reckoning as a metaphor that called to mind the etymological meaning of *essay* as an *exagium* or weighing. Trying to weigh arguments freely and let the scales tip as they would, *Days of Reckoning* allowed in subjects it had not intended to include, adopting as it went along the famously carefree and originary attitude of Montaigne's *Essais*: "Il n'est pas subject si vain qui ne merite un rang en cette rapsodie."¹ Such an attitude makes an essay wayward.

The inherent waywardness of the novel itself as a literary form turned out to be a submerged motif of the last essay in the volume, *The Capitalistic Will*. The essay argued that the novel's waywardness allowed the writer to resist a reader's desire for clarity. Unexpected twists and turns of plot and characterization, as well as strange elisions, produced mystification, an effect the essay refused to deplore. On the contrary, *The Capitalistic Will* proclaimed a critic's love of textual mysteries, her appreciation of their involuted purposes, and her pleasure in their obfuscating tactics which, the essay argued, criticism could not completely counter. The essay described reckonings made within the texts only to question their validity and deny their finality. It skeptically recalculated the final reckonings that characters had made and declared them obfuscations serving personal, cultural, and literary purposes. These purposes were reinforced by the novels' self-reflective expository passages, which the essay traced to sources of unearned

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authority – to writers or narrators with a vested interest in the culture of capitalism. Such passages, the essay argued, represented the texts' murky attempts at a final reckoning that would account for events the essay considered unaccountable. In a succession of long notes, the essay provided space for a diversity of critical judgments, but it found their finality questionable, necessarily so because the complexities of the texts – concealed by their serene and superficially simple styles and obfuscated by their self-serving explanations – demand a continuous re-reckoning. The inconclusiveness of the reckonings produced in *The Capitalistic Will* represented the essay's resistance to a demand for final judgment implicit in critical processes that seek a settlement of accounts – an accounting that, as we say, closes the books.

In *essaying* an open-ended critique, I found myself appropriating for the second time an art form that evoked waywardness by drawing the eye in various directions rather than across a single linear plane to a prescribed endpoint. Previously, in a book called *Women Writing in America*, I had borrowed the collage, using it in my subtitle to justify a lack of closure. Like the triptych, the collage is a multifaceted art form that induces the eye to wander over disparate pieces held together in juxtapositions that jar the aesthetic sensibility and open the mind to a re-reckoning of fundamental cultural assumptions – assumptions about what is and is not of intrinsic artistic value, or of intrinsically consequential difference, or of a hierarchical order that could, and perhaps should, be democratized. For once diverse and diversely valued fragments have been placed upon the canvas of a collage, junk and high art interact with indifference to their culturally defined differences. Seeing this interaction, I offered the collage as an analogue for an open-ended feminist criticism by suggesting that diverse women's voices, rather than visual images, could be placed upon an equal, equalizing, and expandable plane. One essay in *Women Writing* mimetically reproduced the form of a collage by painting the portrait of a writer with fragments of prose set off from each other by different discursive modes and different typographies, the jagged pieces coming together to reveal the wholeness of a self created out of a woman's fragmented and multiple roles. Another essay described a novella as a literary collage, a story constructed of fragments and found objects – actual junk and junked lives – which had been salvaged, put together, and redeemed by the writer's art.

Though the form of the triptych seems more strictly prescribed than that of the collage, it has considerable freedom to vary its triadic pattern or to exceed it by becoming a polyptych. Generically, the triptych is a type of polyptych, a multifaceted art form that has no fixed number of panels and no single design. Some polyptychs place beneath their main panels a secondary series of small interconnected pictures. Such pictorial sequences have the qualities of discreteness and connectedness I see in the endnotes, which simultaneously support the essays and stand apart from them as autonomous elements. If they maintain their double stance properly, these notes should justify their length as commentaries in-

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teresting in themselves. The essays' increasing reliance upon notes to introduce the arguments of literary theorists may reflect an increasing reluctance to concede to theory a space which could be occupied by practical criticism. The earliest essay I wrote, *The Hidden Mines*, is the least annotated and the most personal. In it, an "I" speaks directly to the reader. Subsequent essays, more directly concerned with theory and its proliferation, invent the fiction of a critic with two voices, a personal voice that speaks in the essays to address the texts, and another voice, heard in the notes, that converses with critics about literary and cultural contexts.

This marked separation between essay and essayistic notes invites readers to enjoy a certain waywardness in their choice of what to read and in what sequence. One can read the essays without the notes for self-contained arguments about the texts. One could read the notes first for background material and arguments of their own. One could read the essay and notes conjointly, turning from the texts to various contexts. All of these possibilities are adumbrated in a highly wayward discussion of notes that I read after I had written this apologia for my essays. I refer to Derrida's lucubrations in the published version of his spoken comments, entitled "This is Not an Oral Footnote."² Echoing Derrida as he echoes Magritte, I can say that this book is not a book, since one can read its collected essays in any order, though the first, *Days of Reckoning*, establishes a theoretical scaffolding for the volume as a whole. For this reason, I have placed it first though it was written after the two essays that follow, *Speaking Her Own Piece*, and *The Hidden Mines*. Because *Days of Reckoning* discusses most explicitly issues I see implicated in postmodern cross-cultural criticism as theorized and practiced, it can serve as a introduction to the concerns of the other essays, though it can be read also, I would suggest, as an inconclusive conclusion to the volume as a whole. Its segmented form and inferential argument allow it to be read in a reverse order, since its concluding pages reflect upon what it originally intended and so serve as a preamble or beginning as well as an end.

I have a vision I have not been able to realize – of a critical essay divided into two parts: an explicatory essay and a set of notes that would constitute a secondary essay when read continuously. This master diptych would have two horizontal panels, one focused upon literary texts, and the other upon critical contexts. Each horizontal panel could be read independently as a self-contained essay, or both could be read together as vertically continuous, thus assuming the conventional form of a footnoted critique. All I could achieve was a rather idiosyncratic bifurcation which, however, did allow me to pursue an interest in individual texts while I explored a variety of contexts – literary, cultural, biographical, historical. All the essays express a self-conscious concern with a critic's choice of contexts for the study of literature. This concern arose with the conception of each essay, since each was written in response to an invitation that defined explicitly, if generally, the setting for which the essay was destined – distinct and different settings pointing to national culture as a context for literary

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criticism. To explain why the essays redefined the terms of their invitations and how they engaged interactively in a process of continuous cross-cultural reckonings, I introduce each essay with a short account of the particular context in which, and about which, it was written. This adds another voice to the volume, reminiscent, self-reflective, and occasionally rueful.

Notes

1 The quotations from Montaigne that serve as epigraphs for prefatory notes come from a 1962 edition of *Essais*, ed. Maurice Rat (Garnier Frères, 2 vols.).

2 Jacques Derrida, "This Is Not an Oral Footnote," in *Annotation and Its Texts*, ed. Stephen A. Barney (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 192–205. The temptation to digress is strong, since one could wander into another bypath by pursuing Derrida's account of the footnote. Derrida declares that if he wanted "to be sure" that any polemical attack he might make "would be read and not passed by," he "would put it in a footnote, conferring on it the principal role, so that what is apparently the main text would become an auxiliary pretext for the footnote" (p. 198). To explain this apparent inversion, Derrida engages in a "digression," and to avoid further digression, I leave him here with the last word. To do otherwise would be to demonstrate once more the critic's inexhaustible capacity to comment, argue, and annotate. Perhaps, as Montaigne has said, this capacity testifies to our inexhaustible desire for knowledge (le *desir de connoissance*), made tangible by our swarming textual commentaries. In his essay "De L'Experience," Montaigne observed that "il y a . . . plus de livres sur les livres que sur autre subject; nous ne faisons que nous entregloser." In his (not) oral footnote, Derrida elaborately glosses himself.

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Panel I: On Breaking Up

veu la naturelle instabilité de nos meurs et opinions, il m'a semblé souvent que les bons auteurs mesme ont tort de s'opiniâtrer à former de nous une constante and solide contexture

Montaigne

In the summer of 1990, I was on my way to Russia, carrying with me indispensable items for the trip, chewing gum and lipsticks and a set of lectures on Russian and American short fiction. The lipsticks were for Russian chambermaids, and the lectures were for a group of American and Canadian college alumni, mature men and women, on a tour – an educational tour, the brochure said – of Soviet Russia. I was to educate the group about modern Russian and American literature, and my counterpart, a Canadian historian from McGill University, was to educate us about the history of the Soviet Union. This history, long, involuted, and astonishing, had led to a time of heightened promise. In the summer of 1990, the Soviet Union – and the world – seemed to be moving toward a future in which Cold War fears would become a mere memory of the past. This was the promise, many believed, held out by Gorbachev and his policy of *glasnost*.

As I imagined myself cruising up the Volga River, leisurely combining edifying conversation with vodka cocktails, I could not foresee the incessant worry that my happy and ignorant plunge into cross-cultural criticism would bring. For one commitment led to another. By coincidence, I was asked that summer to write an essay on teaching literary texts from a cross-cultural perspective – a nice coincidence, I thought, since I was already engaged in drawing cross-cultural comparisons. Two years later, I was still writing the essay, which I thought I might never finish and, because of its length, never publish. My unending reading and writing became an end in itself, fulfilling an ideal of scholarship I would not abnegate though, clearly, it could impede a professional career. I kept writing, and the world kept changing. As we know, Gorbachev lost his luster and his position, and the Soviet Union was fragmented into a “former” state. Sud-

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denly the road to a peace was turning in the direction of disillusion, violence, and tragedy. Why, I now wonder, did a lifetime of reading leave me unprepared for such twists and turns? Why did I not foresee the possibility of the tragic ironies that I knew could complicate any plot, including those of politics? In the summer of 1990, I shared the celebratory mood of our group in spite of what we could not avoid seeing and hearing, even on a carefully guided tour. We saw the long lines in front of shops with quickly emptied shelves. We heard grievances and complaints from our Russian guides. We added our complaints as we recoiled from the grubbiness of railroads and grew weary waiting for planes that were hours late. But we understood that discomfort, disorder, and stories of discontent were part of the packaged tour. We were on the outlook for wonders, and we saw them ahead on a historical road to the future that was straight and unalterable.

At the time, I thought the road ahead of me was clear. I had accepted fairly straightforward assignments I would fulfill in a fairly straightforward way by comparing *this* with *that* to show the heuristic value of bringing together exemplary texts from different national and cultural contexts. My first assignment was going well, I thought. The texts I had chosen aroused interest. The lectures I gave raised long and hot arguments – perhaps because they often followed the cocktail hour, but more likely, because they emphasized textual and cultural indeterminacies rather than the certainties my celebratory readers expected. I wanted to be straightforward and affirming, but I was zigzagging my way through a range of critical problems that were to become more confounding as I tried to fulfill my second assignment. How could I answer a call for a methodological essay on teaching literature from a cross-cultural perspective when I was beset by doubts about distinctions between text and context, definitions based upon binary oppositions, and divisions drawn by national boundaries which, presumably, art could transcend? I doubted the legitimacy of critical responses based upon a reading of translations. I doubted the validity of cultural generalizations based upon exemplary particulars. How exemplary of cultural difference, or of anything, were the particular texts I had chosen? I suspected that the clear and cogent reasons I could give for my choices did not expunge their essential arbitrariness.

As my doubts emerged, the essay that became *Days of Reckoning* began to display its waywardness. It refused to stay within the limit of pages assigned, thus becoming unsuitable for the collection for which, presumably, it was being written. It refused to develop a linear argument, to allow a binary comparison, and to entertain certain conclusions. It began to fragment and then to reassemble itself into a triadic form that enacted its developing argument about essayistic form itself – that this form was essentially inconstant and artifactual, a product of disparate pieces. I began to think that the effort to make of pieces one constant and solid fabric – “une constante and solide contexture,” as Montaigne had put it – was misplaced when applied to a cross-cultural literary essay. Indeed, the effects

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of this effort would be specious because they were produced by the contingencies of a particular method and design – by a binary comparative structure, a linear form, and a partisan selective process. After all, my discommoding essay wanted to argue, comparing *this* with *that* – as compared, say, to comparing sets of *this and that* – was an arbitrary, if simple and conventional, way of performing cross-cultural literary criticism. Comparison could assume a multiple as well as multiplicity of forms; it could be read in crisscross ways or up and down, rather than only linearly. It could reproduce rather than erase “la naturelle instabilité de nos meurs et opinions” that Montaigne believed the essay morally bound to reveal.

As its arguments prevailed, the essay gave up its original assignment to pursue a dogging question: How could the literary critic apply postmodern theories to novels valued for their realistic representations of a cultural milieu when these theories defined culture as a text inseparable from a language that was, essentially, self-referential? When Solzhenitsyn wrote about Stalin’s *gulags*, did his words refer to other words or to a real world? Such a question would have disconcerted his readers on the summer cruise up the Volga, since they naively assumed that the words he, and they, used referred to actual social realities.

Meanwhile, the changing circumstances of Russian everyday life were suggesting the inability of an essay, no matter how widely or wildly extended in form, to accommodate a subject of such scope as cross-cultural literary criticism. Indeed, the social and political tumult in the now former Soviet Union revealed the inadequacy of any list of literary texts to represent a cultural context. Context itself began to seem to me a site of uncertainty and pieces: historical uncertainties, critical uncertainties, pieces left from what had been broken up – a country or, how less significantly, a literary form – and pieces out of which to make a new, if inconstant, whole. Moreover, wholeness seemed to me inherently elusive, an unattainable, and perhaps undesirable, ideal. No text could tell the whole story even of the slightest historical happening upon which it was based. This is not to deny that the texts of *Days of Reckoning* have important historical relevance to their times – the relevance is inseparable from their importance. But the Russian novellas elided the ethnic diversity of the Soviet Union and the devastating political issues inherent in this diversity, while the American novellas focused exclusively upon a white, urban middle class. Pointing this out, my lectures discomfited an audience eager to believe that a few selected literary texts could give a trustworthy view of the culture from which they came. Clearly, the view would be partial and slanted, and it required the critic to find a position from which to essay its value. The question of what this position might be, raised tentatively in my lectures, moved to the foreground of the essay to produce the fragmented but paradoxically coherent form of a literary triptych.

One value of this triadic form, as I saw it, was that it opened a space for women’s new and neglected writings alongside well-known works written by

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and about men. The first panel considers two such works: *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*. In contrast, the second panel presents much less known novellas, *Sofia Petrovna* and *The Girl*, which happen to have much in common. Both were conceived in a time of crisis, both were long left unpublished, and both are now getting the attention they were long denied. Both are moving testimonials to their times and to two extraordinary radical women – Lydia Chukovskaya and Meridel Le Sueur. The third panel brings the triptych into the present with Natalya Baranskaya's novella "A Week Like Any Other" and Arlene Heyman's prize-winning "Artifact," works currently attracting comment for their incisive portrayals of contemporary women.

Each of these sets of novellas occupied a space within the essay that was both discrete and overlapping, since each panel was separated from the others and, at the same time, melded with them to form a single encompassing critique. Within any one panel, a comparison between an American and a Russian novella revealed striking similarities in the novellas' literary form and themes, and in their critical reception. These similarities threw into relief differences that may, or may not, have been culturally inscribed. When I was lecturing on the novellas as we traveled up the Volga – I write this nostalgically – I began to find myself mystified by a certain lack of difference in the emotions that the books aroused. Everyone seemed to feel the same about different characters. Everyone disliked Bellow's hapless Tommy Wilhelm and Heyman's strangely unsatisfied Lottie (we did not read *The Girl*). American, as well as Canadian, readers found these characters' desires, whether for money, love, self-identity, or an ineffable Truth, petty and ungracious, even grating. In contrast, everyone admired Solzhenitsyn's prisoner for his quiet acceptance of his fate, seeing it as heroic rather than, as some critics claim, merely accommodating. Almost without exception, the women in the audience, whom I would have thought distanced from Baranskaya's desperately rushing heroine, embraced the Russian character because her story reminded them of their own or their daughters' lives. I found this equation of literature and life refreshing, if disconcerting, as it affirmed a proposition denied by postmodern theories and evoked by the epigraph that introduces Days of Reckoning – namely, that Truth is "Something big," something one can come close to, look at, and recognize within the disguises of fiction.

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Days of Reckoning in Russian and American Novellas: A Cross-Cultural Triptych

Oh, this was a day of reckoning. . . . a day . . . he would take a good close look at the truth.

Something very big. Truth, like.

Seize the Day

In Saul Bellow's novella, *Seize the Day*, Tommy Wilhelm, a preposterously superfluous, suffering man, articulates a belief in truth that postmodern literary and cultural critics generally disavow. Wilhelm conceives of truth as a vaguely reified "Something" – an object of size, located in space, and accessible to the human gaze. Throughout his fateful day of reckoning, Wilhelm hotly pursues this oxymoronic reification, following small and seemingly foolish signs, like a man's hat bobbing up in a crowd, until at last he discovers the ultimate reality he has been seeking – truth simultaneously embodied and disembodied by death. This ambiguous representation affects Wilhelm profoundly, consummating "his heart's ultimate need" but sundering his physical being. His vulnerable creaturely body convulses and seems to come apart, its disjunct segments independently bending, bowing, twisting, shaking, crippling, swelling, nodding, being clutched.¹ These bodily contortions apparently signify Wilhelm's deliverance from this world to another, a higher, freer, world of "happy oblivion" where he can forget his earthly troubles. In the novella's final tableau, an ecstatically sobbing Wilhelm enters this transcendent realm in his own perverse way: instead of rising to its heights, he sinks. Thus, he completes the drowning action with which the novella begins by losing – and finding – himself in an undefinable depths. There, murkily, mortality evokes self-love as the essence of truth.

This hyperventilated denouement, comic in its outrageous excess of rhetoric and emotion, reveals a contentious aspect of Wilhelm's truth: its power to transport an ordinary mundane person – ordinary even if, like Wilhelm, ludicrous – out of historical time and place, the situating circumstances that contextualize cultural criticism. Cultural criticism, however conceived or practiced, is ir-