

about his four *alternating* "perspectives." More importantly, although Iser shares some of the terminology and interests of the proponents of structuralism and semiotics, he notices their literature only incidentally and makes no attempt to explain relationships. (See Jonathan Culler's "Phenomenology and Structuralism," *The Human Context*, 5 [1973], 35-42). In addition, his illustrations, or brief applications of his theories, are too infrequent, and questions remain about the relationship between his theory of aesthetic response and publishable literary criticism. He suggests that the object of the critic should be "to reveal the conditions that bring about . . . [a literary work's] various possible effects" or to clarify its "*potential*" and not "to impose one meaning on his reader"—a crucial point which may become clearer if Iser proceeds to offer a book of models.

If *The Act of Reading* does not eventually prove to have the same stature as, say, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and *Anatomy of Criticism*, surely it is one of those rare books which deserve to be *studied* by all serious students of fiction. Could there be any more basic question than how we process or interact with literary texts?

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XENIA GASIOROWSKA
The Image of Peter the Great in Russian Fiction
Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979. Pp. 199.

No other figure in Russian history has inspired so many historical and fictional treatments as has Russia's greatest czar, Peter the Great. To be sure, his greatness and the significance of his rule for the future of the Russian people make it natural and fully warrant the frequent preoccupation with him. But there is a certain uniqueness and peculiarity about this man that intrigues scholars, artists, and common men alike. No wonder, therefore, that so many writers have used Peter the Great as their subject matter, not to speak of historians, who have yet to exhaust this fascinating subject.

As the author of the book under review states, her intentions were not to write another history of Peter the Great, nor just to catalogue the numerous anecdotes about him, nor to examine and evaluate as such the fictional works dealing directly or indirectly with him. Rather, her purpose was to arrive at "the composite image" as etched by fiction writers and thus to capture the human portrait as put together by the various authors. This is achieved by pursuing the historical truth, by using anecdotes, true or mythical, or simply by inventing events and characters as they fitted their artistic schemes. Xenia Gasiorowska has succeeded quite well; she has skilfully avoided the trap of checking the historical veracity of the depiction of Peter the Great or of evaluating the liberties taken by writers of fiction. While doing so, she has pursued, and captured, that elusive "composite image" created by fictional literature about Peter the Great.

The author goes a step further in that she establishes a new approach to historical fiction: she combines the existing approaches with the search for the purely human element, which might, after all, be the *raison d'être* of literature. She begins by discussing briefly the nature of the genre of historical fiction, and this sets up the framework of her study. After a biographical sketch of Peter the Great, she describes the sources about him at the disposal of writers throughout the centuries. She delves into the czar's personality, his appearance and behavior, the people in his entourage, the women in his life, the questions of the succession to the throne, and the environment in which the drama of his life and rule unfolded. All this, of course, as presented in Petrine fiction which consists of about sixty novels and stories.

The study provides brief, though very useful, plot summaries, a bibliography, and footnotes. It adds a scholarly touch to the highly readable and often amusing tone of the book. By cutting across several disciplines—a practice rather in vogue these days—the author confirms once again that the study of literature does not have to be a cut-and-dry, hermetic endeavor. Such an approach also assures this book of a very wide audience.

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