

KATERINA CLARK

The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual
Chicago: The University of
Chicago Press, 1981. Pp. 293.
\$20.00.

In her thought-provoking study, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, Katerina Clark attempts to analyze the Soviet novel "in terms of the distinctive role it plays as the repository of official myths." The study of Soviet literature outside the Soviet Union, notably in the West, has often been based on a discussion of nonliterary, especially political circumstances in which it is forced to exist. While Clark's book seems to follow the same direction, it goes well beyond mere discussion of political matters and accusations. Recognizing the highly political nature of Soviet literature, she delves into seldom-read novels to determine the inner laws that govern them, such as Socialist Realism, the Master Plot, the Positive Hero, the "spontaneity"/"consciousness" dialectic, the "Great Family," etc. In doing so, the author dispenses with the customary method of literary criticism. With generous helpings from history, sociology, psychology, and political events, she endeavours to prove, first, that Soviet literature has deep roots in the nineteenth century, and, second, that while the political sphere has dictated literature, it has also been influenced by it.

The author has achieved her objectives handsomely. She is convincing in the presentation and argument of her theses within the set framework. It is difficult to argue the author's contentions within that framework. One is also grateful that she has undertaken this admittedly drudging task and has done it in a highly scholarly manner. It must be made clear, though, that her success is predicated upon her tightly knit scheme; once the premises are removed, difficulties arise. One of the biggest problems lies in our inability to judge the exact circumstances under which Soviet literature has been and is being created. As long as the author's judgments are based on what has been published and what we are told the writers' intentions were—and, in the last analysis, that is all she could go by—her analyses and conclusions can be accepted. Unfortunately, that does not always represent the whole truth—there have been cases where authors had to revise their work or to repudiate it

altogether. Therefore, it is difficult to make certain that the "laws" as presented in this book are natural results of a genuine development or have been manipulated from above. Moreover, the self-imposed limitations in this study preclude the discussion of some of the best Soviet novels (*We, Cities and Years, Envy, The Thief, The Artist Unknown*, etc.). After all they also do belong to Soviet literature and they do harbor some well-defined myths of their own. Granted, these novels do not fit Clark's scheme but then, the title of the study (*The Soviet Novel*) is somewhat misleading.

It is unfortunate that the appreciation of this gallant study is limited to those who have read the novels such as *Cement* and *The Blast Furnace*. Despite the author's often lucid analyses, it is hard to sustain the attention or to test the validity of her arguments without a familiarity with the novels discussed. As for the author's implied criticism of Western critics for refusing to deal seriously with Socialist Realism novels, one could paraphrase Petronius's remark to Nero concerning his incessant, amateurish fiddling, "Do with me whatever you wish, but please don't bore me to death!" Clark's scholarly zeal—for which she should be admired—should not justify the condemnation of other scholars who are simply trying to defend themselves from being bored to death.

Vasa D. Mihailovich

JOHN R. MILTON

The Novel of the American West
Lincoln: University of Nebraska
Press, 1980. Pp. 341. \$17.95.

In *The Novel of the American West* John R. Milton offers a useful introduction to some of the serious fiction written in or about the "interior West," a vertical slice of the United States bounded on the east by the one hundredth meridian (roughly the north-south line followed by the Missouri River flowing through the Dakotas) and on the west by the various mountain ranges. The distinction between serious regional fiction (what Milton calls "the capital W Western novel") and the "popular formula western hacked out for the mass