

## 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.

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## 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

market" is an important one. Dealing with the differences between the two in deliberate detail, Milton devotes his preliminary chapter to a discussion of the literary failings of the popular "western." He lists nine standard plots (The Rustler Story, The Range War or Empire Story, the Marshall or Dedicated Lawman Story, and so on) and also talks about the unimaginative use of the four basic elements in this formula fiction: the hero, violence, love, and the western landscape.

The second chapter, "The Writer's West," which attempts to set the stage for an examination of the "capital W Western," is the most disappointing. It is short, generally superficial, and frustrating for the critical reader with its teasing generalizations ("the American west . . . poses a problem for the literary imagination partly because it is the largest and most varied region within the United States") and its failure to come to grips with the special ethos of the region.

In the third chapter Milton looks at the evolution of the Western novel, tracing its origins in the travel narrative and journal of exploration, its development through the imaginative treatment of themes particularly suited to the regional setting (isolation and survival, for example), and its affinities with the literary traditions of romance, sentimentalism, and adventure. References to Francis Parkman, James Fenimore Cooper, and Wallace Stegner provide a context for Milton's treatment of several less well-known writers later in the book.

The core of this study is a close examination of half a dozen writers who have made their mark as regional novelists: Walter Van Tilbury Clark, Harvey Fergusson, Vardis Fisher, A. B. Guthrie, Jr., Frederick Manfred, and Frank Waters. The names are hardly household words: as Milton is the first to admit, only two of them (Fergusson and Fisher) are even mentioned in the latest edition of the standard *Literary History of the United States*. Milton makes a strong case for reading Vardis Fisher, with a critical overview of Fisher's work which offers compelling analyses of individual novels and intriguing insights into the artist's attitude towards his craft. On the other hand, the chapter on Guthrie and Manfred is a summary overview of a series of historical novels which seem to offer little more artistically than many of the popular westerns, apart from some

structural dependence on an accurate chronology of nineteenth-century events. Milton's critical evaluation of Walter Van Tilburg Clark is perhaps the high point of his study. Of all the works Milton examines in detail here, it is Clark's novels alone that are seen to transcend the western setting. Novels such as *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1940), *The City of Trembling Leaves* (1945), and *The Track of the Cat* (1949) may be read as a series of fascinating failures, in which intellect and emotion are seen in constant tension, balanced and imbalanced, in flux and in occasional stasis. Clark's "perception of reality rests heavily on dualities and contrasts, an imagery as well as characterization. . . . he searches for unity, and while the distinctions or contrasts of experience are not resolved openly . . . they are joined by implication" (p. 197).

The concluding chapter, entitled "Variations on Western Realism," is a kind of catch-all in which Milton attempts to link recent writers whose fiction is set in the "interior West" with writers as early as Hamlin Garland, as well known as Wallace Stegner, and as prolific as those whose work he analyzes in earlier chapters. The basic thesis here is that "capital W Western novels" should be read as part of a continuum, partly because they themselves often attempt to forge temporal links between past and present, and at their best are "prophetic. . . . achieving a "unifying vision of past, present and future" (p. 324). The survey is too brief to be satisfactory as literary history and too crowded with names to allow convincing critical assessments. Ironically, the chapters in which Milton attempts to set the work of individual writers in the spatial context suggested by his title are the weakest in the study. The value of *The Novel of the American West* lies primarily in the fresh and original assessments of writers we should know about, and for this in particular it is worth having. There is also a useful list of works cited with bibliographical information, and an index.

Stan Atherton