

that are likely to find a wider audience than these exquisite but, frankly, rather slight compositions. *Be Brave (Du nerf)* resurrects Monsieur Songe from earlier work and has him divert himself with mildly amusing (the blurb exaggerates in qualifying them as “hilarious”) versions of his own death, while *Théo or The New Era (Théo ou le temps neuf)* is about an old man who in answering the questions of his precocious great-nephew Théo discovers what is described as “renewal.”

Red Dust are to be congratulated for persisting with the labor of love entailed in making Pinget’s ever-lengthening list of publications available to the English speaker, but one cannot help wondering how many potential readers of Pinget’s works really are out there, especially since even in France his audience is decidedly limited.

N. N. Shneidman

Russian Literature 1988–1994: The End of an Era

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995. Pp. 245. US \$19.95

Reviewed by Victor Terras

A comprehensive survey of a major contemporary literature poses huge difficulties. The material to be digested is large. The time to analyze it is severely limited (in this case, the author’s preface is dated December 1994!), the author must deal with phenomena in flux and against a background that may change even as his work is in print. Considering these formidable obstacles, Professor Shneidman has done very well at a truly Herculean job. To be sure, his survey has some self-imposed limitations. It concentrates on fiction, leaving poetry and drama out of the picture. Only authors residing in Russia are discussed—a pity, considering the lively activities of Russian writers in the United States, France, and elsewhere. Also, Shneidman’s “selection of authors and works for discussion is arbitrary” (x). Still, a tremendous amount of material is covered, much of it critically, with attention to every aspect of verbal art: plot, structure, ideas, political ideology, social relevance, psychology, language, and style. Shneidman is not afraid to make value judgments—a bold step, considering how often even famed critics have badly misjudged their contemporaries.

Shneidman’s synchronical approach does not wholly ignore diachronical connections, often referring back to pre-*perestroika* and even to pre-revolutionary roots of current phenomena, albeit in a rather general, sporadic, and cursory manner. Enough facts about literary organizations, groupings, journals, and their position within a changing political and socioeconomic ambience are presented: the effects of a market economy on publishing, the transfer of the political forum from literature to journalism and television, the changes in the role of the intelligentsia, the Russian Army, and bureaucratic institutions in Russian society. Shneidman produces a strong synthesis of the developments that have effected

radical changes in the body of contemporary Russian literature. Metaphysical, religious, and existential themes proliferate at the expense of conventional social and psychological issues. The changes are even more striking in the form of recent Russian fiction. Shneidman observes a general tendency to ignore plot and straightforward structure for subplots, digressive essays, changes of perspective and narrative mode, multidimensional vision, and other discordant devices. Surrealism, blurred reality, "hard realism" (dealing with the hideous and the perverted), and violent and obscene language are common. A popular convention is anti-utopian, often in the form of socialist realism in reverse, such as when Viktor Pelevin introduces a school for astronauts whose legs are amputated to make them "real people"—in response to a story by the socialist realist writer Boris Polevoi, "Tale of a Real Man" (1947), featuring the heroic exploits of a Soviet pilot who loses his limbs in action.

A great deal of attention is paid to so-called postmodernism. Shneidman finds it puzzling that Russian critics tend to identify postmodernism as an antithesis to socialist realism. Yet, in a way, socialist realism *was* modernist in that it created an ordered virtual reality whose creators were aware that its historical assumptions, its assessment of human nature and of society, as well as its notion of the relation between life and art were imaginary. The answer of postmodernism to the ordered world of socialist realism is an indeterminate or even chaotic world with endless questions and no answers.

And yet, *plus ça change*.... The new literature still asks the same "big" questions that Russian writers were naive enough to ask when the West had long given up on them: "Who are we, as humans, as Russians, as members of the Russian intelligentsia?" The new writers of Russia still explore questions of morality (absolute and relative), the relationship of art to life, and the human condition in a state of freedom. They search for values without having any. A pervasive theme is that of an ideological and existential aporia: "Everyone is in a fog, unable to make a clear choice or see the light of day" (161, referring to a story by Tat'iana Tolstaia).

If there is anything objectionable in Shneidman's book, it is an occasionally condescending and doctrinaire tone. Shneidman deplores that "many good Russian writers ... [are] wasting their talents on writing social sketches and political pamphlets" (11). He expresses a low opinion of Russian literary scholarship, mostly on the grounds that literary theory is "virtually moribund" (50). At times, Shneidman is a bit reckless in his judgment, such as when he includes Chingiz Aitmatov in a statement to the effect that "some older writers ... are confused and dejected, and produce little of substance" (40). This assertion hardly squares with Shneidman's own comments on Aitmatov later in his book (62-67). But these are minor quibbles. The profession will be grateful to Professor Shneidman for this informative book.