Review: The Poetics of Yury Olesha by Victor Peppard

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most intense male relationships). Lesér has set herself a tremendous task here; chronology and Mann’s words define the matrix of her laudable exploration, which, however, is somewhat at sea without a methodological compass in this wealth of words and information. The conventional biographical approach that acknowledges neither recent Mann scholarship nor literary-theoretical discussions of the past decades sets Lesér’s book apart from the others discussed; it adheres to the traditions of literary analysis that see literature as a reflection of life, the author’s work as constitutive of “an intellectual biography.”

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Despite all the critical attention that has been showered upon Yury Olesha (1899-1960) during the past twenty-five years, this Soviet writer remains a highly enigmatic figure whose oeuvre continues to generate major interpretive disagreements. Victor Peppard’s monograph, whose purpose is “to demonstrate that there is in fact an identifiable set of interconnected poetic principles that governs Olesha’s work and gives it artistic coherence,” explores what he considers to be the three dominant elements in his poetic system: 1) defamiliarization, 2) carnival, and 3) dialogicality.

In the first chapter, “From Metafiction to Metaliterature,” the author examines the aesthetic innovations that Olesha introduced in his works. Basing his analysis on Shklovsky’s notion of ostranenie (“defamiliarization” or “estrangement”), Peppard asserts that Olesha, in keeping with the spirit of artistic experimentation that inspired the best Soviet writers of the 1920s, attempted to rewrite the rules of writing in his texts, thereby forcing the reader to reevaluate and reformulate the very processes by which literature is produced. Olesha emerges from Peppard’s analysis as “a persistent recaster and reshaper of familiar forms and conventions.” The most salient examples of this generic and structural defamiliarization, he argues, are provided by Envy (with its ornamentality), Three Fat Men (with its multertextuality), and No Day without a Line (with its metaliterary nature). In Chapter Two, “Variations on the Carnival,” Peppard concentrates his attention mainly on the text of Envy, which, he claims, is “so profoundly permeated with the spirit of the carnival” that it serves as “a special exemplar of carnivalesque fiction in twentieth-century Russian fiction.” Bakhtin’s theory provides the basis for his examination of the various carnivalesque features, such as eccentricity (scandal scenes and verbal haranguing), mésalliances (parodic doubles), and the dynamics of crown-
Peppard's monograph provides a number of illuminating observations about
important (and, until now, largely unexplored) aspects of Olesha's poetics. One
shortcoming, however, is the author's unfortunate tendency in his discussions to
refrain from addressing broader implications raised by the notions of carnival,
defamiliarization, and dialogicality. One wishes that Peppard, who is clearly
knowledgeable about his topic, would have strayed more often from his narrow
rhetorical plan, thrown off his exceedingly reverent (and thus sometimes restric-
tive) discipleship to Shklovsky, Bakhtin, and Morson, and speculated more freely
and expansively about Olesha's poetics. Nonetheless, his book does represent a
valuable addition to the scholarship now available on this remarkable Soviet writer.

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JoAnn Cannon. Postmodern Italian Fiction: The Crisis of Reason in Calvino, Eco, Sciascia,

Postmodern Italian Fiction: The Crisis of Reason in Calvino, Eco, Sciascia, Malerba con-
stitutes of a preface, a lengthy introduction, and four chapters. It is a worthwhile
collection of essays in English on four highly influential Italian writers, as JoAnn
Cannon adroitly examines certain works which, for her, formulate "a cognitive
role for the fictional work," because as she also states in her Preface, each of
the works "discussed in this study is to varying degrees a self-conscious text, oc-
cupied or preoccupied with its status as literary artifice." In a lengthy historical
introduction, Cannon offers an overview of the artistic and intellectual milieu in
which each of these works was conceived and written. The chapters that follow,
instead, are dedicated to specific works of the writers in question. (There is, un-
fortunately, an infelicitous editorial oversight: the book jacket refers to the In-
troduction as Chapter One, and so on, as does the author herself in an endnote.)

Chapter One deals with Leonardo Sciascia's historical essay The Death of the
Inquisitor (1964) and his historical novel The Council of Egypt (1963). Here Cannon
demonstrates how Sciascia fuses both the historical and fictional modes in the