

Preface

Shin'ichi Murata, Stefano Aloe

The present volume *The Reception of East Slavic Literatures in the West and the East* summarizes the outcome of the international conference of the same name, organized by the University of Venice, the University of Verona, and the Sophia University of Tokyo, and held at the University of Venice on March 2-3, 2023, with the participation of prominent Slavists from around the world.

The idea of organizing an international conference and publishing a volume on the reception of East Slavic literature was born on the initiative of S. Murata with the collaboration of S. Aloe and M. Weisskopf. It is a project which the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) has supported. Professor S. Nonaka from the Saitama University in Japan also contributed to our project and supported us in inviting two Ukrainian researchers, for which we express our gratitude.

In the original plans, the theme of the conference was the adaptation of Slavic cultures and literatures in the West and in the East as a whole. As a result of careful discussions including E. Dobrenko and A. Farsetti, Slavists from the University of Venice, which we chose as the conference venue, the final topic of the scientific meeting was determined as expressed by the title of this volume. Despite the difficult international situation, thanks to the conceptual and practical support of Slavic representatives from the University of Venice, the University of Verona, and the Sophia University of Tokyo, we could successfully hold an international conference on comparative Slavic studies. There were discussed interesting topics and perspectives of analysis for world Slavic studies, which are necessary above all in this most difficult period for Eastern Europe.

We would like to express special gratitude to those participants who came with difficulty from Ukraine, unhindered by their courage and love for science

and culture, regardless of the ongoing war. At the same time, we regret that no participant from Belarus and from the Russian Federation could attend the conference. We are well aware that the absence of Russian and Belorussian scholars constituted a significant gap for the conference and, moreover, for this volume. We are also aware that such a lack might appear to be a deliberate choice of the organizers: this was not the case. We editors of the present volume are both lifelong specialists in Russian literature (and burning with passion for Russian studies), as well as interested in Belarusian culture and literature without being specialists in it. So, it is very important for us to make it clear that this situation was produced against our will and that we are firmly in opposition to any form, direct or indirect, to so called “cancel culture.” It is a fact that one finds oneself in the present situation organizing scientific conferences under conditions quite similar to those of the Cold War, with difficulties of various kinds that would have been unthinkable only two years ago.

In the face of such difficulties, it was our aim as organizers of the conference, and later as editors of these proceedings, to make sure that Russian literature was nevertheless adequately represented. And we are convinced that we have succeeded. As far as Belarusian literature is concerned, we were only able to obtain one contribution, which was, nevertheless, of an excellent standard and of great significance. We tried to make the volume balanced and rich in all its components, as well as in the alternation of its three working languages: English, Russian, and Ukrainian.

Undoubtedly, the reception of Russian literature in the various parts of the world has and has had a much greater historical importance than that accorded to the other two East Slavic literatures. Which should not lead to the mistake of considering Belarusian and Ukrainian literatures as irrelevant in an international context. Furthermore, the study of cross-cultural processes, translations, fashions, and exchanges between literary settings, which is the favorite object of comparatists, demonstrates that not only are there no objectively “secondary” phenomena in this field, but also that internationally little-known literary experiences can provide the analysis with vivid patterns of general trends, and at the same time, can offer great surprises thanks to their original features. In the last few decades, many prejudices have declined in regard to Ukrainian and Belarusian literature, which have been studied and known more extensively even outside their respective countries. This is enabling an appreciation of historical literary movements and works that deserve to be contextualized within the larger framework of modern and contemporary literatures in an intercultural perception.

The goal is to break out of traditional patterns, which are national (nation-oriented) and often self-referential (i.e., uni-directional), and to reevaluate literary and cultural phenomena in their multicentric dynamic osmosis. That brings to new understanding of the center-periphery, urban-rural, imperial-national, state-regions dialectics. Only avoiding established patterns makes possible a full appreciation of the so called “secondary” (i.e., not “mainstream”) literatures. At the same time, being able to abandon the tag of “exotic” when approaching cultural phenomena far from our horizon is also a good practice which allows us to see

different receptions of the same event in parallel: that is what the present volume highlights with its “apparently eccentric multicentricity.” Moments of the history of Chinese or Japanese reception of Soviet socialist realism, for instance, could be interpreted as “exotic” by a European or an American public, as well as the reception of a Russian novel in Fascist Italy which could also be labelled as “exotic” by the Chinese, American, or even Russian public. But an exotic reading would lead to downgrading these phenomena in the readers’ perception to “secondary,” which is what they are not. An open, modern viewing, such as the present volume offers, puts different experiences of reception in parallel, they all are part of a unique cultural framework, and they can help scholars to better understand literary and historical processes as if in a mirror.

We the editors have had the opportunity to gather twenty-one brilliant articles on the reception of the three East Slavic literatures throughout their history in very distant cultural and geographic regions of the world: Asia (Japan and China), and Europe (in particular Italy and Poland). The result is original, but far from exotic.

In view of the above, the sole criterion we have considered for the format of the articles was chronological, not spatial: the book is divided into three quite equal parts, corresponding to the historical frames of notable literary phenomena: “East Slavic Literatures from Classics to Modernism” (Part I), “Soviet Encounters and Stalinist Canon” (Part II), and a third part devoted to contemporary literatures (“Reception of Modern East Slavonic Literatures”).

To summarize: the topic of the perception of Eastern Slavic cultures in the world, or rather, in the West and in the East, is extremely relevant, interesting, and significant, since the world sometimes forgets the importance of the perception of the regional aspects of the culture. Those who are aware of the critical situations of the planet and of all the whole humanity need to develop their studies on regional cultures.

And it is important that Slavists from different countries and continents took part in our scientific meeting and reported on a topic that has rarely received worthy attention until now. These are the receptions of Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian literatures and cultures in interaction with European and Eastern cultural processes, in particular in the modern and contemporary world. The presented materials and theses contribute greatly to amplify our knowledge of these processes, not only thematically, but also methodologically.

It is with this spirit and desire that we decided to organize the conference, hoping for tangible results. With this collection of articles, we are proud to announce that we have achieved our goal.

In conclusion, we would like to thank all those who made a report at the Venice conference and all the authors of this volume for their active participation in our project. Our project has just begun with this book: with the hope of a quick resolution of the global problems of the world resulting from the acute situation of Ukraine and Russia and to foster a feeling and desire to develop a culture of peace and mutual dialogue between diverse cultures. Everyone who has the will to develop the world’s literary and cultural heritage has the power to effect change.

