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Review: Frederick T. Griffiths and Stanley J. Rabinowitz, Novel Epics: Gogol, Dostoevsky, and National Narrative

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BOOK REVIEWS

Literature and Fine Arts

Griffiths, Frederick T., and Stanley J. Rabinowitz. *Novel Epics: Gogol, Dostoevsky, and National Narrative*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1990. ix + 184 pp. $29.95 ($12.95 paper).

In *Novel Epics* the authors bring a fresh and imaginative approach to the problem of the Russian novel's epic strivings. In illuminating the epic status of Gogol's *Dead Souls* and (more briefly) Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, Griffiths and Rabinowitz avoid the often fruitless search for formal and stylistic echoes by defining the epic in terms of formation and tradition: "We might more accurately speak of epic as a cycle then as a genre, that is, as texts associated less by likeness than by a continuing thread of narrative and allusive gestures . . . that announce each new text as the final chapter of what precedes" (p. 9). On this account, the movement of *Dead Souls* upward, Gogol's gesture toward escape from the fallen world, makes him a bard not a satirist; what characterizes epic par excellence is "a final redemptive drift . . . that snatches up humbler things to serve higher perspectives, even if those higher views are just questions and muddled hopes" (p. 38).

In the course of elaborating their thesis, Griffiths and Rabinowitz offer new theoretical perspectives as well as sensitive readings of texts (*Taras Bulba*, "Rome," *Dead Souls*, *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*). One of the most interesting parts of the book is the introductory chapter, which considers the relationship between epic and novel. Here the authors offer a provocative critique of Bakhtin, questioning both his definitions of epic and novel and his (explicit and implicit) privileging of the latter over the former, challenging in particular the idea of the monophonic nature of epic. In highlighting the peculiarly allusive and incremental character of epic, however, the authors overstate the extent to which any novelistic tradition can be described as "a list of separate items . . . that . . . are discrete from one another" (p. 6). Novels have memory too, very often the same kind of memory that Griffiths and Rabinowitz see as characteristic of the epic.

The textual analyses of works by Gogol and (tantalizingly briefly) Dostoevsky are full of new perspectives and wittily precise formulations, for example, on *Taras Bulba*, "Rome," and *Dead Souls*: "Prophecy thrice gets born from the collapse of plot, and a heroic narrator springs full-blown from the head of a depleted protagonist" (pp. 43–44). The discussions of the significance of Pliushkin in *Dead Souls*, of Dante and Gogol, of the relationship between *Dead Souls* and *Selected Passages*, of Gogolian and Dostoevskian closure, and of the theme of the founders of Troy in *The Brothers Karamazov* are convincing and revelatory. The analysis of Part 2 of *Dead Souls* clarifies and supports other aspects of the book's argument, but I am made uneasy by the degree to which it draws conclusions about the plan of the book, about the role of the narrator, etc. What we have of Part 2 was, after all, cobbled together by editors from drafts written at various times, and any kind of formal or structural analysis is risky at best.

Novel Epics will be welcomed by students of both nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian literature for its lucid and erudite analysis of the "monumental tradition" that includes Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Pasternak, and Solzhenitsyn. It is also a valuable contribution to the ongoing project of defining Gogol's complicated relationship to the classical and European literary traditions.

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