SLOVO

Book review

Russomania: Russian culture and the creation of British modernism, 1881-1922

Rebecca Beasley, 2020

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Pages: 560

Language: English

Juliette Bretan, University College London

Unearthing the vibrant and manifold layers of Russian influence on early British twentieth-century culture as if unpacking a series of matryoshka dolls, Professor Rebecca Beasley's *Russomania* is the first comprehensive account of 'the role Russian literature played in the creation of British literary modernism.' Beasley contends that that there was a veritable and transformative network of British- Russian cultural connections in the 1900s; an original argument bolstered by her previous work in this field, including her role in co-creating the Anglo-Russian Research Network in 2011, and her joint-editing of *Russia in Britain* (2013). Her new monograph is organised chronologically, mapping out the formation of British modernism, whilst 'trac[ing] the history of Russian literature's reception in Britain, and its impact on overlapping networks of writers who sought to redefine modern British literature, especially the British novel'. Russian culture, she claims, thus not only impacted individual authors and literary groups, but also had a fundamentally stylistic legacy on the development of British modernism as a genre. In this regard, the monograph is a valuable addition to both British and Russian modernist literary studies; detailing the multi-disciplinary and multinational influences across twentieth- century literary cultures.

Beasley notes that Russian literature began to take on an important role in British literary politics as a result of three key factors: the growing number of translations of Russian works in the late 1800s; the arrival of Russian émigrés, who worked as translators, interpreters and champions of Russian culture; and the publication of surveys of Russian literary history. However, *Russomania* also demonstrates how the themes and styles of this Russian literature permeated into British modernism, at a time when literary styles and literary criticism – as well as language study – were already transforming.

Running through the roster of leading British modernists, from Ford Madox Ford to Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence, *Russomania* contains a vibrant documentation of the Russian influence on British twentieth- century literature. The first chapter details the work of Russian émigrés who 'form[ed] close strategic relationships with members of the British liberal establishment and socialist groups' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, thus inspiring core British modernist critics and editors (including Ford and Edward Garnett) – as well as shining a new light on the formation of literary networks in the country.

Beasley points out that whilst British knowledge of Russian literature and culture arose from a variety of political perspectives, – from radicals, anti-revolutionaries, liberals, to conservatives, and supporters of tsarism, – it was socialists and revolutionaries, including former members of the influential Russian literary society, the Chaikovsky circle, who particularly transformed British modernist circles as British socialism began to develop. Subsequently, Russian literary traditions began to take hold in Britain, prompting new approaches to novelistic style and form. Crucially, a more 'instinctive' Russian realism was praised for its uninhibited depictions of everyday life and societal mores.

Russomania is a significant and essential study of how modernism was shaped by Russia and contemporary Russian socio-political developments, as well as the hidden Russian histories of British modernism. Among many new contributions to the field is the interchapter on the 'Whitechapel Group' of Russian-Jewish artists, based in London's East End. Beasley acknowledges, for the first time, the impact of their shared Russian heritage on their literary and artistic output. The Polish-British writer Joseph Conrad is another intriguing addition, deployed by Beasley to demonstrate anti-Russian sentiment in the early British modernist novel. Conrad's works, she argues, were inspired by support for nation states against Russian oppression – but *Russomania* could have expanded more here on the complexities of Conrad's position both in relation to Anglophone and Russian cultures. In doing so, Beasley could have also encompassed wider perspectives on attitudes towards migrants from Eastern Europe and Russia in British culture, and the impact of this on the dissemination and reception of works from the region.

Beasley concludes by stating that *Russomania* demonstrates 'the diverse debates over values and models that characterised the literary culture of the early twentieth century': the book certainly contains significant work on the complexities of Anglo- Russian modernism, whilst exposing new cultural, social and political interactions between Britain and Russia in the early twentieth-century. It is, therefore, a valuable addition to research in Russian and Anglo-Russian fields.