

Loseff, Lev. *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature*. Munich: Otto Sagner, 1984. xiv, 277 pp. DM 38.

Lev Loseff used to be "not just an observer but also a practitioner of Aesopian writing in Russia" (p. xi) (perhaps also in emigration; see his recent provocative discussion of Solzhenitsyn's purported anti-Semitism). The work under review, into which his observations have crystallized, is a fine accomplishment for obvious as well as less predictable reasons. Among the former are: the relevance and human interest of the topic; the scarcity of previous research; the wealth of (inherently elusive) material assembled, presented, and

interpreted for the Western reader (even for an ex-Soviet citizen it sometimes reads like a detective story); the use of modern literary theory; and the author's general sophistication, wit, clarity of thought, and command of the subject. The latter find expression in the paradoxical premise (traced back to Herzen, Vinogradov, Brodsky among others) that "the traditional comparison with the hangman and his victim begs to be replaced by one with ... wolves ... needed to keep the deer in top form" (p. 12) and in the controversial final conclusion about the purely ritualistic value of Aesopian communication.

Of the book's two parts, the first is devoted to theory, the second to analyses of major examples of Aesopian writing. Developing the linguistic metaphor inherent in "Aesopian language," Loseff sets out to describe this special style of aesthetic communication. He defines Aesopian language as a metastyle superimposed on the literary structure in its interaction with the socio-ideological context. The semantic mechanism of the Aesopian utterance is found to be akin to that of the riddle and to rely on ambivalence. More specifically, it relies on certain types of manipulation of what information theory calls "noise," which can only be understood if three-way communication between author, censor, and reader is considered (Loseff even provides formulas). Crucial for the system are screens and markers, "the devices ... bent on concealing the Aesopian text," i.e., message, and on "drawing attention to that same text," respectively (p. 51); "it is frequently one element which is the realization of both screen and marker" (p. 52). An extensive chapter (III) goes into a detailed typology of Aesopian means-various possible emotional colorings of the text (not necessarily satirical), genres (passed off one for another), rhetorical figures (metalogical preferred to autological), and types of intended audience (alleged and actual). The exposition in Part I is generously supported by examples that are often anecdotal and elementary but always illuminating.

Part II deals more closely with four Aesopian phenomena: Shvarts (*The Dragon*), Solzhenitsyn (the watered-down version of *The First Circle*, intended for publication in the USSR), Yevtushenko (the essential duplicity of his poetic style), and the genre of Soviet children's literature (speaking differently to children and adults and helping to nurture future Aesopian readers).

Loseff's pioneering study is likely to stir discussion. I am unable here to do full justice to its merits or for that matter to go into its drawbacks: the Aesopian interpretation of some examples, e.g., of Zoshchenko's Lenin tales (pp. 202ff.), failed to convince me; the formulations of hidden messages could be more explicit; the metalanguage introduced in Part I often remains unused in Part II; the English text, on the whole excellent, on occasion sounds translated. I will, however, briefly state my main reservation.

According to Loseff, Aesopian writing does not convey any specific new message-for the simple reason that only information known in advance can be read between the lines: screens cover it, markers point to it, but it has been shared from the start. "Aesopian literary texts, ... devoid of informative context, offer ... confirmation of the general thesis of the Formalists, Bakhtin and Vygotsky; form ... is content" (p. 219). The "function of such texts is a cathartic celebration of artistic power, circumventing the all-forbidding power of the State" (pp. 222-223). Loseff's idea is attractive but risky, the pitfalls being a failure to distinguish Aesopian art from art in general and, in case the

distinction is deemed irrelevant, an impoverishment of the notion of artistic content. If new information is ever created in literature, then there seems to be no reason to deny it to Aesopian writing. In a sense, all literature is the product of interaction between a subversive and a restraining force (the Freudian *id*, the Formalists' innovation versus the *superego*, civilization, convention), a product that not only combines the two (in the form of sublimation, defamiliarization, Riffaterre's ungrammaticality, etc.), but discovers or creates an entire new reality, that of culture, i.e., information. In fact, some of Loseff's own examples seem to contradict his reductionist claim, e.g., the quite specific message formulated for an Akhmadulina poem on p. 51 or the case of *The Dragon*, where, one is tempted to infer, the Aesopian "equation" of Communism with Nazism is a valuable and lasting cognitive discovery, rather than a short-lived trick pulled on the censor. When performed on a sufficiently deep level, the hidden warfare necessitated by censorship proves even more beneficial than Loseff's already generous assessment, by actually altering the terrain on which it is waged.

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