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SUMMARY

This study describes and analyzes the revolutionary changes that took place in the Russian literary field between 1985 and 1995. It is founded on the basic notions of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the literary field (field agents, positions, dispositions, manifestations etc.).

The study consists of a preface, five chapters and an epilogue; it is also supplemented by an index of names and abbreviations and an annotation (in Russian, Dutch and English). The work comprises 450 pages and includes one diagram and eight tables. Some parts of the study have been published separately as articles in academic magazines (Dutch Contribution to the 12th International Congress of Slavists, 1998) and Russian media («Ex Libris NG», 12.10.2000), and have also been presented as talks at international conferences (AATSEEL, 1999, Chicago; 6th ICCEES World Congress, 2000, Tampere, Finland).

The preface outlines the general ideas, factors and events that had formed the field of Soviet literature as it appeared at the beginning of perestroika. In other words, the preface sums up the stages and measures that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union took to subjugate literature and keep it under control, treating it as a political and ideological tool useful in “educating the masses”.

The investigated period of revolutionary changes in the literary field is divided into four chapters, each of them spans approximately three years:

Chapter I: 1985–1987;
Chapter II: 1988–1990;
Chapter III: Samizdat;
Chapter IV: 1991–1993;

Chapter III, dedicated to samizdat (a USSR-specific phenomenon) is more of an “interchapter”. It has been placed between Chapters II and IV not just to provide a break in the narrative – the main reason behind its placement is chronological: Chapter IV starts with the beginning of 1991, the year when samizdat ceased to exist (and the USSR disappeared as a state). The fading away of samizdat was due mainly to the adoption of the new Press Law that abolished its main constitutive principle – censorship.

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1 See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, The Literary Field (текст представлен в марте 1983 года на семинаре в Бад-Гомбурге, см.: П. Бурдье, Поле литературы, пер. с фр. М. Гронаса, НЛО, №45, 2000); Pierre Bourdieu, Le Champ littéraire. Préalables critiques et principes de méthodes, Lendemains (Berlin) #36, 1984, (p.5-20); Pierre Bourdieu, Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field, Stanford University Press, 1996, etc.
The afterword (Epilogue: 1996–2009) gives a brief account of the further developments in the situation of literature in Russia (the establishment and institutionalization of new traditions, the emergence of new tendencies) after the fundamental transformation of the literary field. By summing up the events and occurrences that go far beyond the chronological scope of the study, the introduction (Preface) and the afterword (Epilogue) place the studied material in its necessary context.

Overall, the four main chapters have the same structure. Each of them is divided into subchapters and is structured in the following way:
1. Brief report of the most important events in the political field (Essential Events);
2. Events within the official literary field (The literary authorities: writers’ unions, literary journals, newspapers, publishing houses, literary prizes etc.);
3. Literature: new authors and literary works;
4. The situation in literary criticism.

The first two chapters (dealing with the period of 1985–1990 when the transformations began) include, besides the aforementioned parts, subchapters on journalism, since literary journalism in the USSR formed an integral part of literary journals and of the literary field as a whole. When the Soviet hierarchy of field values started to disintegrate, literary journalism lost its role and influence in the literary field and moved to the more appropriate field of mass communication (political and/or economic journalism); therefore, chapters on journalism are absent in the second half of the study (spanning events from 1991).

The first chapter, which deals with the beginning of perestroika, discusses the first subtle changes in the literary field that became manifest at the VII Congress of Writers as a split of the literary establishment in two camps, democrats and conservatives. Gorbachov’s campaign of kadrovaya ventilatsiya – refreshing (literally, “airing”) the party cadre – did not leave the creative work force unaffected. Having appointed new editors-in-chief for several literary journals, the Party leader created a “support team” for his new policy among the press (the weekly Ogoniok, the literary monthlies Novyi mir, Znamya and their “sympathizer”, the literary-artistic journal Yunost). However, the editors of the conservative press (the journals Nash sovremennik, Molodaya gvardiya, Moskva, the newspaper Literaturnaya Rossiya), thanks to support from the Kremlin (and personally E. Ligachev, probably the most conservative member of the Politburo of the Central Party Committee at the time of perestroika), kept their chairs at this stage. Besides, such strongholds of conservative literary criticism, theory and history as the journals Voprosy literatury and Literaturnoe obozreniye were also left untouched.

When the beginning of perestroika was over, not only a rift had emerged within the main bodies of the literary establishment (the Writers’ Union and the Literary Foundation of the USSR, as well as the publishing houses and the press), but a partitioning of the most important resources (journals and newspapers) had also taken place. At the same time, all the institutions and every journal and paper officially supported glasnost, democracy and socialism.
The perestroika was propelled by journalism, which enjoyed a revival sparked by new names (V. Selyunin, N. Shmelev et al.) and an orientation towards economy. Economic journalism became one of the most important elements of the first perestroika years.

In the first phase of the perestroika literature was most concerned with the revision of history, which implied rehabilitation of literary names and works. The first breakthrough occurred in poetry. Starting with Gumilyov (a selection of his poems was published by Ogoniok in April 1986), by the fall of 1986 the Soviet press had officially lifted the taboo on a number of poets (Akhmatova, Mandelstam, Tsvetayeva et al.) whose works widely circulated in samizdat circles but were unknown to the general public. By the summer of 1986 contemporary prose perked up too and the official critics started talking about the “three P’s” of Soviet literature (Pechalny detektiv (The Sad Detective) by Astafiev, Pozhar (The Fire) by Rasputin and Plakha (The Scaffold) by Aitmatov), each of which in its own way defined a certain “Rubicon in literature” that was supposed to mark the beginning of a new era. At the same time, however, the attention of readers and critics was drawn to a completely different literature that pushed contemporary Soviet prose into the background. Journals were taken over by “suppressed literature”, works created (A. Rybakov’s Children of the Arbat, V. Dudintsev’s White clothes, Yu. Trifonov’s Disappearance, A. Pristavkin’s Children of the storm, etc.) during Khruschev’s Thaw (when the Stalin personality cult was officially denounced), and which dealt with the crimes of Stalin, but which could not be published when the Thaw petered out. Along with the “suppressed literature” of the 60s and 70s, texts written by eyewitnesses and participants of the historical events in the 20s and 30s started to appear in print. Most of the writers belonging to this group, which included, among others, Babel, Pil’nyak, and Platonov, were persecuted for political reasons and/or destroyed by the Soviet authorities, and their works were generally ignored by the official literary world. It must be noted that at this time the works of living émigrés or authors circulating in samizdat/tamizdat were not yet appearing in the official press (except a single poem by Brodsky, bravely squeezed into the December issue of Novyi Mir in 1987). Nobody dared to mention émigré authors yet.

The state of literary criticism at the beginning of the era was marked by a disorientation that at the end of the period was even noticeable in the writings of the most skilled critics. The critics who were used to place every new text into one of the three well-established genres of contemporary prose (village, city and war prose), found it hard to deal with a rapidly growing number of unusual, classification-defying literary works. Their familiar set of tools proved useless in analyzing texts that did not fit into the mold of socialist realism. In literary studies the comeback of “suppressed” and forbidden literature made it necessary to review the periodization of Soviet literature. New names, ideas, problems and theses kept being added to the critical discourse, driving the discussion (by the very end of the period) to a new level that soon proved to spell the end of socialistic realism.

The second chapter describes the highest point and the “beginning of the end” of perestroika in the USSR (1988–1990). At the beginning of the period, the state passed the Law on State Enterprise, which converted enterprises to self-support, self-financing and self-accounting (which
meant that the majority of them was cut off from government subsidies). Another law, passed at the end of the period, was the Press Law (August 1990) that abolished censorship in the USSR. The end of 1988 – beginning of 1989 can be called the most exciting period in the history of Soviet literature: in mere months so many texts of such great variety – some of them quite revolutionary – were added to the literary field that it was no longer possible for Soviet literature to maintain its status quo. Among other things, this period is remarkable for the appearance of collected works of writers who never even attempted to get past the censors before. This was also the time when new alternative magazines and newspapers (Vestnik novoi literatury, Solo, Gumanitarnyi fond, etc.) came into existence. These new platforms brought yet more new names into the literary field: Venedikt Yerofeev, Viktor Yerofeev, Nina Iskrenko, Vsevolod Nekrasov, Yegor Radov, Vladimir Sorokin and many others. 1989 saw the return of the works by emigré writers belonging to the third wave of Soviet emigration (the “Brezhnev wave”) – V. Aksenov, G. Vladimov, V. Voynovich, A. Galich, V. Nekrasov, A. Sinyavsky, A. Solzhenitsyn. Thus, by the end of the period the literary field (and the entire country) was irrevocably changed; having lost its structure, it descended into chaos. In the meantime, new information (names and texts) kept flowing in; the writers pushed the limits of what was considered possible in language and literature (for the first time in the history of Russian literature, “unprintable” words were being adopted as part of the modern lexicon, forcing the literary journals to reconsider their perceptions of “right” and “wrong”). By the end of this period the USSR became a reader’s paradise: the official press was publishing texts that few people dared even mention a short time ago; the circulation of literary journals grew explosively; new publications (periodical and one-time) kept appearing, while the prices for printed matter remained affordable.

The third chapter breaks the historical sequence of events in order to turn to that special phenomenon of Soviet culture, the samizdat, which is a perfect example of a rhizome (the term introduced into the cultural discourse by the French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari). The Soviet samizdat can be considered a parallel literary field, complete with all the necessary elements: its own poets, writers and critics, its own journals, newspapers, almanacs, prizes, etc. Being a typical rhizome, samizdat was neither mono- nor polycentric – the multiple strands of its connections and interrelationships were woven together in a most complex way. In one form or another it existed in the entire country, but was not coordinated from anywhere in particular. Samizdat is described as a *chronotope* of the densest hot spots of the literary samizdat, with special attention given to the more or less regularly published samizdat. The history of samizdat is followed up to 1991, thus restoring the chronological line of the study. In 1991, with the official abolishment of censorship in the USSR and the beginning of the change into a market economy, Soviet samizdat – as it was known and loved by the readers and persecuted by the authorities – disappeared forever (a bold analogy can be made here with the Internet as something akin to Soviet samizdat on a world scale, but this is completely different field).
The readers’ paradise that the USSR became in 1990 proved to be extremely short-lived – its fall began as already in the next year, though the readers of the “most well-read country in the world” couldn’t be blamed for it: the country itself disappeared. After the USSR fell apart, its structures and systems followed suit. For the literary field, it meant not just the disintegration of the main bodies of literary power (the Writers’ Union, the Literary Foundation, publishing houses, journals, newspapers etc.), but also the loss of infrastructure (most importantly, the distribution and sales networks). In 1991, after the price controls were lifted and the trade liberalized, the subscription prices for periodicals along with the delivery prices sharply rose; at the same time, the income of the subscribers grew less. By the end of 1993, the circulations of literary journals had shrunk to one-third, sometimes even one-seventh (the case of Novyi mir) of their pre-perestroika size, while some magazines (Yunost) saw a 50-fold decrease in circulation numbers. The readers’ interest in literary journals also began petering out by that time: they were becoming increasingly tired of the endless political and social discussions by literary critics on the pages of literary publications.

The emergence of new literary newspapers (Nezavisimaya gazeta, Segodnia) and journals (Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie) became an important sign of a new, post-Soviet Russian literary field being born. The irreversibility of this process was further confirmed by the emergence of privately-owned publishing houses; some of them were small-scale and marginalized (R. Elinin’s Lia; N. Perova’s Glas; S. Kudriavtsev’s Gileia; Ad Marginem, NLO), while others – EKSMO (1991), Olmexpress (1991), AST (1991), ROSMEN (1992), Vagrius (1992) – have since grown into commercial giants. This was also the period when new literary prizes appeared and gained status.

The three years of this period were very positive ones for Russian literature, and in many aspects proved to be formative for the next 10 to 15 years. Three new names that came into prominence almost simultaneously came to occupy the most notable places on the literary Olympus: D. Galkovsky, V. Pelevin and V. Sorokin. The literary and critical parts of Chapter III deal mostly with these three writers. Literary criticism as a whole lagged behind, very unconvenient at the moment when the new autonomous literary field was beginning to form.

Chapter V deals with the last period of the decade, from 1993 to 1995. This period can be characterized as a rapid growth of the literary field, caused by the influx of new participants, the development of new forms of literary life (salons, clubs, ‘elite’ book shops), the emergence of new authors and media (newspapers, journals, glossy magazines, the internet). The literary mainstream of this period demonstrates several important tendencies: from the death agony of socialist realism, through the phantasms of quasi-historicism, to escapism. Special attention and space is given to the situation in literary criticism: the new important processes that finally started at this time.

During this period, old and familiar institutions that exercised a powerful influence on literature throughout the history of the USSR, either disappered altogether (the Writers’ Union and its offshoots) or lost their status (some literary journals, former trendsetters), while new institutions emerged and gained significant influence in a very short time. The latter include new journals,
newspapers and publishing houses, as well as independent literary clubs and salons that changed the very character of literary life in Russian society; the internet and glossy magazines contributed too, bringing forth many changes in the conceptual framework and emotional charge of literary texts. The period of 1993-1995 can be seen as a period of ultra-rapid hybridization of what was left of the Soviet literary field with the burgeoning post-Soviet field elements and the new phenomena (some of them long known in the West, some relatively unexplored – such as the internet). By the mid-90s, the rapid acceleration of these processes created an entirely new literary field. The reforms of the literary field that started in 1985 were largely complete at the end of 1995. The period 1993-1995 can be considered the most decisive and fateful in the entire decade. In merely three years, the literary field that was falling to pieces, that was constantly suffering under the attacks of the political field, that kept losing its bases, infrastructure and influential agents, had rebuilt itself into an almost complete entity, possessing every feature needed to become fully autonomous.

The last chapter serves as an epilogue; it deals with general tendencies in literature, criticism and the Russian literary field as a whole after the complete transformation. The development of Russian literature can be broadly expressed by the following formula: from artificially protracted socialist realism, via a crash course on postmodernism (short but very intensive in Russia), to a new realism, not quite developed yet.

It remains to add, that the abundance of quotes (some of them rather long) in the thesis is due to the necessity to restore the documentary context of every period, and the limited availability (even now, despite the possibilities of the internet) of many quoted sources.