FROM THE EDITORS

Reviewing Reviews

As anyone who peruses the pages of history journals is probably aware, many book reviews are not terribly satisfying. They are formulaic, bland, and not very critical (or, less often, needlessly critical). The primary reason for the poverty of reviews is rather mundane -- they are too short. Six hundred or even 1,000 words is simply not sufficient to allow scholars to carefully consider the range of subjects that must be covered for rich, thought-provoking analysis. The short review is an impossible genre, a destructive battle between brevity and understanding. Reviewers know this, and frequently feel frustrated by the seemingly arbitrary word-limits imposed on them by journal editors (who, naturally, are under constraints of their own). One of the stated aims of *Kritika* is to improve the standard of book reviews in Russian and Eurasian history by offering authors the space they need to give books (and particularly rarely-reviewed books in languages other than English) the detailed treatment their authors deserve and the scholarly community demands.

Yet it must be said that additional length alone will not raise the standard of book reviewing in the field. For, on deeper inspection, it is clear that there are other, less obvious forces that diminish the quality of reviews. On the most general level, one might point to what could be called the "culture of criticism," particularly in American academia, but also elsewhere. Like any set of mental habits, this culture has rules.

Some are formal, that is, having to do with the literary template used to construct reviews. Most reviews (particularly short ones) follow a tried and true formula: summary, discussion, critique, praise. Each segment of the formulaic review boasts its own clichés: "This work is a fundamental contribution to …"; "The author is to be praised for …"; "It would have been desirable to …," and so on. Certainly, a common vocabulary is necessary for any scholarly enterprise, but the use of this formula and its cookie-cutter components can have a dulling effect on reviews. No doubt, they make it easier for reviewers to write reviews. In a short review, the critique -- that is, the part that involves real thought -- can be as short as a paragraph or a few sentences. The rest is simple. It is equally certain that the formula makes it easier for readers to read reviews -- one knows just what to expect around every corner. But a formula is a formula, and not a very good vessel for subtlety or critical thinking.

It is not the template alone that diminishes the quality of reviews. Rather, it is the Manichaean mentality that accompanies it, one that sharply divides reviews into two categories, "positive" and "negative." How many times have we all had the following conversation:

Professor A: "Did you see the review of X's book by Y?

Professor B: "Yes, it was quite negative."

We are all guilty of speaking as if a scholar's life work were a cineplex movie that could be given "thumbs up" or "thumbs down." The short review, and the pattern upon which it is written, make these sorts of judgements easy. A formulaic review can be quickly scanned for telling

adjectives -- "ambitious," "seminal," "path-breaking" -- to determine whether the reviewer "liked" or "disliked" the book. The formula is so generic that experienced readers can often predict where the telling adjectives will occur -- usually in the last paragraph right before the short "praise" section -- making it unnecessary to read the entire review (if, that is, one merely wants to extract the verdict).

There is, of course, a cynical presumption behind the "good-bad" way of speaking about reviews, namely, that the reviewer was hiding what he or she truly believed about the book in stilted, formulaic language. Again, it must be admitted that this is often the case. And here we come to the heart of the problem with our culture of criticism: the institutional and inter-personal realities of academia have a chilling effect on freedom of criticism in book reviews. In today's intellectual climate, no one wants to write a "bad" review, for "bad" reviews often have uncomfortable consequences. At the very least, a critical review can give rise to personal animosities and ill-feelings among colleagues. As a group, we are overly sensitive to criticism. The last thing any one of us wants, after pouring heart and soul into a project, is a "bad" review. Review writers are aware of this sensitivity and pull their punches accordingly (or simply refuse to review certain books). But sometimes a "bad" review can have much more serious results, particularly for junior scholars. As we all know, the "market" is flooded with history Ph.Ds. Hiring committees can choose from dozens of excellent candidates. There might be little need to settle for someone with a "mark" on his or her record, for a raft of other aspirants waits in the wings. Similarly, tenure committees need not promote someone who has generated significant criticism, for there are many potential "stars" available. Since it is not uncommon for even those applying for assistant professorships to have published books (another result of the job crisis), the review has taken on added significance as a form of certification. Like never before, "good" reviews mean jobs and advancement; "bad" reviews mean the opposite. This situation has, in practice, placed an additional and unfair burden on the book reviewer. Once, the reviewer's job was to critically evaluate a book; now reviewers help decide scholars' fates. It is no wonder that most reviewers refuse to be party to this process. They engage in what might be called "passive resistance." Either they refuse to review works of which they are critical or they write only positive reviews. "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all" -- it could cost someone a career. Whether reviewers blanch their reviews for personal reasons or because they do not want to negatively affect scholars' futures, the reviews they produce in this chilly atmosphere wander aimlessly in the grey no-man's-land between bland and misleading.

Can the culture of criticism be improved? Yes and no. There is no magic, undiscovered formula that will lead us into an era of open scholarly debate, free of stale literary formulas, simplistic judgements, or the understandable hesitancy to "go negative." But there is, we think, a model that might be followed for a somewhat healthier culture of criticism than our own, which we might well consider when we enter into debate. We have in mind the "Prime Minister's Questions." For those of you who have not seen it, these are the regular debates between the British PM (and his "side") and his chief opponent (and his "side") that occur in the House of Commons. The most striking aspect of the confrontation is the cheerful atmosphere in the House itself. The impression one gets is that both sides are fighting for one cause, and that it is through the fight itself that the good cause will be promoted.

Some of this spirit of the "noble opposition" would, we think, improve our culture of criticism. The key element in fostering a new critical atmosphere would seem to be trust. The reviewer and the reviewed must believe that, while they are in a sense opponents, they are working toward a common goal -- the pursuit of historical scholarship. Many (and perhaps even most) of us already believe this to be the case and act accordingly. But, alas, the commonality of our business is all too easily forgotten in the rush of events. The desire for approval, and the need for satisfaction once approval has been withdrawn, are natural and ineradicable elements of the human soul. Nevertheless, every scholar must remember that historical knowledge is the ultimate object of our efforts, not the approbation of our peers in and of itself. Once the collaborative nature of our enterprise is accepted, we can proceed to open, free, and fair debate without undue fear that criticism will damage the reviewer's or reviewed's egos, esteem, or (it is hoped) careers. We all must be able to take as well as to freely give criticism, secure in the understanding that its sole object is to improve the quality of historical knowledge. John Stuart Mill famously wrote that it is only through debate that understanding can progress. He was right. But Mill might well have added that it is only through understanding that debate can proceed.