

Ilya Kliger, *Sovereign Fictions: Poetics and Politics in the Age of Russian Realism*, University of Chicago Press, 2024, 287 pp., ISBN 9780226831879.

Reviewed by Marina Osipova

Alma Mater Studiorum - Università di Bologna

Kliger's monograph *Sovereign Fictions: Poetics and Politics in the Age of Russian Realism* is devoted to the nineteenth-century Russian novel. A substantial body of scholarship exists on particular authors and themes, from Tolstoy's treatment of war and history to Dostoevsky's explorations of psychology and morality, Turgenev's depictions of the intelligentsia, and Gogol's representations of bureaucracy (Jones & Miller 1998). Much of this research focuses on individual writers, specific works, or narrowly defined problems. Kliger, by contrast, offers a synthetic and theoretically ambitious account of Russian realism as a whole. He examines literature not simply as a reflection of individual experience, but as a way of understanding the role of the state in society's life. In his view, state power becomes one of the central subjects of interest for Russian novelists.

Kliger makes an important point by comparing Russian novels with Western ones. He shows that Western literature usually represents what he calls "sociotopes" of literary craftsmanship and creative techniques. These include economic and legal systems as well as shared interests. These systems help bring individual people together into working groups. Western novels often show how traditional father-figure authority becomes less important over time. Kliger demonstrates that Western literature typically keeps personal life separate from public life. In Russian literature, on the contrary, the state penetrates all spheres of life and becomes an important element of the narrative. It can be perceived as a force uniting the personal and the public, but at the same time as a source of violence and fear. The Russian novel, according to Kliger, gravitates toward

tragedy, where power plays a key role. He argues that while the Western novel centers on autonomous private life, in the Russian novel this private life is vulnerable to state intrusions.

The book explores how realist literature is connected to the idea of the state and how it reflects what the author calls the “social imaginary,” a category borrowed from the works of Cornelius Castoriadis (1987). This is a conception of who belongs to society, what roles, duties, and expectations exist, and what it means to be an individual. Kliger traces how the peculiarities of social structure influenced characters, situations, and conflicts in literature. The focus is on the ways Russian writers depicted the state—as a harmonious community or as a threatening source of power. Thus, in A. S. Pushkin’s poem *The Bronze Horseman*, the hero encounters the frightening symbolism of power in the form of the monument to Peter I.

In N. V. Gogol’s *The Inspector General*, officials find themselves in panic from unexpected state intervention. In I. A. Goncharov’s *Oblomov*, the main character’s inability to integrate into a society organized by the state and demanding activity and participation in state service is shown; against this background, the active Stolz emerges victorious. In Kliger’s opinion, this ambivalent perception of power is a characteristic feature of Russian literature. He describes this phenomenon as “social realism under autocracy.” Under such conditions, literature attempted to comprehend the role of the individual not within the framework of civil society, but in the context of the state as the main force of belonging and identity.

Kliger uses a method he calls “medial reading.” This is an intermediate approach between close and distant reading. He does not concentrate on one work but analyzes a wide spectrum of texts to capture persistent forms expressing the social imaginary. He strives to reconstruct the “language of the epoch”—a system of images, figures, and meanings through which Russian authors spoke about their time. A key concept in the analysis becomes “deformation,” a term borrowed from Russian formalists. Kliger shows how Western literary forms were reconceptualized depending on their interaction with the theme of the state. He investigates not only internal changes in texts but also their connection with the political and social situation, including censorship and the system of power.

Of particular interest is Kliger’s choice of theorists and the specific interpretations of works he proposes. While philosophers such as Hegel, Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Antonio Gramsci are widely discussed in various fields of literary studies, Kliger’s analysis demonstrates their unique productivity when applied to the distinct conditions of Russian realism, particularly in highlighting the state’s pervasive

role. For instance, in the first chapter, Kliger examines how Vissarion Belinsky, a prominent critic of the first half of the nineteenth century, adapted G. W. F. Hegel's ideas, notably by focusing attention not on civil society but on the state, which in turn influenced narrative frameworks for individuals in their social settings. This allows for a new reading of *Eugene Onegin*—not as a novel about private life, but as a work about how individual fate is formed under the influence of state structures. Tatyana turns out to be not simply the heroine of a love story, but a figure embodying the possibility of social integration through marriage to a general.

Kliger's examination of Russian literature through Carl Schmitt's idea of sovereignty provides a clear way to understand how power works and affects people's lives in stories. Schmitt's concept of the "state of exception," where normal laws are set aside for sovereign control, is especially relevant in his analysis of Alexander Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman*. In this poem, the main character, Eugene, faces the overwhelming force of state power shown through a flood—a symbol that goes beyond just a natural disaster to represent the unpredictable nature of sovereign authority. This power can erase personal lives at any moment, showing how individuals are at the mercy of those in control.

Kliger further enriches this analysis by incorporating Walter Benjamin's reflections on melancholy, which serve to deepen our understanding of characters weighed down by power. In Nikolai Gogol's *Tale of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich*, Kliger highlights Belinsky's distinction between the "poetry of actuality" in *Taras Bulba* and the deeply sad nature of Gogol's story, where life in the ghostly world lacks real vitality. This connects with Benjamin's idea of the "dramatic collapse of the body politic onto the body natural," showing an image of a bleak life cut off from political effort. Building on these ideas, Kliger uses Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben to look at how power has changed from sovereign rule to biopolitical control. In Ivan Turgenev's *First Love*, Kliger shows how the government's influence goes beyond public life into personal relationships and moral choices. The father's death starts a melancholy contagion that leads to "universal creaturely solidarity in death," highlighting a world where power is used harshly, making the social/private realm feel unreal and focusing all life in the political story of autocratic fathers and queens.

Moreover, Kliger uses Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony to examine generational conflicts in Alexey Pisemsky's *One Thousand Souls*. Kliger discusses Pavel Annenkov's review of this novel, where Annenkov points out the gelatinous quality of civil society in Russia and how its members struggle to be self-governing, disciplined participants in a hegemonic normative culture. The novel reflects this issue, where only the ruler acts for the common good,

and these actions take on an “ambiguous, sinister form.” This shows Gramsci’s view that the state remains obvious in Russian literature due to the lack of strong bourgeois power. However, the eventual defeat of reformist aspirations demonstrates how resilient established beliefs and values remain in the face of revolutionary ideas.

Kliger works with a wide range of sources. His corpus includes literary as well as critical, philosophical, legal, and publicistic texts. The foundation consists of novels—this distinguishes his approach from many Western studies. He chooses not only canonical works by Pushkin, Gogol, Lermontov, Goncharov, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky, but also lesser-known texts by Sleptsov, Druzhinin, Kostomarov, and Herzen. He also analyzes texts by Belinsky, Annenkov, Chicherin, Aksakov, and others.

The unusualness of Kliger’s approach lies not only in method but also in the reevaluation of familiar categories. Instead of emphasizing individualism or civil society, he shows how Russian novels are built around the theme of power and its influence. This provides a new understanding of realism as literature closely connected with the state. He includes early texts in his analysis that are traditionally not classified as realism in order to trace how the special state optics of Russian prose was formed. Thus, he proposes reading realism as part of a broader historical process where literature becomes a space for reflection on power and belonging.

Thus, Kliger’s book fits into the line of research devoted to connections between poetics and politics. The monograph allows us to see those aspects of the literary process that usually remain outside the field of vision. The author concludes that Russian literature is not secondary to Western literature, despite borrowing genres and forms, but expresses a specific experience significant for the contemporary subject.

References

Castoriadis, Cornelius. 1987. *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Cambridge, USA: MIT Press.

Jones, Malcolm V. & Robin Feuer Miller (eds.). 1998. *The Cambridge Companion to the Classic Russian Novel*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.