A Student Reflection on Harriet Murav’s Lecture “Marking Time: Modernism and Belatedness in the Writing of David Bergelson”

Following the REEEC Fall Reception on Thursday, September 12, Professor Harriet Murav opened the 2013-2014 New Directions Lecture Series by speaking on modernism and belatedness in the works of David Bergelson. Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures and Comparative and World Literatures, Harriet Murav is the current editor of Slavic Review. She is also the author of several monographs:

- Music From a Speeding Train: Jewish Literature in time, and consciousness. In her lecture, Murav conveyed the sense of “experiencing the present as if you’re too late” as a prominent theme in the early twentieth century in general. She cited the manifestation of such experience in Anna Akhmatova’s 1922 poem After Everything and brought examples from Bergelson’s fiction, specifically from Nokh Alemen (translated first as When all is Said and Done then as The End of Everything). A favored example was Bergelson’s Anna, who leaves behind a letter lamenting that someone else has lived out her springtime.

The train was the biggest symbol representing the crisis of time brought about by new technology. For Murav, this sense of belatedness also prevalent in Bergelson's fiction opened up the world for new ways of understanding. She connected the theme of belatedness with Freud’s early twentieth century fixation on the “after effect.” Freud claimed that every defining experience one would ever have would have occurred by the age of five, and the rest of one’s life would be resorted to making sense of those experiences. Professor Murav argued that while Bergelson's characters were perpetually too late, Bergelson’s view was in opposition with Freud's. For Bergelson it was never too late to recover from past experiences.

The lecture explored the ways in which Bergelson tried to juxtapose belatedness with change, how “remembering the past can be seen as the potential for something new.” One of her central arguments was that the after effect was not a sense of finality, but a way for transformation. This is where she explained that Bergelson's early works went in line with the early twentieth century French philosopher Henri Bergson.

Murav’s lecture explored the concept and dimensions of belatedness in the early fiction of the Yiddish writer David Bergelson within the context of early twentieth century theoretical and artistic inquiries about memory, time, and consciousness. In her lecture, Murav conveyed the sense of “experiencing the present as if you’re too late” as a prominent theme in the early twentieth century in general. She cited the manifestation of such experience in Anna Akhmatova's 1922 poem After Everything and brought examples from Bergelson's fiction, specifically from Nokh Alemen (translated first as When all is Said and Done then as The End of Everything). A favored example was Bergelson's Anna, who leaves behind a letter lamenting that someone else has lived out her springtime.

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She paralleled Bergelson with Bergson, who wrote that the unremembered past contained the source for maturity and futurity, which she explained as recovery being possible through intuition and discovery.
Professor Murav’s central argument was in the greater context of memory, and she concluded her lecture by stating that memory is a source of futurity. The study presented in her lecture is part of her current book project “Marking Time: The Writing of David Bergelson,” which builds from the context of twentieth century artistic and theoretical approaches, and inquiries discussed in the lecture to explore the “tragic contraction and creative dilation of time” as experimented within David Bergelson’s fiction.

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