

short but thorough summary of the local cultural and political landscapes.

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Russell Scott Valentino, *The Woman in the Window: Commerce, Consensual Fantasy, and the Quest for Masculine Virtue in the Russian Novel*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2014. xiii, 170 pp.

This ambitious book by Russell Scott Valentino aims to explore “the sheen of virtue, its rhetorical construction in some three hundred years of European expression, and its eventual displacement by the commercial ethic” (2). A literary scholar by training, Valentino treats his topic primarily through incisive new readings of novels by Nikolai Gogol, Fedor Dostoevskii, Lev Tolstoi, Boris Pasternak and Vladimir Nabokov. Yet his wide-ranging approach also situates these writers in a much broader investigation of how global modernization and economic transformation have reshaped notions of virtue, a study that stretches all the way from Plato’s *Republic* in Ancient Greece to Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* in the postmodern USA.

Valentino transverses this grand historical sweep even in his introduction, as he provides a fascinating meditation on the evolving meaning of *virtue* and *virtual*. Moving beyond the usual observation that the Latin *virtus* has its roots in *vir* (man), Valentino suggests that *virtus* referred not merely to “manly strength” or “power over other bodies,” but rather to “mastery over one’s own [body]” (3), and that the concept soon came to encompass good character as well. He convincingly argues that such ideas of virtue were transformed by the financial revolution of the late 1600s and early 1700s, which began in Europe, but had spread to Russia by the mid to late 1800s. This period, Valentino suggests, saw the “decline of the heroic ethic amid the spread of the commercial one” (90). Whereas older conceptions of masculine virtue were bound up with tangible things—men’s own bodies and their behavior—the financial revolution instead ascribed value to such intangibles as

money and credit, and came to esteem the men who possessed them. Valentino neatly summarizes this transformation as “a shift from virtue to virtuality” (42), linking this broader change in values with a semantic shift in the use of the word *virtual*. While *virtual* previously denoted the essential nature of something or someone, it has now come to mean a phenomenon with no physical reality. Valentino suggests that we live in a world characterized by increasing virtuality, in the modern sense, and he employs the term “consensual fantasy” to describe society’s mutual agreement to give meaning to things with little or no physical substance: say, a banknote, or a credit limit.

The four chapters of Valentino’s book explore how Russian literature engage with or critique this shift from virtue to virtuality, and how some writers sought to transform or reinvent the virtue ethic for a commercial age. Chapter One treats Dostoevskii’s *The Double*, linking the novella’s themes of masking, inauthenticity, and doubling with the rise of virtuality. “In *The Double*,” argues Valentino, “Dostoevsky has effectively concentrated the fantastical potential of modern commercial culture in the mind of a single individual” (30). Moreover, he suggests that the text laments the loss of chivalric masculinity, a fact highlighted in a key scene where Goliadkin looks up to his beloved Klara Olsuf’evna’s window, much like a knight searching for his beloved, but sees only a multitude of people searching for him, a “public gaze” (32) that meets his own. This trope of the woman in the window provides the title for Valentino’s book, and he traces its recurrence—and transformation—in various texts as a way to map the writers’ various responses to the displacement of the virtue ethic.

Chapter Two explores Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, and the virtue/virtuality framework works particularly well a novel that hinges on the ascription of value of non-existent merchandise. Valentino reads the five landowners as representatives of different stages in the development of economic history, while Chichikov himself is an “excellent exemplar, if not a caricature, of the *parfait négociant*” (65). Chapter Three suggests that Raskol’nikov, too, can be read as a kind of businessman: he “appears to think of the projected murder and theft as a kind of entrepreneurial venture”

(68), though his eventual redemption implies the recovery of virtue. Levin in Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina* also offers an alternative kind of masculinity, one that emphasizes the body's physicality. Drawing on the Greek notion of *thumos*, a kind of energy or spirit bound up with the physical body, Valentino suggests that Levin's "thumos-inspired virtue" stands in opposition to "the contemporary world's fickleness" (88). The book's final chapter moves into the twentieth century, asking whether art might provide men with a viable alternative to virtuality, and finding contrasting answers to that question in Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* and Nabokov's *Lolita*. The latter text allows Valentino to develop further his comparisons with the United States, while also paving the way for his conclusion, which uses DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* to launch a discussion of virtuality in our own era.

One appealing feature of Valentino's monograph lies in how he harnesses Russian literature to engage in dialogue with other disciplines such as psychology and economics. For example, the author challenges psychologist Sherry Turkle's championing of a fluid, multitudinous understanding of the self, drawing attention to the "uncanny manner in which [multiplicity] can slide into duplicity" (22). He also develops a polemic with economist Deirdre McCloskey's *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce* (2006), suggesting that her defence of capitalism "relies on instrumentalist presumptions so profound that they find no articulation in her work" (91). However, it is somewhat surprising that Valentino does not directly address the emerging field of men's studies. It would be illuminating to see how Valentino positions his own research in relation to thinkers such as Raewyn Connell or Michael Kimmel. Moreover, one wonders whether a more explicit engagement with masculinity theory might have allowed Valentino to tackle a thorny question that lingers under the surface of his study: whether and how notions of masculine virtue might depend upon the marginalization of the woman in the window, or women more broadly.

Nevertheless, Valentino's stimulating book adds another chapter to our understanding of Russian masculinity. His focus on nineteenth-century literature is particularly welcome, as so much

work in the field has focused on Soviet and post-Soviet masculinities. His book also offers a useful model that may inspire further research: how would Goncharov's Oblomov or Chekhov's Lopakhin fit into Valentino's scheme, one wonders? Perhaps the book's greatest strength, however, lies in Valentino's innovative use of the virtue/virtuality paradigm, which generates inspired new readings of the Russian classics and allows them to speak afresh to our own virtual age.

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Valerie Sperling. *Sex, Politics and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 376 pp.

This book is a brilliant account of contemporary Russian politics, which offers a fresh perspective on what constitutes the principal underpinning of the current political regime in Russia. Valerie Sperling invites us to analyze the contemporary political processes in Russia through the lens of gender, demonstrating that there is something more than meets the eye to Putin's rule and the political processes occurring in Russia. In particular, the author reveals how the Putin regime makes adroit use of gender norms and stereotypes to uphold its power. Yet, as Sperling shows, Putin is not unique in his reliance on traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity, subordinate femininity, sexism, and homophobia. His opponents, notably, anti-Kremlin groups draw on the very same tactics in their efforts to contest Putin's legitimacy. In her monograph Sperling also examines how gender norms inform the pervasive homophobia and sexism in the Russian political domain (as well as in the Russian society as a whole). The author concludes with her reflections on what can potentially dismantle such patriarchal order, drawing on the case of Pussy Riot and suggesting that feminism can be a powerful instrument in overhauling patriarchy.

The monograph explores a number of issues, exemplifying the wide use of gender norms in contemporary Russian politics. Sperling opens her discussion with the Russian president, who has recently