

Title: What's Radical about "Radical" Aesthetics?

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Abstract:

Chernyshevsky's and Dobroliubov's contemporaries labeled their criticism "utilitarian" (Dostoevsky) or "didactic" (Druzhinin) and criticized the "enslavement" of art (Akhsharumov). In the polemical atmosphere of the late 1850s, such labels allowed the literary world to establish a clear contrast between the "radical" critics and their opponents in the "art for art's sake" camp. While certainly not unfounded, the "utilitarian" label presents a one-sided view of radical aesthetics. This applies particularly to Dobroliubov, who explicitly criticized literary didacticism in an early unpublished article, but also to Chernyshevsky, whose major aesthetic statement focuses much more on the mimetic status of the artwork than on its function. This paper will suggest that the most shocking radicalism of the "radical" critics is found in their starkly uncompromising, literalist mimetic theory, which pushed Belinskian aesthetics to an extreme. In staking out such an extreme mimetic position, the radical critics reopened 18th-century Western European battles over the place of the imagination in literature.