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Catriona Kelly

RUSSIAN  
LITERATURE

A Very Short Introduction

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# Preface

Introductions to Russian literature, like introductions to national literatures more generally, traditionally take three forms. One type is an outline of what is known as the 'canon', the lives and works of famous writers – Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Chekhov, with a supporting cast of lesser figures from the nineteenth century, and of major ones from the twentieth. A second type is a sketch of literary movements and cultural institutions: Neo-Classicism, Romanticism, Realism, Symbolism, Modernism, Socialist Realism; censorship, the Soviet Writers' Union, and literary dissidence. A third way of approaching the exercise, one preferred by writers as opposed to academics, is personal appreciation. In, say, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lectures on Russian Literature*, or Joseph Brodsky's *Less than One*, the selection of material is explicitly subjective, and vehement advocacy of some writers sits alongside equally energetic debunking of others.

There are also less obvious ways of writing introductions. One is the survey organized round a strong central thesis. Yury Tynyanov's brilliant book *Archaisms and Innovators* (1929), for instance, argued that literary evolution developed out of writers' attitudes towards existing texts, whose ways of representing the world might be inertly copied, actively rejected, or at once absorbed and transformed. Another is the in-depth analysis of some technical aspect of the literary language. Mikhail Gasparov's history of Russian versification, for

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example, examines how preferences for metrical forms have changed over the course of time and scrutinizes the weight of meaning carried by particular metrical measures at a given point in history.

This book does not fall into any of these categories, least of all the first two. There are many excellent linear outlines of Russian literary history already: there is no place for another one, particularly not one that would need to simplify beyond recognition a literary culture with a large number of important writers, many of whom wrote big, complex books. Equally, I am wary of settling on some central 'big idea', given that there are already far too many ruminations on Russian literature that reduce sophisticated texts to inane clichés: the 'superfluous man' as the central theme of fiction, and so on. On the other hand, a theoretical discussion such as Tynyanov's needs room to breathe, and is hard to follow if the source material it attempts to explain is unfamiliar. So what I have decided to do is to follow the lead of an earlier Very Short Introduction, Mary Beard and John Henderson's eloquent and captivating *Classics*. Rather than running through the Peloponnesian Wars, Greeks and Persians, Athens as the birthplace of democracy, Rome as the birthplace of plumbing, the Conquest of Britain, and other landmarks of the subject as it used to be taught in the school room, *Classics* focuses on one particular artefact, the friezes from the Temple of Apollo at Bassae in Arcadia, using them as the starting point of a wide-ranging exploration of issues that are of current concern in the professional study of the Ancient World and of changing attitudes to the classical past.

A comparable way of organizing an introduction, both to Russian literature and to the ways of thinking and arguing about it, is to centre it on the Russian equivalent of Shakespeare, if not of the Bassae Marbles, Aleksandr Pushkin (1799–1837). Pushkin's writings themselves touch on many central themes in contemporary literary history, from the colonization of the Caucasus to salon culture. Many different critical

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approaches have been applied to them, from textology, or the comparison of manuscript variants, to Formalism, to feminism. The development of the 'Pushkin myth' (the writer as 'the founding father of Russian literature') raises all kinds of interesting questions about how literary history is made, about how the idea of a 'national literature' comes into being, and about the way in which these processes made certain kinds of writing seem marginal (writing by Russian women, for instance).

Approaching a national literature in this way does not mean exposing an act of deception perpetrated on readers by patriotic critics. Pushkin – like Dante, Shakespeare, or Goethe – was gifted with outstanding talent and intellectual depth: his writing is profoundly rewarding. But the reputations of such national writers can be intimidating, surrounded as they are by critical guard-dogs, who (as is only to be expected of guard-dogs) often seem less concerned to celebrate what they are protecting than to keep others away from it. Reputations of this kind sometimes generate rather lazy reactions on the part of critics, too. (Consider the phrase I used a couple of sentences earlier, 'profoundly rewarding': what does this actually mean?) Pushkin and other great Russian writers should not be seen as members of some artistic Politburo, receiving what Soviet meetings used to describe as 'stormy applause turning into an ovation' from a captive audience of contemporaries and later generations. They were often at loggerheads with each other and with the Russian public, while the efforts of successive regimes to press dead writers into service as prophets of official ideologies stood in stark contrast to the intolerance of the same regimes for living writers who would not keep their mouths shut (or their pens at rest). There is quite a lot in this book that is controversial, too, but it is meant to be provocative in an active sense – to stimulate reflection and debate. You will not finish it knowing everything there is to know about Russian literature, but you might, I hope, be inspired to find out more about one of the world's great literary cultures and to share my enthusiasm for thinking and writing about it.

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Although this book is not meant to be a conventional literary history, I am determined to follow convention in one respect: by thanking those who helped with the writing of it. George Miller gently bullied me into the idea of writing a 'very short' introduction in the first place, and offered an exemplary mixture of commitment, constructive criticism, and technical guidance as the book took shape. Catherine Humphries and Alyson Lacewing saw the typescript through to press. Several anonymous readers made suggestions that helped me improve the first draft; more general help with lines of approach came from conversations with friends such as Mikhail Leonovich Gasparov, Barbara Heldt, Stephen Lovell, David Shepherd, Gerry Smith, and Alexander Zholkovsky, as well as from the studies of Russian literature and culture listed in my suggestions for further reading. Martin McLaughlin's gift of his Calvino translation was a great help with Chapter 1.

In an introductory book of this kind, though, it is above all one's teachers that one thinks of. In my undergraduate days at Oxford, Anne Pennington's wise tolerance and deep love of Russian poetry was complemented by Ronald Hingley's fierce expression of enthusiasms and detestations, and insistence that Russian writers must be seen as part of a wider literary world. I hope this book is a worthy tribute to them, and also to the students I have taught in Oxford and at the University of London, whose sceptical questions, creative ideas, and refusal to take anything for granted are a constant delight and an unfailing inspiration.



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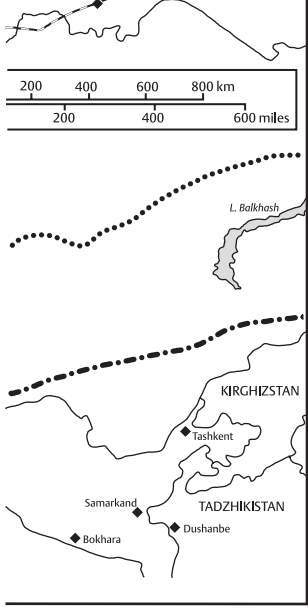
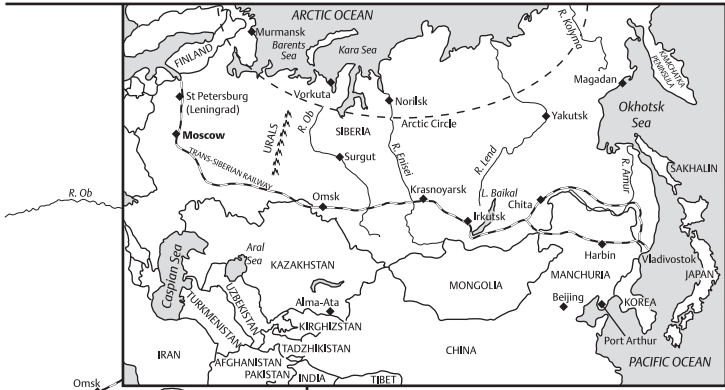
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# List of Maps

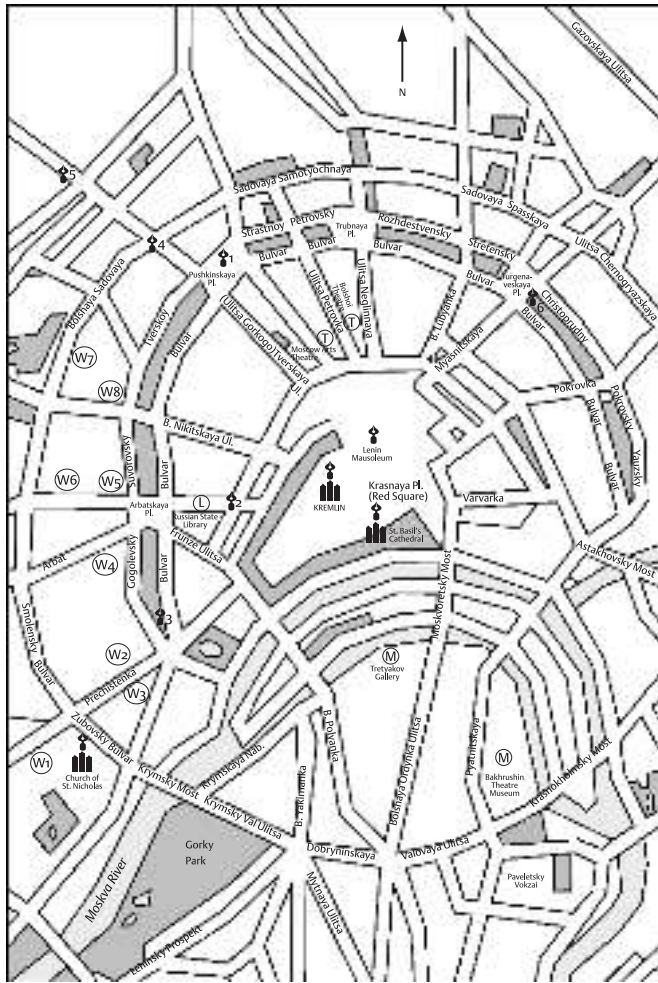
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**Map 1** The Russian Empire, showing places with literary associations.



- Key**
- territory added 1801- mid-19th century
  - ..... boundary in 1800
  - ◆ towns



**Map 2** Central Moscow, showing some of the main monuments and museums.



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## Key

🏛️ Museums

🎭 Theatres

📖 Libraries

🏪 Churches

🏠 Writer's museums

🏠<sup>W1</sup> L. Tolstoy museum ('Tolstoy house')

🏠<sup>W2</sup> Pushkin museum

🏠<sup>W3</sup> L. Tolstoy museum

🏠<sup>W4</sup> Hertsen (memorial house)

🏠<sup>W5</sup> Gogol

🏠<sup>W6</sup> Tsvetaeva (memorial apartment)

🏠<sup>W7</sup> Chekhov (memorial house)

🏠<sup>W8</sup> Gorky

🗿 Monuments

🗿<sup>1</sup> Pushkin (1880)

🗿<sup>2</sup> Dostoevsky (1981)

🗿<sup>3</sup> Gogol (1909/1952)

🗿<sup>4</sup> Mayakovsky (1958)

🗿<sup>5</sup> Gorky (1951)

🗿<sup>6</sup> Bulgakov (1991)

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# Chapter 1

## Testament

Which of us can understand Pushkin? We knew Pushkin only in translation [ . . . ] and we liked his short stories much less than Nathaniel Hawthorne's; and obviously, we were wrong, for because of limitations of language we were debarred from seeing something that is as obvious to unsealed eyes as the difference between a mule and a Derby winner.

(Rebecca West, 1941)

In 1925, the Anglo-Russian literary critic D. S. Mirsky began *Modern Russian Literature*, a pioneering 'very short' introduction published by Oxford University Press, by referring to Pushkin.

It is indeed difficult for the foreigner, perhaps impossible if he is ignorant of the language, to believe in the supreme greatness of Pushkin among Russian writers. Yet it is necessary for him to accept the belief, even if he disagrees with it. Otherwise every idea he may form of Russian literature and Russian civilization will be inadequate and out of proportion with reality.

Seven decades later, Pushkin is still acknowledged as 'supremely great' among Russian writers by his compatriots, and this is still likely to strike foreign readers as odd. Outside its home, Russian literature is associated first and foremost with prose, and particularly with prose that is rich in



1. Portrait of Aleksandr Pushkin.

This 1827 portrait of Alexandr Pushkin (1799–1837) by Vasily Tropinin, done from life by an artist who was the favoured painter of Moscow’s ‘middling sort’ (successful merchants, civil servants, and respectable writers) is at first sight a workaday likeness. In contrast to a contemporary, Orest Kiprensky, who produced a full-blown Romantic portrait of Pushkin, eyes raised, arms folded, and statue of the Muse at his back, Tropinin gives the poet only one ‘writerly’ accessory, the sheaf of manuscript under his right arm. At the same time, Pushkin is handled rather differently from Tropinin’s other subjects. His fraying scarf, carelessly knotted at his badly ironed collar, and long dirty fingernails, suggest unconcern with trivialities such as grooming; his sideways gaze conveys abstraction; and his prominent astigmatism (barely noticeable in most portraits) implies internal conflict. The picture shows Pushkin at the pinnacle of his lifetime fame. A byword for youthful brilliance even in an age where precocity was taken for granted (he had begun publishing while still at the Lyceum School in Tsarskoe Selo, and his early works included the sparkling mock-epic *Ruslan and Ludmilla*, written in his late teens), Pushkin achieved still greater notoriety when he was exiled for political insubordination in 1820. Outside the capital until 1826, he remained at the centre of literary life: *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* (1822), the early chapters of *Evgeny Onegin*, and the lyric poems of 1820–5 had a huge popular and literary success and remained the benchmark of his achievement for many critics and ordinary readers. During the late 1820s and early 1830s, Pushkin’s circumstances were to become increasingly difficult, as a result of political surveillance, a troubled marriage, and a problematic relationship with his readers. Later works, such as the historical narrative poem *Poltava* (1828), received a relatively cool reception, and the last years of the poet’s life, culminating in his death

Testament

in a duel in January 1837, saw mounting personal and artistic isolation. But between 1826 and 1830, he produced a run of masterpieces: many of his greatest lyric poems, his first published experiments in prose, and several outstanding narrative poems, as well as the later chapters of *Evgeny Onegin*.

ideas and devotes itself to the exploration of moral dilemmas. Since the late nineteenth century, it has been Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, the authors of vast novels of exactly this kind, who have been acknowledged, among Western readers, as the greatest writers of Russia. Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1865–9), which argues that human beings can exercise control over events only if they recognize their own powerlessness, yet breathes individuality into a vast range of characters, appears regularly in lists of the ten most important books of all time. The ethical concerns set out by Dostoevsky, above all the question of whether morality is possible in a world without God, anticipated some of the most important concerns of modern philosophy, from Nietzsche to Sartre.

Pushkin wrote no large novels, and he does not even seem particularly 'Russian' in other ways, not even as 'Russian' as Turgenev. Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862) has a main character, Bazarov, whose obsession with social utility (he insists that the dissecting of frogs is superior to water-colour painting) seems satisfactorily strange because it is so hyperbolic. And the novel's country estate setting is at once charming and exotic, with its serf mistress, its ribboned dogs, and its duel fought over an imagined matter of honour. It is easy to trace a line between *Fathers and Sons* and Chekhov's plays, but far less easy to see how *Evgeny Onegin* – with its wayward digressions, its urbane and ironic tone, and its curious air of repressed emotion – might be a forerunner of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1875–7) or of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1868). The combination of wit with the melancholy appreciation that happiness

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may be most elusive when easiest to realize makes the book seem more like a successor to Jane Austen's *Persuasion*. To be sure, it has some impressive English-language descendants – they include Nabokov's *Lolita* and Vikram Seth's verse novel about San Francisco, *The Golden Gate* – but these arch and self-conscious texts simply enhance Western readers' conviction that Pushkin is peculiar in terms of his own, supposedly immediate and spontaneous, culture.

Yet all the major Russian writers were avid readers of European literature; if they reacted against it, they also learned from it. *Anna Karenina* may be at some level a riposte to *Madame Bovary*, but there is a direct connection between an image in the opening pages of Flaubert's novel – Charles Bovary's hideous hat standing for the inconsequential life remarked by the author alone – and the insignificant stubborn burdock that Tolstoy's narrator notices at the beginning of *Hadji Murat*. During the eighteenth century, Russians had been haunted by fears that their literature was too imitative, too dominated by translations. Such fears were replaced during the nineteenth century by pride in native achievements, but receptivity to French, English, German, Spanish, and Italian literature continued. Even writers who had only a poor knowledge of Western languages absorbed foreign material avidly. Dostoevsky's novels were as indebted to Dickens as they were to Gogol. Though the writer detested the real England when he visited in 1862, that only confirmed his adulation for Dickens. After 1917, love of foreign literature survived not only the bitterness of exile, but the cultural isolation endured by writers who stayed behind in the Soviet Union. Anna Akhmatova's admiration for T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, and Joseph Brodsky's for John Donne, are only two of the better-known relationships with Western literature; a more unexpected instance is Marina Tsvetaeva's enthusiasm for the best-selling American novelist Pearl S. Buck.

Testament

By no means all the commentators who shaped Anglophone readers' views of Russian literature were unaware of the artistic affinity of

'Russian' and 'Western' traditions. Many were authors themselves – indeed, the most impressive English-language interpretations of Russian literature have tended to be literary rather than critical. The short stories of Chekhov, in particular, left marks on the work of writers in English such as Katherine Mansfield, Elizabeth Bowen, Sean O'Faolain, Raymond Carver, Alice Munro, Richard Ford, and William Trevor. Chekhov's stories were models of how to contrive small-scale narratives that almost evaded the onward drive of plot, and captured a character's entire world in a few moments that were both exemplary and elusive. Chekhov's writing accorded well with Anglophone admiration for unnoticeable virtuosity (it is not for nothing that the term 'craft' also means 'stealth'). But if greatness in prose involves hardly seeming to write literature at all, then some of Pushkin's narratives – *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* (1822), *Dubrovsky* (1832–3), or *The Captain's Daughter* (1836) – are likely to disappoint. Here, plot matters a great deal, and the need to provide a resolute ending seems uppermost. In addition, Pushkin's closeness to French models (Chateaubriand's *René* or Constant's *Adolphe*, the poetry of Parny and Lamartine) does him no service in Anglophone culture, which has traditionally equated 'French' with 'trite, superficial, and pretentious'.

To be fair, Pushkin's strangeness is not something felt only by foreigners. Russian commentators have remarked it too. Those of pro-Western sympathies have considered it a sign of Pushkin's unique status as a truly civilized person in a society of shameful backwardness; for nationalists, on the other hand, it has been a signal tragedy, a symbol of the alienation of intellectuals from the 'Russian people'. The philosopher Gustav Shpet, a late follower of the nineteenth-century Slavophiles (the movement that arose in the 1830s in order to lament the harm that had been done to Russian culture by Westernization), saw Pushkin as 'an accident'. His writing was 'precisely his writing, the writing of a genius who did not emerge from the Russian national spirit'. But whatever their feelings about Pushkin's expression (or not)



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