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Caryl Emerson

Excerpt

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Introduction

Russian literature is compact, intensely self-reflexive, and always about to forget that it is merely made up out of words. Imagined characters walk out of fiction into real life, while real-life writers are raised to the status of myth. Myths consolidated first around saints, then around cities (St. Petersburg and Moscow), then around biographies of writers, finally around ethical and ideological systems. When measured against the subcontinents – Europe and Asia proper – that flank Russia to the west, south, and east, this tradition is remarkable in two respects: its extreme brevity, and its lateness. Chinese literature is calibrated in millennia. Masterpieces in Arabic date from the fifth century. Dante wrote his *Commedia* in the early fourteenth century and Shakespeare his unparalleled English works at the end of the sixteenth. But Russia as a literary nation entered into consciousness (her own, and the world's) only two hundred years ago.

From that point on, the rise was unprecedentedly swift. Within two decades, from 1815 to the end of the 1820s, two paradigm-shifting events came to pass that provided prime binding material for national myth: Russia's most perfect military victory (the expulsion of Napoleon, from 1812–15) and the maturity of her most perfect poet, Aleksandr Pushkin (1799–1837). These achievements were not the crowning peaks of a national history but its beginning, and they shaped the public face of modern Russia and of Russian literature. It was a two-faced Janus. Pushkin came to represent a style of creativity so cosmopolitan that a Russian man (or woman) of letters was presumed to be at home, linguistically and culturally, anywhere in Europe. During those same years, however, Napoleon's defeat and its aftermath led to a chauvinistic closing-down of Russia as a sociopolitical entity, and to a pattern of suspicious confrontation with the West that has continued, with small windows of relief, into the twenty-first century.

Such was the visible point of origin. A scant fifty years after Pushkin's birth, Russians were producing works of prose fiction that not only were translated into every major world language, but whose authors, most spectacularly Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), became international celebrities and media stars, as much for their lives and philosophies as for their art. The self-consciousness of this

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tradition was furthered by a steadily rising literacy rate, the emergence of a mass press, and also by recurring national trauma, censorship, and an edgy, often defensive “exceptionalism” – that is, by the insistence that Russia was so special that she could not be judged by normal (which is to say, Western European) standards of progress, health, or success. “Normalization” at some non-catastrophic level became a possibility only for post-communist Russia. But many Russians – and Russia-watchers as well – have feared that rudderless freedom and the abrupt dethroning of literature’s role as arbiter of national identity might spell the end of the Russian literary tradition.

This book is predicated on the assumption that such fears are unfounded. A literary tradition can crack, interbreed with alien elements, be subject to massive purging and parodies of itself, incessantly predict its own demise, and still remain robust. Indeed, purgings and parodies need not discredit the corpus but can become identifying traits and even load-bearing structures within the tradition. The enduring core of this tradition is called the “literary canon.” The phrase requires some explanation. The canon of a nation’s literature – its best-known texts, plots, fictional characters, plus the mythically enhanced biographies of its writers – does not have the force of a religious doctrine or a legal code. It changes constantly, but slowly, more by accretion and decay than by fiat. A given canon looks different, of course, to native speakers raised inside the culture that gave birth to it, than it does to outsiders who speak another language and depend upon translations. The literary canon of any national culture works in approximations. Ask any dozen interested readers to identify “canonic works” from a given culture, and each will come up with a different list. But chances are excellent that all lists will contain some works in common. Our goal is to stick close to that common core.

As used here, the phrases “literary tradition” and “literary canon” refer to works of creative fiction that satisfy three criteria. First, these are the created worlds (or writers’ biographies) that generations of Russians have been raised on and are expected to recognize, the way English speakers recognize the shape of one of Shakespeare’s plots (*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*) and Spanish speakers the tribulations of Don Quixote. Merely mentioning the name is enough to bring up the story, for these are common denominators, a sort of cultural shorthand. Although these plots are themselves often of international (or pan-European) origin, the Russian canon is unusually rich in common denominators that peaked first in other national literatures and then were adapted, with fierce enthusiasm and particularity, as Russia’s own (the “Russian Hamlet,” the “Russian Don Quixote”).

Second, texts become canonical when they are repeatedly referenced, recycled, and woven into successive artistic worlds so that they never entirely fade

from view. Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (set between 1805 and 1819) had an impact in its own time (the 1860s), inspired an opera (by Sergei Prokofiev in the 1940s), a steamy parodic sequel titled *Pierre and Natasha* (in the 1990s), and along the way a mass of reverent and irreverent illustrations, films, spin-offs, caricatures, and comic strips. Natasha Rostova has now become a personality that can enter other stories (including real-life ones); she is not limited to the plots that Tolstoy created around her.

And finally: the literary canon is proof of the legitimating aesthetic judgment of readers over time. Of course politics, censorship, taste, prejudice, accidents of loss or discovery, and approved reading lists play a role in the canonizing process. But overall, canonic works survive because they are excellent. Excellence in an artwork is both formal (that is, due to its efficient aesthetic construction) and "psychological" – that is, we recognize a classic because it has rewarded multiple interpretations of itself from multiple points of view, over generations.

During the century that it has existed in adequate English translation, the Russian canon of novels and plays has acquired a reputation and a certain "tone." It is serious (that is, tragic or absurd, but rarely lighthearted and never trivial), somewhat preacherly, often politically oppositionist, and frequently cast in a mystifying genre with abrupt or bizarre beginnings and ends. The novels especially are too long, too full of metaphysical ideas, too manifestly eager that readers not just read the story for fun or pleasure but learn a moral lesson. These books are deep into good and evil even while they parody those pretensions. If there is comedy – and Russian fiction can be screamingly funny – there is a twist near the end that turns your blood to ice. Russian literary characters don't seek the usual money, career, success in society, sex for its own sake, trophy wife or husband, house in the suburbs, but instead crave some other unattainable thing.

How one should respect this reputation and received "tone" is a delicate issue. In the literary humanities, an Introduction is a subjective enterprise. It has a shape of its own, which means big gaps and broad leaps. It is not a history, handbook, encyclopedia, digest of fictional plots or real-life literary biographies, and even less is it a cutting-edge textbook summarizing, as science textbooks can, the "state of the art." No in-print genre today can compete with search engines or updatable online resources for objective information of that sort. An Introduction probably works best as a tour guide, pointing out landmarks, road signs, and connecting paths. Since its purpose is to lead somewhere more complex than the point at which it began, it should introduce names, texts, and themes that an interested reader can pursue elsewhere in more detail. A non-Russian author inviting a non-Russian audience to enter this territory is thus obliged, I believe, to select as exemplary those literary texts and tools

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that are accessible “from the outside.” They must exist in decent translations, survive as genuine works of art in their target languages (here, English), and be capable of accumulating cultural weight beyond Russia’s borders.

With minor exceptions, this defines the transposable Great Russian prose canon, plus perhaps a dozen plays. It neglects the empire’s cultural minorities. This prose canon contains very few women (the Russian nineteenth century had no Jane Austen, George Eliot, or George Sand) – although groundbreaking research on Russian women’s writing over the past three decades has brought to light many formerly invisible authors and works. For reasons of space, the Russian émigré community is excluded from this book (together with the aristocratic and very Russian genius of Vladimir Nabokov, who has stimulated a Russo-American industry of his own).

The most significant compression in the present volume, however, occurs in the realm of Russian poetry, which can only be a secondary presence in the story. The *Cambridge Introduction to Russian Poetry* has already been written, by Michael Wachtel; the present book can be seen as a companion to it. Our tasks are quite different. Wachtel notes provocatively in his opening sentence: “The achievements of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy notwithstanding, Russian literature is a tradition of poetry, not prose, and Russian readers have always recognized it as such.”¹ Russian readers, yes – but not the rest of the world. Europe ignored the Slavic tongues. Highborn, educated Russians of the imperial period were raised bilingually, spoke French in polite society, and many knew English and German as well. Europeans by and large did not presume that any benefits could be gained by learning Russian. And why should they? The Russian officers who occupied Paris in 1814 spoke French as purely and elegantly as their defeated foe. Some Russian writers, like Pushkin’s friend Pyotr Chaadaev as late as the 1830s, argued that the Russian tongue was unsuited to refined philosophical thought. This imbalance in language competencies contributed to a curious, and not unjustified, superiority complex in many great Russian writers. Most insistent in this regard was Fyodor Dostoevsky in his journalism of the 1870s. We can translate you, Dostoevsky proclaimed, but you cannot translate us. We can grasp, absorb and transfigure your legacy, but ours is mysterious, potent, for us alone. When the quadrilingual Ivan Turgenev, living in Paris in the 1870s, presented some poems by Pushkin in his own French translation to Gustave Flaubert, the latter shrugged: “Il est plat, votre poète” [He’s flat, your poet].²

To set poetry at one pole and “the rest of literature” at the other is a familiar reflex in literary studies, and it comes at a cost. It satisfies our intuitive sense that the most marvelous aspects of a poem collapse outside its original language, or must be wholly recreated by a translator-poet of equivalent gifts, whereas prose

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is somehow wide open, serving raw experience more than form. This binary view, unfair to the resources of both poetry and prose, leaves out rich stretches of artistic writing in between – ornamentalist prose, rhythmic speech, and “prose poems,” for example. But it nevertheless touches on an important truth. Prose is deficient in criteria and tools for precise measurement, whereas poetry has an agreed-on descriptive and critical vocabulary, beginning with rules of versification. In his *Introduction to Russian Poetry* and elsewhere, Wachtel argues that poets cite, converse, and bond with one another (that is, come together in a tradition) most intensely at the level of what is lost in translation. The reality of the work, its substance, is this complex of rhythmic patternings and specific aural cues. Only later does that technically identifiable mass come to be associated with certain themes (feelings, images, narrative experiences).³

How do prose writers bond and cite? Shared themes and images are important for both poetry and prose, but unlike the lyric poem, fused to the language and rhythms of its birth, prose and dramatic genres are presumed to be more resilient – orphaned without trauma and adopted with gratitude into new families. Novels, stories, and plays are routinely “realized” outside their original languages, garnering international fame in all manner of translations, to audiences that have no idea of the context or sound of the source. (Occasionally one even hears the comment that a translation can, and should, *improve on* the original. A variant on this position was voiced by the Czech-French writer Milan Kundera in 2007, when he argued that the aesthetic value of a given novel could be appreciated fully only in the “large context of world literature,” which for him meant by those “without a knowledge of the original language.”⁴) Confounded by the success of their product and uncertain about the specificity of their tools, professional prose analysts frequently default to plot summaries, the work’s “message,” the perspectives of its narrators, its reflection of real-life events, and how its fictive personalities do or do not cohere as people who resemble us, their readers, and their friends. These are all valid categories and inquiries. But they apply as readily to philosophy, sociology, politics, cultural anthropology, psychology, and simply getting through the day as they do to verbal art.

This profligate applicability of stories to life was one reason why the Russian Formalists, attempting to professionalize literary study in the 1920s, took up the challenge of narrative prose with such missionary fervor. They devised technical categories for its analysis that were deliberately, polemically blind to personality and to ethics: objective terminology and procedures that would qualify artistic prose as a self-consciously “literary” (or “poetical”) construct. It is of enormous significance that the most aggressive and fertile of these Russian prose theorists,

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Viktor Shklovsky (1893–1984), wrote brash and influential essays on the artistry of Miguel Cervantes, Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle, Laurence Sterne, all the while working solely, and apparently with full confidence, in Russian translation. Shklovsky did not know Spanish, English, or any foreign language. Did he consider his monolingualism a handicap? His practice as an analyst of prose suggests that in his view, a higher-order authenticity residing in the very structure or movement of literary narrative permits it to transcend the specific material out of which it is made. No verse theorist could take seriously the “scientific” results of such a method applied to his chosen subject matter.

In balancing these two wings of the Russian tradition, the poetic and the prosaic, Flaubert’s remark to Turgenev about that “flat poet, Pouchkine” has been a warning to the present volume. Flaubert was not wholly wrong. Pushkin taken out of Russian becomes two-dimensional with treacherous ease. Part of the reason, surely, is that his lyric gift was not especially pictorial. He tended to avoid metaphor, which is among the easiest elements of a poem to be transferred out of one language into another. Instead of image and metaphor, Pushkin manipulated for poetic purposes various grammatical categories, largely case endings and the verbal aspect peculiar to Slavic tongues – all the while delivering a lucid, pure, almost conversational speaking line.⁵ Other great poets of thicker, more startling texture, such as Marina Tsvetaeva (1892–1941), built so inventively out of Russian phonemes that each verbal unit literally explodes on the ear with a mass of lexical and rhythmic associations. Such effects can hardly be registered outside their native element. But some genres of poetry (longer narrative poems, ballads, and many types of verse satire) communicate powerfully in translation, and these will be selectively stitched in to the chapters that follow. Perhaps most important, the *lives* (and deaths) of poets – heroic, sacrificial, prophetic – are themselves texts of the utmost centrality to the Russian literary canon.

There is a final intriguing paradox. Michael Wachtel is surely correct that Russian poets cultivate a highly formal communal identity out of aural and rhythmic reminiscence. But prose writers seem to have cultivated the opposite, a form-breaking impulse. Several high-profile Russian writers celebrated their resistance to, if not downright defiance of, all the received forms or genres out of which Western literary canons were built. To cite only the most famous, Leo Tolstoy, writing in 1868 upon the conclusion of *War and Peace*: “the history of Russian literature since the time of Pushkin not merely affords many examples of deviation from European forms, but does not offer a single example of the contrary . . . In the recent period of Russian literature not a single artistic prose work rising at all above mediocrity quite fits into the form of a novel, epic, or story.”⁶ Because Ivan Turgenev wrote trim little novellas that resembled

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French and Italian prose classics, he was viewed with suspicion as a renegade, insufficiently disobedient and exotic to be truly Russian. The same charge was later leveled against his well-trained, formally disciplined, Western-friendly compatriot in music, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

Russian spokespersons for the canon have long been protective of its eccentric, high-risk, rebellious profile. The greatest writers seemed always to be in trouble with their regimes, and the worst regimes in turn felt threatened by writers. But a persecuted or martyred writer could be posthumously cleansed of ideological impurities and elevated to approved, even to cultic, status in a series of state-sponsored Jubilees. This happened massively with Pushkin (d. 1837) at the end of the nineteenth century, with Tolstoy (d. 1910) beginning with the centenary of his birth in 1928, and with the great Futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (d. 1930), glorified by Stalin's decree five years after he had committed suicide. A writer privileged to be part of this pantheon could be alternately repressed and sponsored, shoved into the limelight and just as suddenly yanked back into the shadows. One can only wonder, looking back at the process from a freer time, how much of that heroic story of literature's centrality to Russian culture was itself manipulated. How might Russian identity have developed without these violent enthusiasms and constraints?

Such thought experiments are sobering. For of the three major forces that disseminated literature and compensated writers – the ruling court (tsarist or communist), the aristocratic salon, and the bookseller's market – “royal patronage,” with its hectoring censorship and selective sponsorings, has probably done the most to foster the high-minded texts that we associate with the immortal Russian classics. But did the average Russian citizen in times of distress really recite poetry like a mantra? How many readers actually desired to change their lives, as those great novels (and novelists, and literary critics) constantly urged them to do? The story of the two-hundred-year rise of Russian literature became its own bestselling novel – although, some now suggest, largely among the elite groups invested in the story.

This hazard is inherent in discussions of any canon, but of the Russian more than most. Among the virtues of Jeffrey Brooks's path-breaking study *When Russia Learned to Read* (1985) is its conclusion that the majority of ordinary Russian consumers of literature in the latter half of the nineteenth century resembled our own sensation-seeking, escapist Western readerships far more closely than the morally saturated, often mournful high canon would lead us to believe.⁷ When, for example, adventure, crime, and detective fiction began to attract a mass Russian market in the 1890s and again in the 1920s, the cultural intelligentsia took fright: escape and thrills were not compatible with the mission of the Great Tradition. For all that this turf war raged over

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keenly valued goods, Russian “high” and “low” cultures were not isolated from each other. Plots, fads, and literary devices moved in both directions. Among the services rendered by recent scholarship is to remind us that most people, including great writers who live in authoritarian or “closed” regimes, have everyday lives and non-heroic appetites. The pull of pleasurable distraction interrupts the grimmest political threats as well as the temptations of tragedy and high significance. Pushkin, lofty persecuted poet, loved comic opera and formulaic verse comedy throughout his life. Sergei Prokofiev, repatriated to the USSR on the brink of the Great Terror, had long courted commissions (from Hollywood and elsewhere) for the frothiest film music. It was this rigid aspect of Russian reverence for its canonical writers and writings that began to loosen up in the 1980s, most frequently through affectionate irony, occasionally through abuse, but always with the sense (thrilling to some, terrible to others) that the stability of a massive and precious edifice was at stake.

Such, then, have been the major anxieties informing this project: the status of the “high” canon; the indispensability of the Russian language to it; and the self-mythologization of Russia’s literary tradition. For each anxiety, compromises were eventually found. Some parts of poetry survive admirably in translation, because form has many ways of making itself felt. It was my working assumption that the major literary works of a cultural tradition do submit to a technical treatment more rigorous and interesting than a paraphrase of plots, feelings, and ideas. Tools of analysis can be devised. Alongside the evolution of poetically analyzable structures – the ode, ballad, elegy, blank-verse lyric, revolutionary “stepladder verse” [*lesenka*] of Mayakovsky – one can also note a sturdy evolution of Russian prose from the middle of the eighteenth century to the present. These “prose units” are partly thematic and generic (prose comedy, travel notes, society tales, ghost stories, newspaper gossip columns, the naturalistic “sketch,” the factory novel) and partly a matter of authorial voice and intonation (satire, travesty, confession). Genres borrowed from Europe encountered a body of Russian traditional (pre-Enlightenment) plots that had long circulated in urban and rural areas, some native to their regions and some trickled in from the south and west: incantations to the powers of the earth, miracle tales, stories of ritual sacrifice, Jesuit school drama, adventure plots, all of which survived well into the modern period. Evolution of these Russianized hybrids occurred within a larger familiar framework of pan-European literary “periods” of which Russian writers were keenly aware, the sequence from Neoclassicism → Sentimentalism → Romanticism → Realism → Naturalism → Symbolism → Modernism → Postmodernism. Irregular pockets of the pious, the baroque, the grotesque, and the absurd interrupt this spectrum. At least one

movement (socialist realism) was deliberately designed to debunk, relativize, and humiliate European literary models.

Let me return in closing to the anxiety about “rudderless freedom” raised in the opening pages. Does Russia’s partially “normalized” post-communist literary life, which has greatly diminished the role and status of the creative writer, threaten the integrity of the tradition? Perturbations have been severe, but apocalypse is nowhere in sight. In-print verbal art continues to have splendid survival advantages, regardless of sinister twists in Kremlin politics and even in competition with today’s image-saturated, instantly accessible cybernetic world. To its immense good fortune, literature does not need the big budgets, collective efforts, or approved public spaces required to realize symphonic music, visual art exhibits, cinematic productions or large-scale architectural projects. Its more compact forms can be carried in the pocket, composed (and also carried) in the head. Heroic legends abound concerning this latter mode of survival under the most recent Old Regime. Nadezhda Mandelstam, widow of the great poet, committed her husband’s entire poetic corpus to memory “for safekeeping” during the Stalinist years, until it was no longer dangerous to write it down. Since literary texts are so very dispersed and so inefficiently, individually, privately processed, inertia tends to be huge. One can blow up an offensive monument but cannot gather up and burn all copies of a published novel. A state bureaucracy can ban a film or mutilate an opera, but it cannot prevent us from memorizing and mentally re-experiencing a poem in all its fullness.

And finally: unlike the progressive, falsifiable sciences or (at the other extreme) the capriciously marketed world of fashion, great literature does not date. It accumulates contexts rather than outgrows them, for literature is designed to speak to the current needs of the person who activates it. Who are these “activators”? Although today’s Russian school curriculum might no longer require *War and Peace* or Mikhail Sholokhov’s *The Quiet Don* – too many other texts compete, and time is in shorter supply – the great Russian novels continue to be read around the world with undiminished fervor.

With that fact in mind it is worth asking, in Milan Kundera’s spirit, whether a literature need belong to its own nation at all. Russian lovers of the word are of two minds on this issue, professing two ideals. In the first, that peculiar chauvinism exemplified by Dostoevsky, Russian literature is a common denominator for the world, yet only Russians are privileged to understand it. Fifteen years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, some leading Russian sociologists still see in the Russian national character a “negative identity” driven by self-deprecating exceptionalism, ennui, sentimentality, constant expectation of

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catastrophe, and an alarming xenophobia.⁸ It is indeed true that these character traits read like a home page for the darker sides of Dostoevsky's novels. But it is also true – and this is the second ideal – that Russian literature long ago slipped out from under the tutelage of the nation that produced it. Russian artists – in literature, theatre, dance, music, film – have inspired more disciples and “schools” around the world than any other single national culture. Since the early 1990s, a bit of that openness has been coming home.