The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Literature

Russian literature arrived late on the European scene. Within several generations, its great novelists had shocked – and then conquered – the world. In this introduction to the rich and vibrant Russian tradition, Caryl Emerson weaves a narrative of recurring themes and fascinations across several centuries. Beginning with traditional Russian narratives (saints’ lives, folk tales, epic and rogue narratives), the book moves through literary history chronologically and thematically, juxtaposing literary texts from each major period. Detailed attention is given to canonical writers including Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Bulgakov, and Solzhenitsyn, as well as to some current bestsellers from the post-communist period. Fully accessible to students and readers with no knowledge of Russian, the volume includes a glossary and pronunciation guide of key Russian terms and a list of useful secondary works. The book will be of great interest to students of Russian as well as of comparative literature.

Caryl Emerson is A. Watson Armour III Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Princeton University.
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For Nicholas,

wonderworker
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Sculpture of Aleksandr Pushkin in St. Petersburg
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Acknowledgments

This is a book for the advanced beginner. It is not presumed that the reader has taken any courses in Russian literature or history, nor studied the Russian language (although I do introduce a number of Russian words for which there are no precise cultural equivalents; these words are gathered in a glossary at the end). All works discussed exist in English translation and most enjoy considerable name recognition outside Russia. But the beginner is nevertheless not entirely a blank slate. Most readers, hopefully, will have read a story or seen a play by Chekhov and know something by Tolstoy (perhaps Anna Karenina) or Dostoevsky (Crime and Punishment, The Brothers Karamazov). If the name Solzhenitsyn is familiar at all, it sounds less dissident today, in Putin’s Russia, than it did in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union. The reader might have heard that Aleksandr Pushkin is their greatest, most perfect writer, but having come across a piece of his in translation, can’t figure out what all the fuss is about. (If Pushkin is appreciated, probably this is due to the famous operas built off his works: Modest Musorgsky’s setting of Pushkin’s play Boris Godunov, and two Tchaikovsky operas inspired by Pushkin’s texts: Eugene Onegin and The Queen of Spades.) Readers will most likely also know that Russians endured an absolutist autocracy until the early twentieth century; that the enserfed Russian peasantry was liberated around the same time that the North American states freed their black slaves; that a Bolshevik coup d’état took place in 1917; and that this communist regime fell apart in 1991. Further contexts are provided in brief timelines prefacing each chapter or along the way.

Because the book is for beginners, those professional colleagues who helped me by reading drafts, prodding out errors, and advising me on what to delete know a great deal more than the book’s target audience. And yet they kept their erudition in check, remembering that the purpose here is to introduce and seduce, not to resolve some scholarly debate. Of those who donated their page-by-page insights and services to this project I thank, above all, my Princeton colleagues Michael Wachtel (whose Cambridge Introduction to Russian Poetry, 2004, preceded this volume by several years), Olga Peters Hasty, Simon Morrison, Ksana Blank, Ellen Chances, Serguei Oushakine, and Petre Petrov.
Many hundreds of Princeton undergraduates in my literature courses over the past twenty years have helped me to see what texts did (and did not) speak to the curious, but still “common” reader. For scrutiny and scholarly feedback from outside the Princeton community, I am indebted to three of my most astute longstanding readers, Kathleen Parthé, Donna Tussing Orwin, and (in a class of her own as stylistic editor and critic) Josephine Woll, whose untimely death from cancer in March 2008 makes the imprint of her intelligence on these pages all the more precious.

Then there are my own teachers, in print as well as in person, whose traces are everywhere and edgeless: George Gibian, Sidney Monas, Victor Erlich, Robert Belknap, Michael Holquist, Robert Louis Jackson, Richard Taruskin, Donald Fanger, Joseph Frank.

In this as in other Cambridge University Press projects, Linda Bree has been the exemplary editor, ably assisted this time round by Maartje Scheltens, Elizabeth Davey, and Jacqueline French. At the final inch, which became a very demanding mile, Ivan Eubanks provided indispensable editorial, formatting, and research services. Jason Strudler helped me cut 23,000 words from the final draft without batting an eye.

Debts to my family this time round are deeper than ever. To my ever supportive and enabling husband Ivan Zaknic, my parents, and my siblings, the usual gratitude for accepting the fact that the wisdom and provocation of the Russian literary tradition has been my lodestar for as long as I can remember, obliging them to make allowance, decade after decade, for odd priorities and monumental blind spots. Special thanks are due to my father David Geppert, who is the sort of reader and interlocutor that most writers can only dream about, and to my sister Trisha Woollcott, certified nurse-midwife, who persisted in calling Nikolai Gogol “google” and whose no-nonsense diagnostic skills detected all manner of verbal obfuscation. To my grandnephew and godson Nicholas, born in 2004 and thus also a beginner, this volume is lovingly dedicated.