

Cambridge University Press

0521621798 - English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance

Rachel Polonsky

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

There are two directions in Russia . . . There are many cultures and what will be the encounter of Russian culture with European: will she return and go to the 'banya' to wash or will she put on a 'jacket' and go to the café-chantant (for what else can foreign culture give her?) I do not know.

Mikhail Kuzmin, Letter to Georgii Chicherin, c. 1902–3

'We Russians', Dostoevsky wrote in 1876, 'have two motherlands: our Rus, and Europe.' To Dostoevsky, the double nature of Russian culture gives it an unrivalled assimilativeness, a quality of receptivity that is unique:

Much of what we have taken from Europe and translated to our country has not merely been copied by us . . . but has been grafted into our organism, into our flesh and blood . . . every European poet, thinker and philanthropist is always most fully and intimately understood and accepted in Russia in all the countries of the world apart from his own . . . Shakespeare, Byron, Walter Scott and Dickens are dearer and more understandable to Russians than, for example, to Germans, although, of course, we have not one tenth of the number of translations of these writers that Germany [has] . . . This Russian attitude to world literature is a phenomenon almost unparalleled . . . among other nations throughout world history. [It] really is our national Russian peculiarity . . . every poet innovator of Europe, everyone who appears there with a new idea and a new source of strength, cannot fail immediately to become a Russian poet as well, cannot bypass Russian thought, cannot fail to become almost a Russian force . . .¹

Dostoevsky's 'We Russians' echoes the words of the first of Petr Chaadaev's *Letters on the Philosophy of History* (1829), a text which drew the cultural history of the Russian people into the punishing light of a philosophy of national historical development inherited from German Romanticism. Chaadaev had looked at the culture of his people and found that Russia had failed to form fruitful relationships

Cambridge University Press

0521621798 - English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance

Rachel Polonsky

Excerpt

[More information](#)

with other national cultures: 'we have absorbed none of mankind's ideas of traditional transmission', he lamented.²

The polemics between 'Slavophiles' and 'Westernizers' which preoccupied educated Russia in the middle decades of the nineteenth century took shape under the impetus of Chaadaev's letters which, as Aleksandr Herzen famously commented, 'rang out like a pistol shot in a dark night'³ when first published in 1836. Dostoevsky's celebration of the receptivity of Russian culture may be read as one of many replies to Chaadaev's plaint that 'we Russians, like illegitimate children, come to this world without patrimony'.⁴ To Chaadaev's accusation that Russian culture is 'based wholly on borrowing and imitation',⁵ Dostoevsky responds with rhetorical vehemence that what Russia has taken in has not been copied, but rather ingrafted 'into our flesh and blood'. As we shall see, considerations of Russia's receptivity to external influences have, since Chaadaev, characteristically been concerned with establishing the crucial distinction upon which Dostoevsky's case rests: between copying and grafting, between borrowing and assimilation.

Chaadaev had figured the development of a national culture as analogous with the development of the human personality: 'Peoples are moral beings in the same way as individuals are'.⁶ Relationships between nations are seen to be formative of national identity just as relationships between individuals are formative of personal identity. In this respect he is followed by the twentieth-century cultural theorist and semiotician Yuri Lotman, who understands cultural reception as a process which by its nature involves the kind of ingrafting for which Dostoevsky claims Russia has a special capacity. Attempting to provide a typology of cultural assimilation, Lotman proposes that in comparative literary study we do not ask how the influence of one text upon another becomes possible, but rather 'why and in what conditions does a "foreign" text become necessary for the creative development of "one's own"?'⁷ For Lotman, as for Chaadaev, the development of a culture parallels the development of a personality: 'contact with another "I" is an inescapable condition of the creative development of "my" consciousness'.⁸ Creative consciousness 'is always an act of communication, an exchange' between people, or peoples, in which the original communication is 'transformed by the receiver into something new'.⁹ The immanent and interactive dimensions of a culture (or a personality) are 'dialectically linked and interpenetrating sides of a single process', so

Cambridge University Press

0521621798 - English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance

Rachel Polonsky

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

that 'the immanent development of a culture cannot be realized without the continual flow of texts from outside',¹⁰ foreign texts arriving from other national cultural traditions.

This 'outside' has a complex organisation. Needing the 'other' for its own growth, a culture continually creates this 'other' out of its own inner depths.¹¹ The phenomenon 'the West', conceived as a unified cultural force external to Russia, is in one respect an 'ideal', an imaginative figment of Russian culture. This projected 'West' is not static, but always changing and culturally active, subject to its engagements with the real West. Lotman describes the tragic dynamic inherent in Russia's relationship with its projected 'other' which, as Osip Mandelstam noted, was always far 'denser and more concrete than the historical West itself':¹²

The controversy 'Russia' versus 'the West' generated the type of the Russian Westernizer [*zapadnik*]. This figure . . . fulfilled the role of 'representative' of the West. He was judged in relation to the general understanding of the West, and the West was judged in relation to the Westernizers. But the Russian Westernizer was very unlike the real man of the West of his epoch and, as a rule, knew the West very little: he constructed it by contrast with the Russian reality he observed. It was an ideal . . .¹³

In Lotman's theoretical observations about cultural reception, we find that the activity of the receiver comes to the fore in a fashion adumbrated by Dostoevsky in his description of Russia's receptivity. In comparative literary study of the kind invited by Dostoevsky's comments, attention inevitably falls on the receiver. That is, in asking those simple factual questions about cultural transmission which George Steiner identifies as fundamental to comparative literary study – 'Who read, who could read what and when?'¹⁴ – we direct our attention towards the reading activity of the receiver culture. For the German literary theorist Hans Robert Jauss, this critical focus on the activity of the receiver restores to literature 'a dimension that inalienably belongs to its aesthetic character as well as to its social function: the dimension of its reception and influence'.¹⁵ To Jauss, the 'dimension of [a work's] reception and influence' is crucial to an understanding of the historical life of that work. He claims that 'literary history' can exist as a fruitful area of intellectual inquiry only insofar as it takes account of the dialectical and dynamic process of literary reception:

Cambridge University Press

0521621798 - English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance

Rachel Polonsky

Excerpt

[More information](#)

For it is only through the process of its mediation that the work enters into the changing horizon-of-experience of a continuity in which the perpetual inversion occurs from simple reception to critical understanding, from passive to active reception, from recognized aesthetic norms to a new production that surpasses them. The historicity of literature as well as its communicative character presupposes a dialogical and at once processlike relationship between work, audience, and new work that can be conceived in the relations between message and receiver as well as between question and answer, problem and solution . . . If the history of literature is viewed in this way within the horizon of a dialogue between work and audience that forms a continuity, the opposition between its aesthetic and its historical aspects is also continually mediated.¹⁶

The ‘aesthetic of reception’ (*Rezeptionsästhetik*) formulated by Jauss is implicit in Dostoevsky’s metaphors of graft and blood. Between Dostoevsky and those twentieth-century critical theorists – Lotman and Jauss – who have drawn explicit attention to the dialogic nature of aesthetic experience and literary history lies the establishment of the tradition of comparative literary study, in which Russian intellectuals have fruitfully participated since its origins as an academic discipline in the 1880s. Perhaps because Russia has for centuries played the role of receiver-culture, the emphasis in Russian literary studies has often fallen on the activity of the receiver, leading those in the more theoretical branches of Russian critical thought to elaborate a rich conception of culture itself as an ongoing ‘dialogue’.

The Russian tradition of comparative literary study, which runs in wider channels of thought about the nature of Russian national identity, simultaneously participated in and commented upon the construction of Russia and ‘the West’ as two distinct but interactive cultural worlds. The discipline of literary-historical study in Russia was formed under the pressure of themes of national historical development which had been circulating in Russian letters since the publication of Chaadaev’s *Letters on the Philosophy of History*. The aesthetics of the poets and writers known as Symbolists and the complex ways in which they handled ideas about Russia’s past and her relationship with other cultures were, in their turn, shaped by the achievements and conceptual problems of comparative literary history. The Symbolists formed their teleologies and epistemologies, and many of their tastes, in response to those of the positivist literary historians who came before them.

The Russian aesthetic renaissance of the turn of the century was, as W. B. Yeats once said of the European Renaissance, ‘founded on

Cambridge University Press

0521621798 - English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance

Rachel Polonsky

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

. . . knowledge of some other self'. 'Newman defines culture as wise receptivity', Yeats writes. '[T]he culture of the Renaissance . . . seems to me founded . . . not on delicate sincerity but on imitative energy.'¹⁷ The Russian renaissance, which was manifest in all the arts and whose poetic aspect is the concern of this book, was to an extent generated by the concept, which emerged from nineteenth-century cultural theory, of a 'renaissance' as a historical moment of intense assimilativeness to foreign ideas and artistic forms. Heirs to an understanding, reinforced by scholarship, of foreign influence as a benevolent phenomenon in culture, the poets, writers, and artists of the turn of the century actively sought to be acted upon by foreign cultures. Operating powerfully in this period is an 'aesthetic of receptivity' which served to give rise to and animate this heady sense of cultural renaissance.

'A literary past can only return when a new reception draws it back into the present', Jauss comments on the phenomenon of cultural renaissance, 'an altered aesthetic attitude willfully reaches back to reappropriate the past, or an unexpected light falls back on forgotten literature from the new moment of literary evolution, allowing something to be found that one previously could not have sought in it.'¹⁸ Jauss's formulation corresponds almost exactly with various descriptions of renaissance circulating in Russia at the turn of the century, descriptions which themselves served to convince Russians in the creative sphere that they were participating in a renaissance, and which gave life and shape to many of their artistic projects. As I will demonstrate, conceptions of renaissance emanating from Victorian England played an important role in forming the Russian conception of cultural renaissance and in orienting the 'aesthetic attitude' of Russian writers towards the various forgotten pasts which they sought to reappropriate. I will thus reveal the dynamic of a double receptivity at work in the prevailing aesthetic attitude of the turn-of-the-century period: a renewed receptivity to foreign literatures which led to a receptivity towards a variety of rediscovered pasts, with Russia's own past among them.

In a cultural turn which echoes the effect of German Romanticism on Russian thought in the 1840s, interaction with European intellectual culture played an important role in the turn-of-the-century renaissance of Slavophilism. This rejuvenated Slavophilism took the form of the rediscovery of Russian folk culture by the most Europeanized artists and intellectuals as, in a strenuous poise, both 'self' and

Cambridge University Press

0521621798 - English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance

Rachel Polonsky

Excerpt

[More information](#)

‘other’, and an attempt to assimilate its ‘barbaric’ energies in their own art as a way of eluding, or transcending, the perceived problem of ‘history’ and bringing on ‘a new mythological age’ in which art would once again belong to the people.

In this study, which is itself comparative, I seek to describe the place of comparative literary history within the particular historical and aesthetic consciousness that formed the ‘horizon of expectation’ of Russian readers of English literature at the turn of the century. In situating the reception of English literature in Russia in this period within the context of the emerging discipline of comparative literary study, I inevitably make use of many of the methodological practices whose origins and assumptions I seek to describe and to place historically.

This study of the role of literary history in the formation of a vital conception of cultural renaissance forms the prelude to an account of the Russian reception of a number of English-speaking writers whose role in Russian literary culture has hitherto been largely obscured by more immediately apparent French and German influences.¹⁹ In the various Russian readings of Shelley, Poe, Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelites, Pater and Wilde, we find, in keeping with Lotman’s typology of cultural interaction, that these writers answer immanent needs in Russian culture, and become partners in Russian aesthetic dialogues. These foreign writers are placed in a Russian frame; they are read *through* Russia, and Russia in turn is read through them.

The English-speaking writers whose reception I study were posthumously called by their Russian readers to participate in speculation and argument on general cultural and aesthetic matters. Some of these, such as the nature of the task of translation, and the distinction between genuine assimilation and mere imitation, are related to the emerging aesthetics of literary reception. Russian anxieties about the rise of mass culture and the democratization of art were negotiated with reference to Ruskin, Morris, Pater and Wilde, whose popularity with a wide reading public gave rise to the very concerns that their writings purported to address, engendering many paradoxes. These anxieties are often expressed in questions about imitativeness and originality, and thus converge with questions of translation and influence.

For their Russian readers, preoccupied with the theme of cultural rebirth, English-speaking writers mediate other times and places:

Cambridge University Press

0521621798 - English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance

Rachel Polonsky

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

ideal places, artificial pasts. Shelley becomes a filter through which mythic and hymnic genres of the ancient East are assimilated into Russian poetry. Ruskin, Pater, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti mediated to Russia a transformative vision of the Italian Renaissance which provided a frame for thought about the relationship between beauty and utility in art. An attempt to discard the burden of the politically charged tradition of Russian aesthetic discourse appears in the Russian adoption of both Pater's conception of critical appreciation and the dandyism of Wilde and Beardsley, forming part of the regeneration of an aesthetics of taste and style patterned on a playful nostalgia for late eighteenth-century Rococo. At the same time, English-speaking scholars such as Max Müller and J. G. Frazer were drawn as interlocutors into Russian speculations on the origins of poetry, its relationship with religion, and its place in culture. Here, where the comparative mode of inquiry dominates, the boundaries between the discourses of aesthetics and ethnography are often indistinct.

The agents of cultural mediation and transmission are individuals, often secondary figures: obscure translators, academics and publishers. In this account of how Russian readers came to and understood English writers, they often occupy centre stage. For into the lives of these men and women were tangled the destinies of literary texts and tastes. Many of these active receivers conform to Lotman's delicate characterization of the Russian 'Westernizers'. Often we see them in contrasting lights: at one moment the awkward outsider abroad, struggling with the foreign; at another, bearing home to a reverent Russian audience the intangible aura of the 'West'. For while Western Europe was still a pilgrim's destination for educated Russians, Russia retained its character for Western visitors as a wild, exotic, and primitive cultural outpost.

At the turn of the century the artistic and academic worlds closely overlapped. Scholarship was one area of cultural activity which had by this time become genuinely internationalized. Russian scholars in the later decades of the nineteenth century were, in a quiet but culturally significant way, welding themselves into an international community of learning. For their part, many of the creative writers of the turn of the century saw themselves, and wished to be seen, as members of an international community of the arts. Personal friendships, conducted by letter and sometimes enhanced or disrupted by the occasional foreign visit, embody the mutual desire for knowledge

Cambridge University Press

0521621798 - English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance

Rachel Polonsky

Excerpt

[More information](#)

of the other in English and Russian scholarly and literary cultures. There are numerous examples of productive friendships between English and Russian scholars and writers which change the course of literary history. The long-standing association between the essayist and translator Zinaida Vengerova and her English counterpart Constance Garnett had a significant impact on both their cultures. Likewise, the collaboration between Oscar Wilde's literary executor Robert Ross and the translator Mikhail Likiardopulo played an important role in the shaping of Wilde's Russian reputation. The encounters between the English Slavonicist William Morfill, the Symbolist poet Konstantin Balmont, and the Russian folklorist and literary critic Evgeny Anichkov turn out to have wide cultural consequences which can be traced with a high degree of clarity. Diary entries and bemused letters home often testify to the tragicomic dynamic in Russia's relationship with England, revealing misunderstandings, recording English reactions to the transformations which Russia effects on English texts, including what Lotman calls 'behavioural texts': ways of talking, dressing and living which in turn-of-the-century Russia were often patterned on English models.

The aim of this study is not an exhaustive cataloguing of all the possible English sources for Russian writings in the Symbolist years. There is no discussion here, for example, of Balmont's readings of William Blake, of Akhmatova's fondness for Keats, Gumilev's interest in Kipling, or Nabokov's debt to Poe . . . Such a feat of source-study would run the risk of losing the wood for the trees, of obscuring with detail the contours of the intellectual culture of the turn of the century which shaped and were shaped by Russian readings of English literature, that particular cultural-historical 'horizon of expectation' which made possible this complex process of reception. There are traces of these readings in many places, loose threads which when drawn together into a coherent pattern secure the place of the poets of this vibrant moment in Russia's literary history within the community of European and American creative readers. A consideration of English writers in the context of their Russian reception not only illuminates new areas on the Russian horizon but also reveals a neglected dimension of the dynamic historical life of English literature. By adopting a comparative approach we can account for some of the remarkable convergences between the English literary tradition and Russian poetry and aesthetic thinking in this exceptionally creative period.

Cambridge University Press

0521621798 - English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance

Rachel Polonsky

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

Museum people

Hurrah for positive science! long live exact demonstration!
 . . . This is the lexicographer, this the chemist, this made a
 grammar of the old cartouches,
 These mariners put the ship through dangerous unknown seas,
 This is the geologist, this works with the scalpel, and this is a
 mathematician.

Gentlemen, to you first honours always!
 Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling,
 I but enter by them to an area of my dwelling.
 Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself'

FATHERS AND SONS: COMPARATIVE LITERATURE
 AND SYMBOLISM

'Modern European science . . . wrung its own neck.'¹ At a certain moment in its history, historical science seemed to have failed culture. 'The diffuseness, the non-architectonic character of nineteenth-century European scientific thought at the beginning of the present century has completely demoralized scientific thought', Mandelstam declared in 1922.² 'The active mind, which is not just knowledge nor a collection of bits of knowledge, but is rather an instrument, a means of grasping knowledge, has abandoned science, seeing that it can exist independently and find nourishment wherever it likes.'³ The cultural process that Mandelstam describes was a family drama in turn-of-the-century Russia. In his memoirs, *On the Boundary of Two Centuries* (*Na rubezhe drukh stoletii*), the poet Andrei Bely describes the domestic topography of the aesthetic shift that marked the end of the nineteenth century. As far as the multifarious group of writers known as Symbolists was concerned, this was the end of the age of faith in the institutions and achievements of

Cambridge University Press

0521621798 - English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance

Rachel Polonsky

Excerpt

[More information](#)

scientific culture. The moment when ‘man’s liberated mind divorced itself from science’⁴ was, in Bely’s account, not so much a suicide as a parricide. The generation which had come of age intellectually in the 1860s looked on as their children and grandchildren rejected in the name of a new aesthetics the positivist ideas which had motivated their lives’ work.⁵ This cultural transition is starkly apparent in the divergence of attitudes towards history and the concept of historical progress between the older and younger generations of the urban artistic and academic elites – Russia’s ‘dynastic intellectuals’ as they have been called.⁶

Though they discarded the positivist conception of historical development – a conception which underpinned much of the scholarly activity of nineteenth-century Russia’s greatest academics – the Symbolist generation developed its own aesthetics using materials that these scholars had brought to light. The first part of this chapter identifies those areas of breach and continuity between nineteenth-century positivist literary history and Symbolist aesthetics which bear on questions of cultural reception. Symbolist attitudes towards cultural reception, of both the past and the foreign, were formed out of a transformation of positivist attitudes which none the less retained many of the achievements of positivist scientific endeavour. The Symbolist attitude towards cultural receptivity was born out of a breach in historical understanding which moved the ground under academic science, leaving some parts of its edifice standing but with their contingency exposed and their objectivist claims suspended.

‘There appeared a *raffiné* artistic aristocracy’, writes one commentator describing the prominent participants in the lush and sudden flowering of the fine arts, music, and poetry in the early twentieth century: ‘They were mainly the children of scholars, professors, philosophers, artists, theatrical performers – for the most part highly educated people. As often as not they had graduated from two faculties, they had all received their training in departments of philology and so on.’⁷ Bely, the son of an eminent mathematician, had spent his childhood in the august company of the Moscow professoriate: economists, philologists, linguists, literary historians, all members of the progressive, Westernizing, liberal intelligentsia. The list of occupants in the apartment building on the corner of the Arbat in which he was raised reads like a list of the contributors to