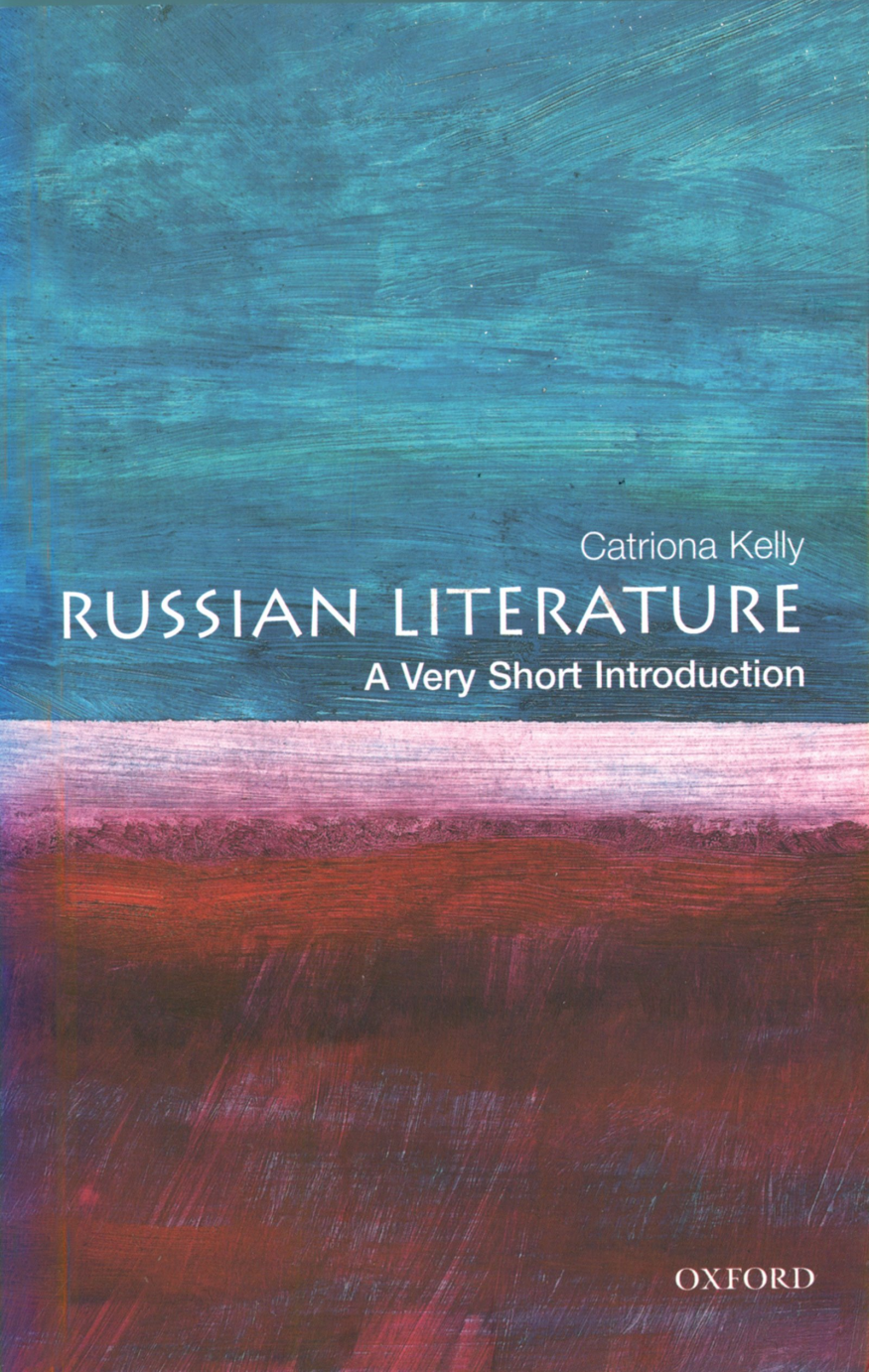
Catriona Kelly
RUSSIAN LITERATURE
A Very Short Introduction
OXFORD

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 outine 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 *Archaists 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

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

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.

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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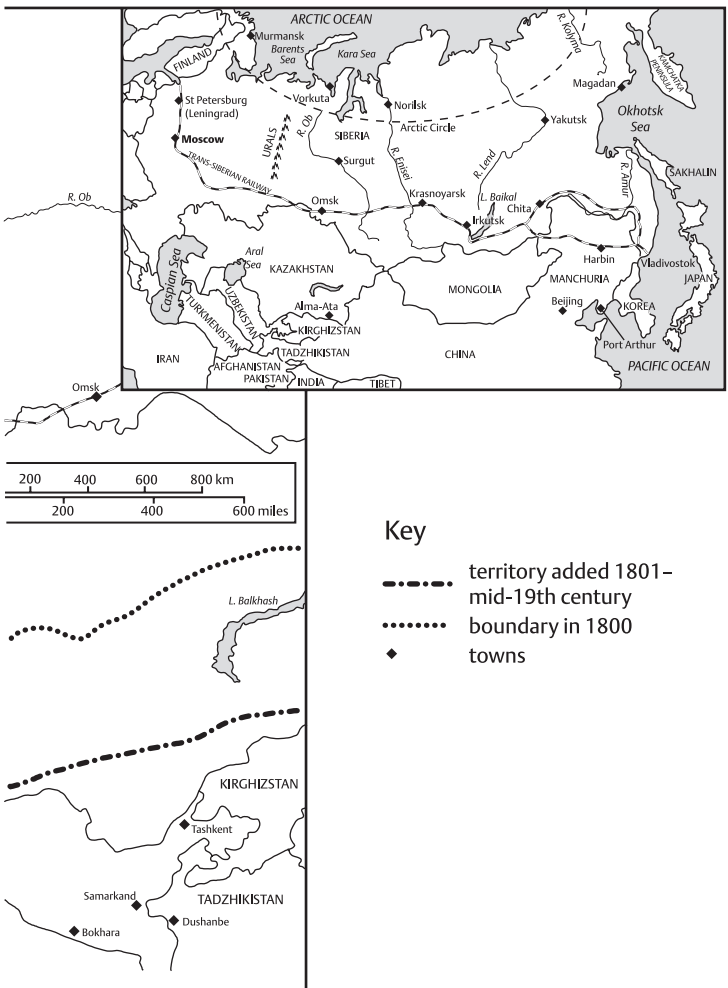
ARCTIC OCEAN
Murmansk
Barents Sea
Kara Sea
FINLAND
St Petersburg (Leningrad)
Moscow
Vorkuta
Norilsk
Arctic Circle
Yakutsk
Magadan
Okhotsk Sea
R. Kolyma
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URALS
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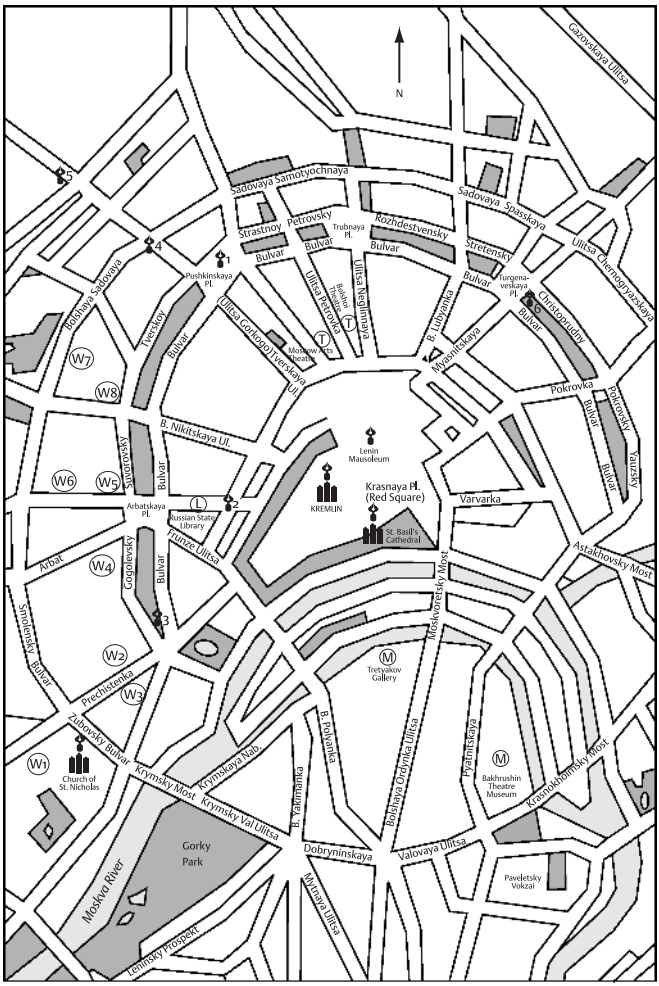
Port Arthur
IRAN
TADZHIKISTAN
CHINA
PACIFIC OCEAN
AFGHANISTAN
PAKISTAN
INDIA
TIBET
Omsk
200 400 600 800 km
200 400 600 miles
L. Balkhash
KIRGHIZSTAN
Tashkent
Samarkand
TADZHIKISTAN
Dushanbe
Bokhara
Key
territory added 1801–mid-19th century
boundary in 1800
towns



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

Key

Ⓜ Museums

Ⓣ Theatres

Ⓛ Libraries

 Churches

Ⓦ Writer's museums

Ⓦ1 L. Tolstoy museum ('Tolstoy house')
Ⓦ2 Pushkin museum
Ⓦ3 L. Tolstoy museum
Ⓦ4 Hertsen (memorial house)
Ⓦ5 Gogol
Ⓦ6 Tsvetaeva (memorial apartment)
Ⓦ7 Chekhov (memorial house)
Ⓦ8 Gorky

Monuments

1 Pushkin (1880)
2 Dostoevsky (1981)
3 Gogol (1909/1952)
4 Mayakovsky (1958)
5 Gorky (1951)
6 Bulgakov (1991)

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