

# A History of RUSSIAN LITERATURE

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## EDITOR'S GENERAL INTRODUCTION

THE vast progress made in all departments of literary scholarship, and the minuteness with which knowledge is now subdivided, threaten to leave the general reader bewildered at the diversity and bulk of what is presented to him. The exact historian of literature concentrates his attention on so narrow a field that he cannot be expected to appeal to a wide class; those who study what he writes are, or must in some measure grow to be, his fellow-specialists. But the more precisely each little area is surveyed in detail, the more necessary does it become for us to return at frequent intervals to an inspection of the general scheme of which each topographical study is but a fragment magnified. It has seemed that of late the minute treatment of a multitude of intellectual phenomena has a little tended to obscure the general movement of literature in each race or country. In a crowd of handbooks, each of high authority in itself, the general trend of influence or thread of evolution may be lost.

The absence of any collection of summaries of the literature of the world has led the Publisher and the Editor of the present series to believe that a succession of attractive volumes, dealing each with the history of

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literature in a single country, would be not less welcome than novel. The Editor has had the good fortune to interest in this project a number of scholars whose names guarantee a rare combination of exact knowledge with the power of graceful composition. He has the pleasure of being able to announce that this interest has taken a practical shape, and that already there is being prepared for the press a considerable series of volumes, most of them composed by men pre-eminently recognised for their competence in each special branch of the subject. If there are one or two names less generally familiar to the public than the rest, the Editor confidently predicts that the perusal of their volumes will more than justify his invitation to them to contribute. Great care will be taken to preserve uniformity of form and disposition, so as to make the volumes convenient for purposes of comparison, and so as to enable the literatures themselves to be studied in proper correlation.

In preparing these books, the first aim will be to make them exactly consistent with all the latest discoveries of fact; and the second, to ensure that they are agreeable to read. It is hoped that they will be accurate enough to be used in the class-room, and yet pleasant enough and picturesque enough to be studied by those who seek nothing from their books but enjoyment. An effort will be made to recall the history of literature from the company of sciences which have somewhat unduly borne her down—from philology, in particular, and from political history. These have their interesting and valuable influence upon literature, but she is independent of them, and is strong enough to be self-reliant.

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Hence, important as are the linguistic origins of each literature, and delightful as it may be to linger over the birth of language, little notice will here be taken of what are purely philological curiosities. We shall tread the ground rapidly until we reach the point where the infant language begins to be employed in saying something characteristic and eloquent. On the other hand, a great point will be made, it is hoped, by dwelling on the actions, the counter-influences, of literatures on one another in the course of their evolution, and by noting what appear to be the causes which have led to a revival here and to a decline there. In short, we shall neglect no indication of change or development in an adult literature, and our endeavour will be to make each volume a well-proportioned biography of the intellectual life of a race, treated as a single entity. Literature will be interpreted as the most perfect utterance of the ripest thought by the finest minds, and to the classics of each country rather than to its oddities and rather than to its obsolete features will particular attention be directed.

EDMUND GOSSE.

## P R E F A C E

IN the year 1834 the great Biéliniski, on his maiden appearance as a literary critic, bestowed the following epigraph, borrowed from one of his fellow-critics, Senkowski, on his first essay :—

“Do we possess a literature?”

“No, we have nothing but a book-trade!”

Eighteen months later, he began to publish a half-yearly Review under this somewhat confusing title,—*Nothings about Nothing*.

Hence we may conceive what the country of Pouchkine, of Gogol, of Tourguéniev, and of Tolstoi has gained by the labour of the past half-century.

For this labour has not confined itself to the amassing of a treasure-house of conceptions, exquisite or stately. It has endowed the nation that conceived them, and Biéliniski himself as well, with the conscious possession of a national genius, the anterior manifestations of which had escaped appreciation, because they had been judged from the æsthetic point of view only, and not from that historical standpoint which alone befitted them. In Russia, more even than elsewhere, the theory of evolution, applied by Taine—in how brilliant a manner we all know—to English literature, remains the only one whereby the sense of a literary develop-

ment which, during the march of history, has experienced such strange checks and forward impulses, can be efficiently revealed. The volume of the literary patrimony of Russia, increasing in proportion to the political fortunes of the country, attracted first the curiosity, and presently the admiration, of Western Europe.

It is a far cry, now, to the days when Sir John Bowring's articles in the *Foreign Quarterly Review* came as a revelation. But the notoriety then so rapidly acquired is still unfairly apportioned. The works of Krylov have been translated into twenty-one languages. Those of Pouchkine still await a worthy translator, both in England, in France, and in Germany. Such authors as Lermontov and Chtchédrine are practically unknown to foreign readers.

These special circumstances have dictated the plan of my work. I have thought it right to avoid excessive generalisation. Russian literature has not yet acquired, in the eyes of the European public, that remoteness which would permit of my summing it up in certain given works and salient figures. I have likewise felt unable to avoid a certain amount of detail. It is not possible to speak to English readers of a Eugène Oniéguine, as I should speak to them of Hamlet. My Russian readers, if such there be, will doubtless reproach me with having paid too scant attention to some one or other of their favourite authors. My excuse is, that even in such a book as this, I have not chosen to speak of anything save that which I personally know, and am capable of judging.

I expect to elicit yet other reproaches, in this direction. The form assumed, in the lapse of time, by such personages as Hamlet or Eugène Oniégue, is the two-fold outcome of an original individual conception, and of a subsequent and collective process. These, first superposed, become inter-pervading, and end, to the popular imagination, in complete fusion. This collaborative process, the secret and existence of which escape the notice of the great majority, constitutes a great difficulty for a writer addressing a public other than that in the midst of which the types he evokes have sprung into being. Try to forget all that the lapse of years, and the action of endless commentaries, the ingenuity, the tenderness, the worship of millions of readers, have added and altered, in such a figure as that of Gretchen. You will see how much of the original remains, and you will realise my difficulty in speaking to my readers of Tatiana, if by chance (and it is a very likely chance) the character of Tatiana be unknown to them. I dare not venture to flatter myself I have completely overcome this difficulty.

Further, I do not close my eyes to my own deficiencies as an interpreter between two worlds, in each of which I myself am half a stranger. While other qualifications for the part may fail me, I bring to it, I hope, a freshness of impression, and an independence of judgment, which may, to a certain extent, justify the Editor of this series in the selection with which he has been good enough to honour me.

Will Mr. Gosse allow me to associate with him, in

this expression of my gratitude, those Russian friends who have helped me towards the accomplishment of my undertaking,—among them MM. Oniéguine and Chtchoukine, to whom a double share of thanks is due. Their knowledge and their courtesy have proved as inexhaustible as their libraries, which rank among the wonders of this fair city of Paris, where they have fixed their home, and where I myself have been so happy as to be able to write this book.

K. WALISZEWSKI.

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# A HISTORY OF RUSSIAN LITERATURE

## INTRODUCTION

THE Slavs, like the Latins, the Celts, and the Germans, belong to the Aryan or Indo-European race. Oppressed for many years by the Western peoples, which drew the word *slave* from the appellation "Slav," scorned by their German neighbours, who would not regard their race in any other light but that of "ethnological matter" (*ethnologischer Stoff*), they probably owed their inferiority solely to their geographical position. Modern civilisation, like that of the ancients, built itself up almost independently of the Slavs. Yet they have raised their protest against a too absolute decree of exclusion, and they have right on their side. The Slav nation did not, indeed, hollow out the channels of the double movement, intellectual or religious, Renaissance and Reform, from which the modern era issued, but it opened them in two directions. Copernicus and John Huss were both Slavs.

The Slav race, the latest comer into the world of civilisation, has always been at school, always under some rod or sway. Whether it be the Oriental and material conquest of the thirteenth century, or the Western and moral one of the eighteenth, it merely undergoes a change of masters. Thus the evolution of the

individuality of the race was no easy matter. Modern Russia still labours at the task, and it has other work to do as well. Modern Russia is an empire a thousand years old, and a colony, the age of which is not, indeed, as has been asserted, that of one hundred and fifty years, but of four centuries precisely. And the colonists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, who recommenced, in the neighbourhood of Perm and towards the Upper Kama, the interrupted work of the old Novgorod merchants, have made but little relative progress. Odessa, with its 405,000 inhabitants, dates from 1794.

Between the Novgorod merchants and their sixteenth-century successors came the Mongol invasion. This does not suffice to explain the prolonged check in the organic development of the huge body which it left in life. Previously, indeed, gaps, periodic suppressions of growth and evolution, had been manifest, and they were repeated after the disappearance of this particular cause. They would seem to be the result of some constitutional vice, connected as much with race and climate as with the course of historical events. Under these inclement skies, history appears to have brought about an accidental mingling of elements, the ill-controlled action of which, when they chanced to harmonise, gave birth to violent outbreaks of energy, while, when they disagreed, the result became apparent in sudden stoppages of progress. The outcome has something of the American in it, and yet something of the Turkish. Thanks to its geographical situation betwixt Europe and Asia, thanks to its historical position betwixt a series of anvils, whereon the Byzantine priest, the Tartar soldier, and the German free-lance have taken turns to hammer out its genius, Russia, young and old at once, has not yet found its

orbit nor its true balance. Here we see a waste ; there extreme refinement. Men have called it rotten ere it was ripe. But that must not be said. Prematurely ripe on one side, indeed, with a distracting medley of savage instincts and ideal aspirations, of intellectual riches and moral penury. But Nature must be given time to perfect her own work.

There is much for her to do. The mixture of races, and their struggles against hostile conditions of existence, against the climate, against foreign invasion, have called another problem into existence. How to fuse into one amalgam such contradictory elements as strength and weakness, tenacity and elasticity, ruggedness and good-nature, insensibility and kindness. The perpetual struggle which has tempered and hardened the Russian to his inmost soul has rendered him singularly susceptible to external emotions. He knows—no man better—how to suffer. No man knows better than he what suffering costs ; and this makes him compassionate. Under an exterior that is often coarse enough you may find a man of infinite tenderness. But press him not too far. Count not too much upon him. He is prone to terrible revulsions !

The same causes have developed his practical inclinations. In his case—in art as in life—realism is no theory ; it is the application of natural instincts. Even in poetry and in religion the Russian has a horror of abstractions. No metaphysical spirit, no sentimentality whatsoever ; great resourcefulness, perfect tact as regards both men and matters, and in all his ideas, his habits, and his literature, a positivism carried to the point of brutality. This, in brief, appears to me to be Russian psychology. But to all this, and from the same causes

always, is linked a marked proneness to melancholy. "Sadness, scepticism, irony," said Herzen, "are the three strings of Russian literature." He added, "Our laugh is but a sickly sneer!" Some weep; some dream. In these last, their melancholy inclines them to a hazy mysticism, which either triumphs over the realistic instincts, or else allies itself with them in strangest union. Of such a union Dostoevski was the product.

Finally, we must inquire of the climate, of the race, and of its history, wherefore this Russian, who is a conceiver of ideas, a realiser of artistic forms, should be possessed of scant originality in his methods of thought, while showing much in his methods of translating the thoughts of others, in his sentiments, his tastes, his gestures. In such matters, indeed, his originality reaches the point of oddity, and goes beyond it, even as far as that indigenous *samodourstvo* which, in certain of its forms, borders closely on madness. This, again, is natural, because psychological development has degrees of its own, and the emotional faculties are here naturally on a lower plane.

To sum it up. A people and a literature standing apart; geographically, ethnographically, historically, outside the Western European community. No doubt the three great elements of Western civilisation, the Christian, the Græco-Norman, and the German, are to be found at the base of this eccentric formation, but in very different proportion, combination, and depth. Both the nation and its literature have, indeed, alike received the triple baptism which freed Russia from all the primitive barbarisms—the apostolate of Cyril and Methodius, the Varegian conquest, the Byzantine civilisation. But the hold of the conquerors, whether of Norman or of German

origin, was weak and transient ; so weak and so transient, indeed, that their very origin is now disputed. Cyril and Methodius bore with them the germ of the Eastern Schism, and by that schism, as well as by the influence of Byzantium, Russia was actually cut off from the Western European world, and isolated in a solitude which was to endure for centuries. From the Crusades down to the Revolution, she bore no part in any of the manifestations of European life. She slumbered on, hard by.

All this will be recognised by my readers in the literature we are about to study together. Somewhat of it is evident even in the language used by Dostoevski and Tolstoy. A wondrous instrument it is, the most melodious, certainly, in the Slavonic circle, one of the most melodious in the universe ; flexible, sonorous, graceful, lending itself to every tone and every style, simple or elegant at will, subtle and refined, energetic, picturesque. In its diversity of form and construction, partly due to its frequent inversions, it resembles the classic languages and German. Its power of embodying a whole figure in one word marks its kinship with the Oriental tongues. The extreme variability of the tonic accent, which lends itself to every rhythmic combination, a markedly intuitive character, and a wonderful plasticity, combine to form a language unrivalled, perhaps, in its poetic qualities. But the instrument was made but yesterday. There are gaps in it ; some parts are borrowed ; we find discords here and there which the centuries have not yet had time to fill, to harmonise, to resolve. This tongue finds soft and caressing words even for those things which partake the least of such a character. *Voïna* stands for war ;



*voïne* for the warrior. But should the warrior be called to defend his country, threatened by an invader, he becomes *Khrabryĩ, Zachtchichtchaïouchtchyĩ!* Can we not hear the hoarse whistling yell of the barbarians?

This language is the offspring, too, of Peter the Great and the Reform. Later on I shall speak of its origin. In its alphabet we recognise perverted forms of both Greek and Roman letters, and others of strange appearance, which neither these two classic alphabets nor that of the German tongue possess; and a residuum, also perverted, from the ancient liturgic or *Cyrillic* Slav alphabet—the Tower of Babel, never-ending.

Modern Russian belongs to the Oriental family of the Slavonic languages; but of all these languages it is the one which contains the greatest number of elements pertaining to other families. Thus the vowel *a*, specially characteristic of the Finnish tongue, has replaced, in many words, the primitive *o* of the Slavonic roots. The Tartar invasion has left its impress both on words and on the construction of sentences. In the department of science, the German invader has won a decided victory; and Dobrolioubov, the great critic of the “fifties,” was able to say, and without undue exaggeration, that the literary language of his country had nothing Russian about it.

But the Russian tongue it is; and being also the language of a colonising nation, it admits of no divergence nor any provincial corruption. There is hardly any *patois* in the country. But it is a new language, without any deep root in the country’s history, and the literature of which it is the organ is likewise new, and devoid of historic depth. Hence, apart even from the manifold

causes already enumerated, we have an alternation of periods of rich and rapid expansion with others of the sterility born of exhaustion. Of this fact we shall see clear evidence. Hence also a predisposition to new formulæ, and to the wiping out of the old ones, to thorough-going radicalism in things literary, to haughty scorn of all traditions and conventions, and even of propriety.



## CHAPTER I

### THE EPIC AGE

#### POPULAR POETRY

IN Russia the epic age was prolonged up to the threshold of the present century. The heroic legend of Platov and his Cossacks pursuing the retreat of the hated *Khrantzouz* (Frenchman) is still in the mouth of the popular bard, the strings of whose rustic lyre yet ring in certain remote corners of the country, in defiance of Pouchkine and his followers. This phenomenon is natural enough. From the point of view of literary evolution, five or six centuries lie between Russia and the other countries possessed of European culture. At the period when Duns Scotus, William of Wykeham, and Roger Bacon were barring the West with that streak of light whereat such men as Columbus, Descartes, Galileo, and Newton were soon to kindle their torches, Russia still lay wrapped in darkness. An explanation of this long-continued gloom has been sought even among the skulls lately unearthed in the neighbourhood of Moscow. These appear to have revealed that, in the primitive inhabitants of that country, the sensual elements were so excessively developed as to exclude the rest.

The Tartar conquest of the thirteenth century should be a much more trustworthy event on which to reckon, in this connection. It destroyed the budding civilisation