

Preface

How does the marginal become mainstream? And how does the *recherché* become *démodé*? These questions run through the chapters of this book like a red thread, structuring its arguments and provoking the reader to examine some familiar names and some familiar works, as well as a host of more unusual and overlooked material. And they are pertinent and productive questions, too, because they point to the dizzying rapidity with which Russian culture became known (if not always understood) in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain, as well as the way in which that culture soon became reduced to cliché and myth. Said and Bourdieu structure the argument, as announced in the book's title, but their work is never read reductively. Said's 'Orientalism' is the explicit productive of 'Orientalists', writers and critics keen to paint a picture of Russia as barbaric and 'other'. And Bourdieu's 'literary field' (a concept that has proved as productive as that of 'cultural capital') is one that is populated by agents and actors who are conscious of their choices, if not always of their expertise (or lack thereof). In many ways, however, the ideas presented here are already implicit in Russian culture itself, which has long been aware of both its belatedness and its precocity, and how these seemingly contradictory features structure its relationship with the rest of the world. In his famous *Lettres philosophiques*, written (in French, no less) in the late 1820s and early 1830s, Pyotr Chaadaev announced both Russia's lack of history and its negligible contribution to world culture: 'Alone in the world, we have given it nothing, we have taught it nothing; we have added not a single idea to the multitude of man's ideas; we have contributed nothing to the progress of the human mind and we have disfigured everything we have gained from this process.' Alexander Herzen described Chaadaev's writings as 'a shot that rang out in the dark night', and indeed the mid-century saw a remarkable oscillation between those who defended Russia's place in Europe, and those who sought to situate its riches elsewhere. The idea that self-definition was the product of a dialogue was, moreover, implicit

in Herzen's writings, and in words that might have served – in inverted form – as an alternative subtitle to this volume, he claimed that 'we need Europe as an ideal, as a reproach, as a virtuous example; if Europe were not these things, then we should have to invent it.' Both Chaadaev and Herzen might have been surprised to see their diagnoses wholly inverted by the *fin de siècle*, when it was Russia that found itself playing the role of the West's own subconscious, unruly and disruptive, yet also libidinal and highly creative. The interplay between stasis and regeneration, ossification and renewal is also central to the work of the Russian formalists, whose revolutionary ideas on literary theory and history were coterminous with Freud's archaeology of the mind. The language and metaphors employed by the formalists bespeak rupture and revolution. Not for them a direct and unbroken lineage of literary development, but a series of 'knight's moves', of quasi-Oedipal rejections of paternal influence, and the search for alternative genealogies, whether in the form of marginal genres, unfamiliar cultures, or inventive new devices that disrupt the hold of the past over the values of the present. Yet as the formalists were only too aware, one generation's radical innovation becomes the next generation's ossified platitude, and their model of artistic evolution is one that can be applied to patterns of transcultural reception too. The seeming ubiquity of Russian culture in early twentieth-century Britain was an enterprise (and the word is advisedly chosen for its economic associations) that carried with it a highly durable form of canonisation that has proved hard to overcome. Between October 2016 and February 2017, the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris staged an exhibition – *Icons of Modern Art* – which reunited the collection of the merchant and patron, Sergei Shchukin. The exhibition attests, of course, to Shchukin's farsightedness (as well as his financial ease), but equally, it shows how the once radical inventive has become part of the cultural heritage of the *homme moyen culturel*. Or consider the incorporation of the scores of Stravinsky, the choreographies of Balanchine, Fokine and Nijinsky, and the designs of Bakst and Benois into the repertoire of the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg, at once effacing both the Soviet *avant garde* and the legacy of socialist realism, and projecting a continuous tradition that runs from Marius Petipa to the present day, as well as a Russian version of Diaghilev's carefully marketed global brand. So how

are we to regain a sense of the dynamism that first brought Russian culture to Britain, and create a modern version of the processes described by Olga Soboleva and Angus Wrenn? It may be that Russian culture has an answer. Writing in the wake of the October Revolution, and anxious that the orthodoxy of one age would simply be replaced by conventions of a new one, the Soviet writer and essayist Evgeny Zamyatin proposed a model of permanent and dialectical revolution in which heresy was the guarantee of artistic originality: 'Today is doomed to die, because yesterday has died and because tomorrow shall be born. Such is the cruel and wise law. Cruel, because it dooms to eternal dissatisfaction those who today already see the distant heights of tomorrow; wise, because only eternal dissatisfaction is the guarantee of unending movement forward, of unending creativity.' We may read *From Orientalism to Cultural Capital: The Myth of Russia in British Literature of the 1920s* as an analytical account of a historical phenomenon, yet the dynamic model of literary reception and cultural appropriation that it proposes is one that remains acutely contemporary.

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