There are many ironies in the history of Russian literature. In chronological terms alone, it is as impressive as any world literature. With a thousand-year heritage, it is almost as old as the Russian state itself. Until the middle of the eighteenth century, however, Russian literature had produced very few works of perennial value. Indeed, what the world recognizes as great Russian literature has been in existence for no more than two hundred years: roughly as long as the United States of America.

The two indisputable Russian literary masterpieces produced before the eighteenth century—the anonymous twelfth-century heroic epic The Lay of the Host of Igor and the seventeenth-century autobiography of the fiery schismatic Archpriest Awakum—exercised no influence on the literatures of Europe and remained unknown even among the neighboring Slavs. One example will dramatize the extent of the country’s self-imposed cultural isolation. While Western Europe saw thirty thousand secular titles published in the fifty years following the invention of book printing by Johannes Gutenberg in 1455, only seven secular titles were printed in Russia over the course of the entire seventeenth century: two grammars, handbooks on arithmetic, geometry,
artillery, and military tactics, and the Codex of the Tsar Alexey Mikhailovich. In its near total disengagement from the European intellectual mainstream, the condition of Russian culture for centuries after the collapse of Tartar rule in 1480 prefigured the Soviet “iron curtain” of recent doleful memory.

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But when Russian literature did finally emerge as a cultural institution in the middle of the eighteenth century, it took only fifty years for the arrival of its first giant, Alexander Pushkin. Pushkin’s genius, happily combining the national and the universal, left an indelible mark on the evolution of Russian letters, endowing it with the “worldwide sensitivity” in which Dostoevsky would later find its greatest spiritual virtue. During the next several decades, the literary scene in Russia witnessed an extraordinary outburst of creativity that soon allowed it to equal — and perhaps even to surpass — the literary accomplishments of any other European country at that time. The consummation of this development, the Russian realistic novel, rightly belongs among mankind’s finest artistic achievements. In the words of a contributor to the new Cambridge History of Russian Literature, “once its portals have been entered [the Russian classical novel] can become so uplifting a place in which to dwell that all other literary experiences seem small-scale by comparison.”

Although it has suffered under a totalitarian regime for over seventy years, Russian literature on the whole has fared surprisingly well in the twentieth century. Not only has it succeeded in maintaining standards of excellence, but it has also enriched us with new works of genius, in poetry as well as in prose. The idiosyncrasies of Russia’s history have affected her literature in many subtle ways, and the ironies with which it was fraught from the very beginning continue to make themselves felt. In the absence of any institutionalized force capable of spiritual or intellectual opposition to despotic rule (the Russian Orthodox Church, unlike the Roman Catholic Church, was for centuries fully subordinate to the state), literature acquired a spiritual authority it has never enjoyed in the West.

Furthermore, in Russia literature was (and still is) looked upon as a source not of only moral but also of social and political instruction. This public attitude has naturally tended to invest writers with a heightened sense of responsibility and of mission. It may also help to explain the ambivalent political status of literature in Russian society, where words can be both the
government’s powerful weapon and its deadliest enemy. No other literature has suffered so much outrage and abuse from critics of every political description or has so often served regretfully as an instrument of oppression. At the same time, no other literature has been so fearless in the face of harassment and terror or can claim so distinguished a list of martyrs, justifying the poet Maximilian Voloshin’s bitter lament on the “cruel fate” inflicted by “infanticidal Russia” on the best and greatest of her gifted offspring.

From a volume as ambitious as The Cambridge History of Russian Literature, which aims to provide a “survey of Russian literature from the beginning to this decade in sufficient, but not overwhelming detail,” one naturally expects elucidation of these themes and issues. One expects, moreover, that in charting Russia’s literary landscape across the ages, such a volume will properly attend to every genre and present accurate information not only about authors of world fame but also about lesser-known figures whose work exhibits some feature of interest or artistic worth. At some six hundred pages (plus a lengthy bibliography), the Cambridge history promises at first sight to meet these expectations. It is crammed with facts and names, and it contains enough critical insights and apt formulations to impress the lay reader. Closer scrutiny, however, leads to a series of disappointments. Intelligent judgments alternate with clichés; information seems at times superfluous but more often insufficient and tainted by factual errors. In terms of its genral perspective, the book suffers from a common flaw of Western Slavic scholarship: it lacks an independent and comprehensive conception of Russian literature free of the biases and distortions of official Soviet literary doctrine.

It is true that much of the ideological prejudice about Russian literary matters originated long before the arrival of the Soviets, thanks to the radical critics of the previous century, especially Vissarion Belinsky (1811-1848). Known to contemporaries as “Vissarion the Frenzied,” Belinsky held that only those works written by authors who were socially oriented and belonged to what he called “the natural school” qualified for admission to the canon. Those who did not subscribe to his narrow concept of literary excellence—writers, for instance, who promoted the idea of “art for art’s sake”—were to be abused, ridiculed, or dismissed outright. It was easy for the Soviets to appropriate Belinsky’s viewpoint, vulgarize it even further, and adapt it to their own purposes. As a consequence, entire literary movements, not to speak of individual authors, have been retroactively ostracized from the body of Russian literature.

The degree and efficacy of this ostracism has varied, however, with vacillations in the party line. Some writers have been relegated to utter oblivion, withdrawn from circulation and never reprinted; others were available only to select professionals in special library departments; still others could aspire to no more than derogatory mention in textbooks. Finally, those writers whose greatness could not be denied have typically been showered with “criticism” that has obscured and misrepresented the very nature of their work, sometimes beyond recognition. Thus Tolstoy was hailed as “the mirror of the Russian revolution” and Dostoevsky was portrayed merely as an ardent champion of the dispossessed, with scant attention paid to the psychological and spiritual
content of their art.

That this truncated conception of Russian literature has proved unduly influential in the West is at least partially recognized by Charles A. Moser, the editor of the new Cambridge history. In his remarks on the double standard applied to works of literature written or published within and without the Soviet Union in the twentieth century, Mr. Moser acknowledges that this was something that—“at least in Western scholarship—never should have occurred in the first place.” But he does not extend this sober criticism to earlier periods or attempt to rectify the historical record. In fact, despite clear signs of the various authors’ efforts to avoid ideological traps, the book betrays a close dependence on the tradition of one-sided criticism initiated by Belinsky. This is evident not only in the material it includes but also—and perhaps more glaringly—in the material it tends to exclude. Several dozen authors of some import can easily be listed who are either completely omitted from the discussion or do not receive their due. In this and other respects, the Cambridge history compares unfavorably with the classic history of Russian literature published in English by Prince Dmitri Sviatopolk-Mirsky (1890-1939) as early as 1927, where many authors here neglected are concisely and memorably characterized. (Incidentally, this brilliant scholar made the unwise decision to return to the Soviet Union in 1932 and shortly thereafter perished in Stalin’s concentration camps.)

This is not to say that the Cambridge volume is without its virtues. In its initial chapters on the literature preceding the Golden Age of the nineteenth century, it contains much of value. These chapters, devoted to writings somewhat esoteric and unfamiliar to most Western readers, are critically independent, forcefully written, and for the most part do not omit pertinent information. One curious omission—no doubt an echo of the Soviet official prudery—is the name of the eighteenth-century erotic poet Ivan Barkov. Barkov’s work, which has been broadly circulated underground, certainly contributed to the development of the Russian language. He was much admired by Alexander Pushkin, who once remarked that he would not believe in the arrival of freedom of speech in Russia until Barkov’s complete works were published. By this token, freedom has not yet arrived in Russia, for Barkov remains unpublished there after almost two hundred years.

Later chapters, however, rely increasingly on criteria imported from the Russian homeland. There are even men of genius whose stature is de-emphasized, including the poet Fyodor Tyutchev and the novelist Nikolai Leskov, both of whom were attacked as reactionaries by contemporary radicals. Many authors who deviated from the realistic mainstream are either omitted or marginalized. Osip Senkovsky is mentioned only as a prolific journalist: his whimsically fantastic tales under the pen-name of Baron Brambeus are ignored. Similarly, the unclassifiable Alexander Veltman—the author of numerous remarkable works and the closest Russian approximation to Laurence Sterne—is recognized only for one “most amusing and far-fetched” society novel.

Perhaps the most conspicuous omission from this book it that of the unique literary phenomenon “Kozma Prutkov” (fl. 1853-1863), a fictitious author and character created by the poet Alexey K.
Tolstoy and his two cousins Zhemchuznikov. Kozma Prutkov is conceived as a graphomaniacal petty official who produces pompous, platitudinous effusions in verse and prose, blissfully convinced of his own genius. At the same time, each of his utterances conceals a satirical barb aimed at the bureaucracy and philistinism of which the egotistical and self-important “author” is presumably ignorant. Many of Kozma Prutkov’s aphorisms have entered everyday Russian speech and are still popular. His hilarious “Proposal to Introduce Uniformity of Thought in Russia” used to rouse suspicion among Soviet authorities because of its uncanny resemblance to their own methods.

The Cambridge history is also marred by numerous factual errors—unconscionable in a scholarly project that claims to be authoritative. Alexander Shishkov is called Alexey (page 93); Aleksander Turgenev is confused with his brother Audrey, dead by that time (page 129). Even English literature suffers: we read that Mikhail Lermontov’s unfinished tale Vadim reveals an acquaintance with Walter Scott’s *The Black Monk*—instead of *The Black Dwarf* (page 185). Very little is said of popular genres, like the nineteenth-century historical novel, and what is said is mistaken: it is not true that Pushkin criticized Mikhail Zagoskin “for his unjust depiction of the poet Trediakovsky as a sycophant and talentless fool” (page 158). Two novels of two different novelists are confused: Zagoskin’s *Yury Miloslavsky, or the Russians in 1612* (incidentally, the first Russian historical novel) and Ivan Lazhechnikov’s *The Ice Palace*, which deals with the events of the middle eighteenth century when Vasily Trediakovsky lived. But it was Lazhechnikov and not Zagoskin who provoked Pushkin’s criticism. All such errors and omissions are particularly unfortunate in light of the greater attention lavished on many epigones of the “natural” and realistic schools who are now rarely remembered even by the experts.

Still, it would be unfair not to mention that the Cambridge history offers some important insights. For instance, it correctly suggests that the teleological impulse of the great Russian realistic novels—implying as it does the possibility of moral improvement —”seems to offer a philosophical challenge to the materialist view.” The central chapters also contain some sparkling characterizations and felicitous judgments. Thus Dostoevsky’s life is described as “a magnificent nineteenth-century Calvary leading to the very gates of Paradise,” and Pushkin’s lyrical verse is likened to “a crystal goblet, elegant, symmetrical, and transparent, which gives forth a clear and resonant sound when struck.” Isaac Babel’s prose is astutely contrasted with Marc Chagall’s paintings and Sergey Prokofiev’s music; socialist-realist fiction is explained away as “an exercise in mutual deception on the part of everyone involved”; the writer Yuri Trifonov, a man with a tortured soul, is called “the closest approximation to a repentant aristocrat the Soviet Union has known.” Nevertheless, especially in the sections dealing with the twentieth century, the book’s numerous errors and omissions cannot offset such occasional flashes of insight.

As we approach the end of the century, it is natural to wonder which works from our period’s immense literary production are destined to endure. While it is too early to attempt any definitive answer, with respect to Russian literature it is already clear that the vast bulk of the writing celebrated by Soviet officialdom is destined for the dustbin of history. Some of these writings
certainly deserve mention as period pieces, but not to the detriment of names and works that stand out as wholesome, original, or sublime. And here the Cambridge history falls egregiously short in failing to do justice to several works now recognized as masterpieces. While the book treats socialist realism and the so-called “production novel” at considerable length, it fails to give any mention whatsoever to Anna Akhmatova’s mature poetry, including several famous lyrical cycles, the poignant Requiem—a powerful denunciation of Stalinism written in Stalin’s lifetime—and the great narrative Poem Without a Hero, a work comparable, as a testament of our age, to the poems of T. S. Eliot and Saint-John Perse.

Nor is due recognition given to Mikhail Bulgakov’s Master and Margarita, arguably the best twentieth-century Russian novel. Bulgakov’s novel has become a part of the idiom in the Soviet Union and is considered a modern classic in Europe. (The book is much less appreciated in the United States, where it exists in Mirra Ginsburg’s excellent translation; to my mind, this betrays a lack of imaginative empathy on the part of the American audience.) Among other important works that the Cambridge history slights is Vasily Grossman’s panoramic World War II novel Life and Fate. Mikhail Suslov, the éminence grise of Soviet ideology, arrogantly decreed in the 1950s that the book would wait two hundred years for publication. But when recently published in France it sold over 130,000 copies; the American edition was passed over almost unnoticed.

Despite the editor’s pledge to the contrary, the Cambridge history devotes uneven attention to Soviet literature and the literature of the Russian diaspora. Entire regions of emigration are missing from the volume’s literary map. For example, Russian China (particularly, Harbin), where more than two hundred Russian periodicals have been published, is left out of account. Of Harbin’s two most distinguished poets, Arseny Nes-melov was captured by the Soviets and died at their hands, and Valery Pereleshin now resides in Brazil where he recently published a volume of verse written in Portuguese. About writers belonging to the second wave of emigration, which took place in the aftermath of World War II, we read nothing but a string of names; about those belonging to the third wave, we hear of no poet except Joseph Brodsky.

As for literary developments within the Soviet Union, it is the same story again. We encounter lavish praise of Yevgeny Yevtushenko’s “outgoing and generous personality” and Andrey Voznesensky’s “virtuoso technical effects.” Both are familiar spokesmen in the West for the Soviet point of view, but as poets and as citizens they are far inferior to many contemporaries. For example, Aleksandr Kushner, leader of the “Leningrad school” of neo-acmeists, is perhaps the finest poet now living in Russia; in the new Cambridge history he is never mentioned.
The advent of perestroika has signified, among other things, a cultural upheaval on an unprecedented scale. If it is true that, during Khrushchev’s “thaw” in the 1950s and early 1960s, society underwent “the return of the repressed,” today we may speak of an explosion of the censored cultural past. At the present moment in Russia an army of publishers, scholars, and critics are busy rescuing and redeeming prose and poetry forgotten for at least a century and a half as well as work from the turn of the century and the early post-revolutionary years.

In the same upsurge of interest and fascination, the Soviet reader now has started to appreciate the works of Osip Senkovsky and Alexander Veltman along with those of Arseny Nesmelov, Valery Pereleshin, and the multitude of others whom the contributors to the new Cambridge volume deemed unfit to be included in their discussion. A number of stunning, previously unknown authors and literary texts are being unearthed from private and public archives, including those of the KGB. These recent discoveries have acquainted us with such new names as Daniil Andreyev, a mystic visionary of the stature of William Blake, and Sigizmund Krzhizha-novsky, a short-story writer who has been called by one critic “Borges-before-Borges.”

One hopes that all this material will soon become the joint property of Russian and Western readers. But when that happens, we will encounter the ultimate irony of The Cambridge History of Russian Literature—to be outdated just as it has actually entered scholarly circulation.

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