

Two Centuries of Russian Verse

Translation and Notes

TRANSLATIONS

by Colin J. Holcombe II

ocaso press 2023

Two Centuries of Russian Poetry: A Short Selection

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Last Revised: October 2025.

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INTRODUCTION

Coverage

What follows is a short selection from two centuries of Russian verse, generally of poems well known in the west, but given a new treatment. I have tried to create faithful renderings that respect the original Russian features, but which still operate as acceptable English poems. This policy of small tucks and text alterations is only one of many approaches, of course, that of turning a poem in one language into a poem in another, but it is arguably the best way to see poetry as a living entity.

The translations here are in formal verse where everything counts — metre, rhyme, phonetic patterning, rhetoric, word choice, stanza shaping, imagery, thought, word connotations and the sound of every syllable — as they do in the Russian originals, making them worth the reading. I make no apology for such reactionary notions. Russian verse represented here was published between 1730 and 1935, and all verse of this period was very formal by today's Postmodernist standards. There was almost no metre-less verse, and even the most revolutionary poems took good care to rhyme properly. Many readers today are more familiar with 'free verse renderings' that simply convey the prose meaning in some pleasing manner, but what they are reading is usually not poetry as the word was once understood. The translator has given up the splendour of formal verse for the facility of everyday words in everyday speech patterns, which

makes the renderings easy to digest but also rather trivial.

Overview of Russian Poetry

We are doubtless more familiar with Russian novelists and short-story writers, but the glory of Russian literature to Russians is its poetry. The form did not suddenly begin with Pushkin, however, but goes back to the eleventh century, when the Byzantine influence combined with old Slavonic to create highly literate tales — part prose, part poetry — that urged Kievan unity in the face of Turkic invasion. The greatest work is the 12th century Lay of Igor's Conquest, but a courtly culture continued throughout the Middle Ages, one which has come down to us as *byliny*: heroic folksongs. Russian written poetry emerged independently in the mid seventeenth century: largely religious poems with a syllabic versification imported from Poland.

The later, urbane and cosmopolitan poetry, which could hold its own against European examples, owed much to the westernising reforms of Peter the Great (1689-1725). Indeed the first poets were court officials, beholden to the tsar for patronage and any liberty to write at all. Competent didactic poetry and satire was being written by the mid 18th century, and these forms were regularised by Lomonosov (1711-65) and given their greatest expression by Gavrila Derzhavin (1743-1816).

Not surprisingly, this late eighteenth century poetry tended to the serious, uplifting and civic-minded.

Officialdom continued as a strong element of Russian poetry, but that control waned in the following century when Salon-influenced aristocrats wrote on more personal matters for their friends. Nikolay Karamzin brought poetry closer to the spoken idiom. Konstantin Batyushkov drew on Italian models, and Vasily Zhukovsky on German models, but the great poet of the epoch, and indeed of all epochs, was Alexander Pushkin. Though continually assailed by censorship, from Pushkin's golden pen poured out a great mass of work, from insults to religious verse, from love poems to fairy tales, and from comedy to tragic works, all with a great surface clarity that was only approached by Evgeny Baratynsky. I give typical examples of these and other poets, with copious notes now published as a separate ebook.

After Pushkin's early death, the Golden Age of Russian poetry enjoyed a brief flowering in Mikhail Lermontov and then gave way to prose writers, many deservedly world-famous. There were still outstanding poets in the nineteenth century, but they worked independently, not as tight-knit groups with common aims. Nikolay Nekrasov wrote socially engaged poems on the monstrous suffering of the Russian poor. Fedor Tyutchev wrote in the more speculative vein of Romanticism. Afanasy Fet withdrew to his estates and wrote in an introspective verse in the 'art for art's sake' manner.

The 1890-1920 period is called Russia's 'Silver Age' though, excepting the incomparable Pushkin, its poetry has no less variety than had the previous 'Golden Age'. Valery Bryusov wrote in the Symbolist vein of European

Decadence. That Symbolism took a religious turn in the poetry of Zinaida Gippius. Vladimir Solovyev's philosophic and mystical thought was the inspiration of three outstanding poets who sought to transcend the physical world: Alexander Blok, Andrey Bely and Vyacheslav Ivanov. Two movements came to the fore after 1910: Acmeism (a neoclassical form of Modernism) and Futurism. The great poets of Acmeism were Anna Akhmatova and Ossip Mandelstam. The Futurists embraced technology and/or a neo-primitivism: Velimir Khlebnikov and Vladimir Mayakovsky. Independent of these movements, but also rising from the ferment of the Revolution were Boris Pasternak and Marina Tsvetaeva, both producing linguistically brilliant, challenging and emotively compelling work.

Political orthodoxy and then the Stalin years asphyxiated poetry. Some poets emigrated but found little of a receptive audience. Some remained in Russia, being persecuted by the state (Akhmatova) or murdered (Mandelstam). Tsvetaeva spent hard years as an *émigré*, returning at last to Russia where, obscure and destitute, she took her own life. Poetry was written under the communist regime, of course, but is of mixed quality. A more unofficial poetry emerged after Stalin's death, however, with Evgeny Evtushenko, and from the seventies appeared many avant-garde practitioners, of whom the best known to western audiences may be Joseph Brodsky. Censorship disappeared with the fall of the Soviet Union, but poets also lost their dissident status, being forced to compete with more popular forms of entertainment. As in

the west, contemporary poetry in Russia retains a small but devoted readership.

Paralleling the above history is a change in the nature of Russian verse. Eighteenth century verse was syllabic, i.e. the number of syllables in the line was the shaping feature, not metre, which was a later, syllabo-tonic shaping introduced by Lomonosov and others towards the end of the century. Syllabic verse was written in rhyming couplets, where rhymes were generally feminine (i.e. ended in an unstressed syllable) and the lines could be further ornamented with a caesura or pause at some consistent position in the line.

Diction also changed. Earlier poems conformed to a certain tone of address and word use. The high tone employed somewhat archaic words that were drawn from Slavonic liturgy more than from the living tongue. It was Karamsin who eased these restrictions into a more everyday usage, and Pushkin who used that everyday language in fresh and vitally compelling ways. But even later poets can vary in their preferences. Nekrasov could happily weave in contemporary slang, but the language of Tyutchev was always more elevated.

INDIVIDUAL POETS

Feofan Prokopovich (1681-1736)

Archbishop Prokopovich was one of many gifted writers, mostly clerics with court positions, who developed the syllabic verse that Kantemir was to use so memorably a decade later. Prokopovich was born in Kiev and became a vocal supporter of Peter the Great's reforms, particularly those relating to the Russian Orthodox Church. He was a propagandist for various measures, wrote a play and produced handbooks on poetics and rhetoric.

Many of his poems, as in the piece translated, were religious, but Prokopovich gradually introduced a more relaxed and recreational tone, not always without satire, that allowed verse to serve wider purposes in the succeeding age of Classicism.

Prokopovich occasionally wrote psalms and spiritual songs, or adaptations of them, which called for greater depth and vigour. *He Who Trusts in God's Good Will* is an adaptation of Psalm 90, and became a popular song in the eighteenth century.

HE WHO TRUSTS IN GOD'S GOOD WILL

He who's strong, and trusts in God's good will,
may look unmoved on all our human ill.
He is no rebel from his people's cry,
nor do tormentors come to terrify.
He does not fear the wars that high clouds wage,
nor lowly southerlies that howl and rage.
No mortal, awe-inspiring doubts enslave
him at the rise of Finn or Baltic wave.
If the world is crushed, it will disintegrate,
and the body, shuddering, meet its fate.
But that same body, broken into dust,
sees soul, unchanged, abiding in its trust.
In You, O Lord, our only strength is known
and every action thus is Yours alone.
Without You, Lord, we're idly filled with dread,
but find that fear itself with You has fled.

Antioch Kantemir (1708-1744)

Prince Antioch Kantemir was probably the most cultured man in the Russia of his day. He was born to wealthy nobility, soon became active in court circles and in 1730 was appointed Minister-Resident in London, transferring in 1738 to Paris, where he remained till his death in 1744.

The *Satires*, composed between 1729 and 1739 for Kantemir's private satisfaction, circulated as MSS among friends, but weren't formerly published until 1762.

Written in the syllabic verse that was superseded later in the same century, these poems are nonetheless Russia's first literature of the classical age. Their targets were the enemies of the Enlightenment, those who supported the old prejudices of Moscow, or displayed the foppishness of the semi-educated Europeanised young nobles.

The nine sisters referred to are the nine muses, goddesses and inventors of science. Crito, used throughout the *Satires*, is a fictitious character, a man feigning reverence, ignorant and superstitious, who prefers the appearance of the law to the essence of it for his own self-interest.

SATIRE ONE (opening excerpt)

Though immature my mind — we brief-instructed men —
rest easy now and do not drive my hand to pen.

Though, write or not, the century's days fly on the same,
one may, without a name as author, still earn fame.

Many the easy paths that lead us nowadays,
nor need the brave to falter on their stumbling ways
against those most distasteful, cursed and naked feet
nine sisters show. Here many lacking strength must meet
with scant success. Yet all must sweat and anguish long,
10. though laboured efforts clearly put them in the wrong,
attracting much derision. But he who desk would spurn,
or stare with troubled eyes at books, will scarcely earn
the fine apartment or a marbled park. Take stock:
he may not add a sheep, this man, to father's flock,
but still our monarch promises, with high-flown aim —
while muses rise around — the ignorant with shame —
to be munificent. Apollo gives what's due,
supporting weaknesses, expanding retinue,
as I have noted for myself, thus adding hopes
20. of many soon inhabiting Parnassus slopes.

The trouble is, of course, that in the kingly praise,
they grow as subjects fearful of the censuring phrase,
'find splits and heresies that spring from tutored thought,
though more is plain stupidity that's nowhere taught.
Yet he who gives himself to books finds godless lies —
as Crito, with a rosary, bemoans and sighs.

A holy soul will ask, with bitter tears, how comes
the fruit of knowledge in us to such hurtful sums?
How children, once submissive and in quiet shod,
30. who in their fathers closely trod the ways of God
and in such service therefore knew no fear, now find
the very church and Bible like to soil their mind?

All is but interpretation; they must know cause;
they have no faith at all in sacred rank or laws:
good humour they're bereft of; no kvass seems sweet.
The threatened stick won't keep them to their salted meat.
They don't light candles now, nor know the fasting days,
find weak the power that's put in hands of churches stays.
Has worldly life, they whisper, fallen so behind
40. that lands and patrimonies are but ill designed?'

Vasily Trediakovsky (1703-69)

Vasily Trediakovsky was the son of a priest but contrived access to the Slaviano-Greco-Latin Academy in Moscow, then to The Hague and finally to Paris, where he studied philosophy at the Sorbonne. Returning to Russia in 1730, Trediakovsky eventually became a court poet of Anna's reign, a translator of French literature and an important theoretician of Russian versification.

Verses in Praise of Russia was written in 1728, when Trediakovsky was a needy student living nonetheless in some style at Paris. It's a patriotic lyric, from someone who was much struck by the elegance of Parisian ways but nonetheless felt that his native country should not be neglected. Trediakovsky's later work is more weighty, philosophical and moralistic. It is not now popular but illustrates how far Russian verse was to travel to reach Pushkin's standards. The language here is elevated: sceptres and porphyry are symbols of power; miters refer to bishops; vivat is Latin for Long live!

The poem is still in syllabic verse form, ten syllables to the line, all as feminine rhyme couplets, AABCC, etc.

VERSES IN PRAISE OF RUSSIA

On this sad flute I start my song today
for Russia barely known and far away.
For all her kindnesses to me I find
it difficult to fully speak my mind.

Mother Russia, vast and undefiled,
may I not tell you, as your faithful child,
how gloriously you sit upon the throne:
how bright the sunlight that is ours alone.

Your golden sceptres colour others, each
puts porphyry and mitres out of reach:
your sceptre's decorated with your grace
as crown is honoured by your radiant face.

Not known for high nobility? Who'd stay
so ignorant within the world's wide way?
For you are noble in yourself, and straight:
for God's you are and shown in brightest state.

To you the faith of pious folk will go
and no impurity the godless show.
Nor will there be a double faith, as such
will join them to the sinful overmuch.

Your people all are Orthodox, and known
for bravery most everywhere. So grown
are children worthy of a mother too
that stand in pride and so acknowledge you.

In what can Russia not be bountiful,
and where can Russia not be powerful?
You are the treasury of all good things,
forever rich, of which your glory sings.

And all the stars that are, they shine in you,
applauding loudly as good Russians do.
Vivat Russia! Live my darling one!
Vivat hope! Long live the good works done!

On this sad flute I end my song today
for Russia barely known and far away,
where I would need a hundred tongues to praise
the dear and wonderful in Russian ways.

Alexander Petrovic Sumarokov (1718-1777)

With Lomonosov, Alexander Petrovic Sumarokov was the father of Russian poetry in the European manner. He was born into the Moscovite gentry, educated at the Cadet School in Petersburg, and, with French taste and polish so acquired, became the first Russian gentleman to choose the profession of letters.

Sumarokov wrote regularly: plays, satires, conventional love poems: a great mass of work. He also pioneered journalism and literary criticism, but his greatest gifts to Russian literature were metrical inventiveness and a genuine ear for melody. In this capacity, Sumarokov saw himself as inculcating the canons of classical good taste in Russia, exchanging letters with Voltaire, and becoming a second Boileau.

As shown overleaf, Sumarokov's poetry is somewhat conventional, well turned but much addicted to the balance, ingenuity and wit expected of eighteenth-century literature. Today it sounds a little forced and insincere

.

FLY MY SIGHS

Then fly my sighs to her whose faithful love I'd be,
and tell her of my griefs, but more my constancy.
Stay in her sweet heart, negate her haughty reign,
and afterwards come winging back to me again.
And bring good tidings with you too, that love I hope
from her is still unchanged and in her bounty's scope.
I've not the temperament that overlong will sigh,
not with a world of beauties here, whom all may try.

Mikhail Lomonosov (1711-1765)

Mikhail Lomonosov was both the father of Russian literature and a scientist of the first order, holding simultaneously the position of court poet to the Empress Elizabeth and Professor of Chemistry at the Academy of Sciences. He brought Russian versification into line with European lines, wrote the first Russian poems that deserve the title great, and also made important advances in the pure and applied sciences, notably in geology, geography, chemistry and astronomy.

Lomonosov is famous for his odes, which typically celebrate anniversaries, name days, Russian achievements and occasionally military victories. Most odes are dedicated to the Empress Elizabeth, but he also wrote odes for Ivan IV, Peter III, the Grand Duke Paul and one for the empress Catherine (who later removed him). The most enduring are the sacred odes that glorify nature and the power of God. The style is often grandiloquent, with features of the baroque, but most poems end peacefully, with a quiet faith in the future.

On the Road to Peterhof is a lighter piece, lamenting the many journeys that Lomonosov would have to make to the imperial palace.

ODE SELECTED FROM JOB: CHAPTERS 38, 39, 40 & 41

1. You, perversely sorrowing,
who, lifting voice to God, complain,
will find His wrath's a fearful thing,
as Job observed through clouded rain.
Through worst of tempests He will shine,
and have the lightning make His sign.
His words will shake the firmament:
He called up Job to argument.

2. Gather all your strength and then
be firm in courage: answer me.
Where were you when I gave to men
the light and beauty round you see.
I made the earth, the firmament;
a host of heavenly powers I sent
to show in power and majesty
the wisdom that will always be.

3. Where were you when before me stand
the countless stars the depths embrace.
Each one was kindled by my hand
throughout the vastnesses of space.
In like magnificence was won
the golden splendour of the sun
and everywhere new rays of light
were as the moonbeams fill the night.

4. Who kept the sea within its bounds
and put a limit on the deeps?
Who monitors the ceaseless rounds
of waves against the rocky steeps?
Who the abysses of mist
with His strong hand He has dismissed?
Who pushed against obscurity
and from the land expelled the sea?

5. Was it ever once your feat
to set the hour that ended dawn,
or to the sun-parched fields of wheat
the cool, reviving rains have drawn?
To sailor brought the breeze's force
that set him calmly on his course?
Can you cause the earth to quake
and its ungodly fear and shake?

6. Have you dowsed the different ways
the sea progresses into deeps,
or many miracles with which we gaze
on monsters that the ocean keeps?
However murky depths may be,
they open up; can you not see
the gate of death, all too well
the fearful hidden mouth of hell.

7. Can you constrain the whirlwind's force?
Or dim the very sun's bright reign?
When air is clear throughout its course
can kindle lightning and the rain?
And brilliantly, as lightning's flash,
scourge all men's hearts with your fierce lash?
Or rock from end to end the universe
and lay on men your wrathful curse?

8. Can your agile mind ascend
as eagles do, the loftiest height,
and in the wind your wings extend
that seas and rivers fill your sight,
and nonetheless observe your prey
however far or deep it lay:
that when so sent for food or why,
there's none elude that rapid eye?

9. Observe the woodland Behemoth
I made as even I made you.
In thorny thickets it is never wroth
but tramples with a heavy shoe.
Its veins accept throughout their length
and you may test them with your strength.
Great ribs of bronze its flanks adorn,
and who can match that fearsome horn?

10. You'd pull the great Leviathan
ashore with some mere fishing rod?
Far out to sea can any man
outrun the fins with which it's shod?
Its scales are glowing whale-size fields,
and cover it with copper shields.
Spear and sword, you will concede,
are to it but a broken reed.

11. Like a millstone is its heart,
sharp rows of sickles make its teeth:
who'll dare his hand be torn apart?
It's battle ready. Underneath
and on the sharpest stones it lies
and will those hardnesses despise.
He sees them as the softest silt
compared to how its self is built.

12. And so it rushes fast to arms
while sea is like a cauldron boiling.
Its larynx seethes, and wild alarms
disturb the abyss where it's spoiling
ever to fight, its eyes a gleam
as coals inside the furnace seem.
The greatest it will fight, for none
has strength to win with such a one.

13. Consider that great space of light
which I had thought to rearrange:
Did I ask for oversight
when lots of little things must change?
And when from first imaginings
I fashioned out those human things,
why did you not entreat me then
to turn out yet still better men?

14. Reflect on this, O mortal man,
imagine your creator's might:
Honour this, His holy plan
that patience fashion all things right.
All things are for our benefit
however comes our end of it.
If life's a burden we must bear,
we can't bemoan what's wholly there.

AN EVENING MEDITATION

On God's Grandeur, Occasioned by the Great Northern Lights

In His face is hid the day.
The fields are gloomy-streaked with grey,
and on the hills the shadowed ray
of sunlight fades and steals away:
and stars, innumerable, mark
the depths of an abyssal dark.

As sand into the breakers cast,
or spark within eternal frost,
as feather in the furnace blast,
or dust into a tempest tossed:
in this deep abyss I am found
but lost in ways that thoughts confound.

The wise may speak of worlds unknown
and doubtless ruled by different lights:
countless are the suns they own,
their peoples' and their century's sights:
all those deities proclaim
the glory in that Nature's name.

What is the purpose of those laws,
when dawn is midnight over there,
when sun enthroned on icy shores
can fling such brightness in the air?
Behold how cool a light brings birth
of daylight on the darkened earth.

You know the planets, all their ways,
and all that book-bound learning brings,
can look beyond the deepest gaze
and so into the smallest things:
tell me now, entire and whole,
what still perplexes in the soul?

What makes such clear displays of light,
their thin flames folded out of sight?
For no great thunderstorms at night
sustain forever that great height.
How can such cold and clouded flare
arise from frozen winter air?

First an ample, watery haze
then fashioned like the sunlight, bright.
They bend into a fiery blaze
and touch the mountain tops with light,
but, though like waves across the ocean,
they seem suspended in their motion.

When savants entertain some doubt
of knowing all within their sight,
and cannot tell how rays reach out
from stars beyond that glimmering light,
or if life's fullness can be known:
how great is our Creator shown!

ON THE ROAD TO PETERHOF

(Written in 1761 when I went to ask for the signing of privilege for the Academy, as I had so many times before.)

Dear grasshopper, one blessed to live so happily,
that in men's sight, moreover, is so proved to be.
You live your whole life through amid the softest grass
and, drunk on honeydew, may dream on hours that pass.
No doubt you are a lowly creature, that many scorn,
but better off, I think, than is the best king born.
So winged and weightless, you've the very angel turned,
to hop about and sing, both free and unconcerned.
When all the world is yours, your home is everywhere:
and, since you beg for naught, no debts are yours to bear.

Gavril Romanovich Derzhavin (1743-1816)

Gavril Romanovich Derzhavin rose from penniless obscurity to the highest offices of state, but is remembered today as Russia's greatest poet before Pushkin.

Derzhavin was an original. By force of inspiration, he completed the hopes of his eighteenth century predecessors like Kantemír, Trediakovsky and Lomonosov, and lived long enough to hear Pushkin recite his first poems, recognizing a talent that would usher in a new sensibility. Derzhavin is famous for his odes, into which he packed a great deal of elegy, humour and satire. To our ears, the poems are rather high-minded and over-long, but they are also exceptionally accomplished and powerful.

It was Derzhavin far more than Pushkin who created the writer's claim to be the social conscience of Russia. Ironically, the gift came from the poet's marked disabilities, the contrariness that so exasperated contemporaries expecting deference to wealth, social position and court procedures. Hemmed in by a social order to which he did not wholly belong, Derzhavin's own scruples became his lodestone, first in his Pugachev adventures, and increasingly in his own writings.

ON THE DEATH OF PRINCE MESHCHERSKY

1. The voice of time, whose metal ring
perplexes with its frightful gloom,
yet calls and calls as though to bring
my life still closer to the tomb.
And light itself, the first we saw,
brought death's sharp teeth into our gaze.
The scythe-like lightning strikes, and days
are grain upon that threshing floor.

2. No destiny eludes those jaws,
no creature known can haste away.
In throne and cell the small worm bores;
to elements the tombs decay.
All fame will yawning time erase.
As rivers rushing to the sea
flow days and years, eternity:
that greedy realm not long delays.

3. We skirt that abyss all our lives
in which, at last, we headlong fall.
With life there's death, and all that thrives
is also under death's dark pall.
Cruel is death, and obdurate:
the stars are subject to its will:
the sun itself fades out to chill:
whole worlds will death intimidate.

4. Only we poor mortals have belief
in us ourselves, forever on,

but death comes quietly, like a thief,
and what was life is promptly gone.
He comes when we're afraid of none,
who know our ends are not yet soon:
like thunder heard in hills at noon
our flight to pride will come undone.

5. Son of easy pleasure's cause,
now where, Meshchersky, do you hide?
For you have left these living shores,
and on the dead must now abide.
This is your finger, yet there's no
occasion in that how? or why?
We only ever weep and cry,
'we born into this world of woe.'

6. Comfort, joy, abundant love,
where mercy lived with shining health:
is not that chill of blood enough
that sorrow dim our spirit's self?
Where feast was once is coffin's pall,
where brightly spoke each laughing head,
the dead are howling to the dead,
and their last pallor looks on all.

7. It stares at all things, every king,
whatever be the power they held,
It sees each rich and pompous thing
as gold and silver idols felled.
It glowers at beauty, breath alive,
at mind in thought, at the sublime:
for those in pride who boldly climb,
it sharpens up its gleaming scythe.

8. In death, with trembling state and fear,
are pride and poverty combined.
We talk like God, but dust is near.
Today such flattering hopes we find,
tomorrow, where is man then cast?
And in an hour we barely miss
confusion enters that abyss,
and, like a dream, our age has passed.

9. And like a dream, the sweetest dream,
my youth has wholly fled away.
Now beauty seems an empty theme,
nor merriment has much to say.
Today I'm not so well-to-do,
nor thirst for honour as in days
so long debauched by love of praise,
yet still there calls the voice I knew.

10. But even courage knows its day,
the hoped-for glory fails its part.
Wealth and riches pass away;
the seat of passion, the flooding heart
will pass as all things pass. And we
with happiness less close to hand,
find all things false. From where I stand,
this doorway to eternity

11. pronounces all must die, today,
tomorrow, Perfiliev. Why grieve
that your fond friend went on his way,
and left the world we all must leave?
Life is heaven's brief, passing gift,
so make your peace both deep and sure:
ensure your parting soul is pure
and bless the blow of fate when swift.

TO RULERS AND JUDGES

The most high God has risen: He
will judge how earthly gods have fared.
How long, saith He, can evil be
unpunished and the guilty spared?

Your duty speaks: uphold the laws,
refuse the bidding of the strong:
defenceless ones should be your cause,
no widow or the orphan wrong.

Protect the innocent from harm,
unhappy ones where hardship reigns.
Protect the weak from might's strong arm,
and free the poor from heavy chains.

The deaf, unseeing from their birth,
have bribes to cover reasons why.
So evil deeds still shake the earth
unrighteousness affronts the sky.

You kings who pose as heaven's fate,
above all other judges thus:
you, I know, are passionate
and mortal like the rest of us.

And you will fall as others do,
and like the withered leaf behave,
will fall at last, and even you
will die as does the common slave.

Arise O God of probity;
accept these prayers of honest worth.
Come, punish wickedness, and be
the one almighty of the earth.

FELITSA (Excerpt)

1. Tsarina, wise, omnipotent
and of the Kirghuz-Kaisak race:
one whose powerful mind has bent
to find the path, the faithful trace
that Khlor, the young tsarevich ¹
may climb the highest mountain's reach.
Say, you whose rose can have no spine,
whose very virtue is designed
to captivate my heart and mind,
say how your counsel would incline.

2. Felitsa, give me sound instruction
in worldly opulence that's true,
have the passions find reduction
and in this world be happy too.
How admirable is now your voice.
Your son escorts me in this choice.
Alas, my urge to fight but thins
against the vanities of wealth,
and if today I curb myself,
tomorrow I'm a slave to whims.

3. Unlike the mirzas in your court,
you often go about on foot.
The plainest food is what you've sought
where honest fare is simply put.
Your hard-won rest is much the same:

you read and write by candle flame.
To us mere mortals from your pen
comes sensible but fervent bliss,
and even cards you choose to miss
as I do morn to morn again.

4. You do not care for masquerades
and to a club are quite unknown:
habit and custom, neither fades,
nor is there dancing by the throne.
You do not haunt Parnassus, nor
what séances are practiced for.
No eastern rule is in your gaze,
who traced an honest path, both whole
and modest. So your waking soul
but works for other's useful days.

5. But I, of course, have slept till noon,
which fumes of pipe and coffee show.
My working day is one long swoon
within whose thoughts chimeras grow.
With captives under Persian skies
I arm myself in Turkish guise.
Still dreaming that I am the sultan
I make my piercing look oppress,
or captured by some other dress
will slip out quickly for a caftan.

WATERFALL (Opening)

In four ways split, the mountain stream
becomes a glittering diamond shower.
To pearl and silver sunk, the gleam
through clefts still shows its seething power.
In woods and splashed blue arc of hills,
the distant torrent thunders still.

The murmur in that forest depth
is here and nowhere, densely lost;
the vault that is by sunlight crossed
becomes a dream or hazy breath.
Through its silent depths, the more
those floods of milky waters pour.

Grey foam along the riverbanks
lies heaped in this wild, shuttered zone,
and in the air come muffled clanks
and squeals of saws and bellow's groan.
A waterfall of water tossed
and in the mist and abyss lost.

But as the pine trees in the wind,
are broken, boulders do not stay,
but, with the thunder, rocks are thinned
to sand, then ground and swept away.
Does ice still bind when cold days pass
and shatter it to powdered glass?

TO EUGENY: LIFE AT ZVANKA (Opening Excerpt)

Blest is he who will depend on none for aught,
who's free of debts and strivings' feared degeneracies,
who looks for neither wealth nor honours at the court:
beyond all sorts of vanities.

Why go to far St. Petersburg for passion's hour,
and give up space for long confinement, check and chain,
with wealth be burdened, luxury, the siren's power,
and doubtless nobleman's disdain?

And what in that compares then to this golden lease
of solitude and quiet? In these Zvanka ways
there's health, contented living with my wife, and peace
I look for in my last of days.

I rise from sleep, see over me a sky that's full
of His great majesty, its mighty ruler king
of all life's beauty. In this wondrous spectacle ¹
are revelations blessings bring.

The good I've looked for all my life, a past that flows
as close as that black serpent does, which gnaws the heart:
but here I'm happy knowing I've avoided those
ambitions with their venomous art.

I breathe in innocence, I drink the life-filled air
and see the crimson sun ascend, a glorious sight.
I seek out garden spots of rose and lily: there
a temple's traced in shafts of light.

I put out corn for pigeons, assuring each one gets
enough as high above the lake the circlings show
their happiness, each singing in the midst of nets:
they cover meadows thick as snow.

Close by, a shepherd blows his horn: the sound then trails
to grouse with muffled cawings, then, not far away.
are lambs, and whistling bushes filled with nightingales: ²
while birds' wings thunder, horses bray. ³

The roof has wisps of steam, which like the swallows play,
and speak of Levantine, Manchurian smells; ⁴
and on the table waiting me a feast's display,
like dreams of towns a peasant tells.

And all around are the glorious deeds of those great men
whose faces line my walls, and from their golden frame
reflect the celebrated days and deeds of then,
and make my chamber shine the same.

For here, continually, from night to morn, I read
the Herald's ⁵ daily bulletins or news thereof:
great heroes all, but where, in answering Russia's need,
are generals like old Suvorov?

Nikolay Karamsin (1766-1826)

Nikolay Karamsin did not write great poetry, but reformed the literary language of Russia, facilitating the poetry of Pushkin and his circle and thus making possible the Golden Age of Russian verse.

Lomonosov had reconciled Church Slavonic and colloquial Russian. Church Slavonic was to be divided into five layers of formality, and these blended appropriately into three styles: high, middle and low. Odes were written in the high style, epistles in the middle style and comedies in the low style. Many foreign words that were popular in Russia at the time were to be excluded. Derzhavin wrote with a Baroque complexity, ruggedly magnificent at best, but inimitable.

Karamsin merged the high and low into the middle style, and wrote with a simplicity and directness that verged on the conversational, albeit the conversation of well-bred gentlemen at ease in their clubs or at home with friends.

Karamzin also made popular the 'poetry of sentiment'. All poetry, being an art form, engendered emotion, but the poetry of sentiment made the overriding sentiment the subject of the poem.

MERRY HOUR

Brothers, fill the glasses, fill
them to the over-brimming top;
then raise and empty them until
the cup is barely left a drop.

How soon the world's enjoyment flags,
and sorrow's known in every reach.
Some live in porphyry and some in rags,
but God apportions joy to each.

For happiness He gave us wine:
it is the wisdom sages send:
the old will earlier youth divine,
and poor attain their sorrow's end.

Those who on sadness only dwell,
and claim September's come to stay,
have lost the art of living well,
and see no light but dark all day.

Let's disregard each saddening thing,
and how confusions overpower,
embrace sheer happiness and sing
of this pure sweet and pleasing hour.

Let all our hearts to gladness pass,
that peace be then a shining boon,
the wine to glitter in the glass
where it is silvered by the moon.

AUTUMN

Winds of the autumn are blowing,
in the dark oak groves,
falling to earth are the rustling
wraiths of leaves.

Now fields and gardens lie empty,
the far hills complain,
forests are bereft of singing:
occupants flown.

Last of the geese in the village
flap southwards away,
wheeling in widening circles
across the sky.

Wisps of grey mist are curling,
through valleys drift,
with smoke from the village entangled,
rising aloft.

Wanderer sees from the hilltops
thick levels of mist;
pale seeming the fields of the autumn:
languid, distressed.

Let then the wanderer be solaced.
All withers to naught
for only the briefest of moments:
soon life's relit.

Soon is the springtime returning:
so her proud smile shows,
nature is once more adopting
her wedding clothes.

But mortals must wither forever:
those old in the spring
know that perpetual is winter,
in life's sad song.

Ivan Krylov (1769-1844)

The opening years of the nineteenth century saw a veritable craze for fable writing in Russia, and any representative collection of Russian verse has to include them. There were several such writers, but Krylov was the best, still read and enjoyed. His last position, a sinecure, was in the Public Library of St. Petersburg, where he slothfully remained for over 30 years, being noted there for his laziness, untidiness, good appetite and shrewd, if somewhat malicious, common sense.

Krylov was largely self-educated, but became successively an editor, a publisher and a librarian. His satires were directed at landowners and their abuse of serfs, at theatre people, women, urban night-life and the world of fashion and snobbery. Krylov's plays include tragedies, but most are comedies about love and marriage in the gentry families. The lyrics, some fifty in all, are generally considered rather flat and prosaic.

Despite the close rhyming requirements, Krylov's fables are remarkable for their colloquial Russian: many of his lines have passed into the language as genuine proverbs.

QUARTET

One day a playful monkey,
with ass,
crass
goat, and bear the wonky,
formed a quartet on the spot.
The scores, viola and two fiddles see
them sat beneath the linden tree
and charm the world with skills they've got.

They strike up brightly, bow away, but charm there's not.
At length the monkey has to remonstrate a bit,
"Brothers, stop, please stop. This can't be how we sit.
We have to change the placings, so, Mishenka, you
sit by the viola. The second fiddle me,
which means, whatever else we choose to do,
the hills and trees know melody."

They all sat down and started, but
the mishaps all popped up again.
But monkey has the reason. "Men,
we need to sit together more, with each
within reach."
So they obeyed. And meekly seated in a row
they found that this was still a no.
In fact the tangled argument got worse and worse,
a curse
on where to sit and how.

But then a nightingale in passing heard the row
and was implored in turn to simply end the doubt.

"A little patience from you sorts the matter out.
And for the quartet, see, at all events,
we've got the scores required and proper instruments.
So what's the seating sense?"
'Certainly you need some learning hereabout,
my tender ears cannot deny,'

was the nightingale's reply,
with 'friends, no matter your positions,
you've got no talent as musicians.'

Vasily Andreyevic Zhukovsky (1783-1852)

Vasily Andreyevic Zhukovsky was the leading pioneer of Russian poetry's Golden Age. As the natural son of a Russian landowner and a Turkish captive girl, he was given an excellent education and, after tutoring his cousins and joining the militia, became the most eminent member of the Arzamas circle of poets. He acted as tutor to the Princess of Prussia, then affianced to the future emperor Nicholas I, remaining close to court circles and becoming associated with Pushkin and then with Gogol. In 1841, Zhukovsky retired from court, married a young German woman, and lived thereafter in Germany.

Many poets of Russia's Golden Age had short and troubled lives. Zhukovsky was an exception. Throughout he seems balanced and sane, though given to some circumlocution and repetition. The language has not the colloquial ease of Pushkin, and any of his variety in theme, but can be eloquent and effective. Many of his poems were in fact translations of famous European pieces, which ended up in Russian being better poetry than their originals. Lalla Rookh, for example, was a long poem of Thomas Moore's, wildly successful in its day, which mixed the spice of eastern romance with exotic locations. Zhukovsky extracts the essence of the piece, adding a favourite contrast between an imagined heaven and a mundane earth.

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LALLA RUK

She was a dream, the soul's delight;
a guest possessing heaven's worth,
a visitor that in our sight
brought things celestial back to earth.

It was a moment only, then
that golden happiness was gone:
a generous messenger to men,
but with that insight faring on.

It was the promised land I saw,
the one that knows eternal peace:
where, ripening in myself, I'd draw
on Kashmir's long and fragrant lease.

Triumphantly I saw displayed
the rose and springtime festival
from lands yet far away, which made
a strange and alien spectacle.

A captivating brilliancy,
in being from no earthly skies,
when youth's unclouded purity
appeared before my startled eyes.

A thin, transparent veil or gown
concealed that lovely face from sight.
Modest, with her eyes cast down:
a gaze as gathered from great height.

And all within a naturalness,
a crown that threw a shimmering trace
on innocence, on liveliness:
what majesty informed that face —

And feelings only depths confess
or calm serenity will say.
As such it was an artlessness
more beautiful than words convey.

I watched; the apparition passed,
(still carrying the spirit on).
That very action could not last:
I followed but the shape was gone.

The vision was a fleeting hope
that lit up life a moment there,
a legend merely where we mope
forever after one affair.

For not with us will spirit stay,
where beauty soon is lost to sight.
It visits us but fades away
being born of some more heavenly light.

Impetuous may be the dreams,
that take on airy morning's part,
a Holy Remembrance that seems
inseparable and one with heart!

In moments only do we see
that entity where Happening starts:
a revelation that must be
a benefice to our fond hearts.

It is our feelings probe the skies
through these vast darkneses below.
We look as through a veil that lies
athwart what any earth can show.

And all that's beautiful down here,
that's life enhancing, true and whole
to our full senses, is thus clear,
must speak the language of the soul.

When we at last will go our way
with thoughts of love, that gift will tell
how sky lights up and long will stay
that star to bid us its farewell.

THE SINGER

Across clear waters, shading trees,
you see his grave, now do you, friends?
There is the bubbling sound spring-water sends,
and leaves are gently lifting with the breeze.
A lyre and crown are with the bough.
My friends, alas: this is the mound
conceals his ashes in the ground.
Sad the singer now.

A soul most gentle, and a simple heart,
but in the world no casual wanderer.
Far out of love of life he fell, and would prefer
to play a brief and yet unripened part.
All too early was his death,
the yearned-for grave, to which he came
with years undone, and sad the same
was this poor singer's breath.

He sang of friends and friendship's tenderness,
of faithful friend struck down about his prime.
He sang of love, but sadly, knew no time
when love produced few torments nonetheless.
Now that earthly race is run,
all striving in his soul can cease,
the grave is quiet, in sleep and peace
this poor singer won.

And sometimes in the evening, by the stream,
he sang a farewell song, and mournfully:
this world, which I delighted in, can be

a soul deceiving if forgiving dream.
Of happiness? Those hopes are gone,
all's perished: let my lyre be still,
but find that peaceful place, as will
this dreaming on.

What life is this if it can lack all charm?
The only bliss to fly on with the soul
to absences that are complete and whole,
from every hour of yearning and alarm.
O haven of the saddening hearts:
if grave's the better path to peace:
so will you take it and increase
this poor soul's parts?

The singer disappears, his lyre's not heard:
no trace of him pertains to vale or hills
and then a full and mournful absence fills
the place where winds and silences are heard.
So shakes the old and withered wreath
when winds will sometimes cross his grave,
and lyre echoes, with naught save
how sad the soul beneath.

THE BOATMAN

Disaster came with whirlwind force;
the oar and rudder, both, were gone.
Across the ocean's trackless course
misfortune drove my vessel on.

Above, in clouds, a star to see.
'Reveal yourself,' I cried aloft.
But, adamant, it hid from me.
The anchor here . . . and then was lost

All things were drenched in gloomy mist,
the waves in ramparts heaved around;
the great deeps yawned, and round me hissed
the neighbouring rocks, a hideous sound.

There is no hope of rescue here:
so said my soul's despondency.
Yet, madman! Providence was near.
A secret helmsman guided me.

An unseen hand was reaching out
above the wave's tumultuous roar,
and through the riotous waterspout
it drew me past that rocky shore.

A powerful guardian guided me,
and gone were roar and dark I feared:
There was a realm most heavenly
in which three angels had appeared.

In Providence was my salvation;
at once my murmured cries had ceased.
And on my knees, in admiration,
my gazing on them much increased.

Oh, who'll describe the charm they had?
Their power over soul's defence,
when all things of the sky were clad
in their most holy innocence?

Untested joy, untried before,
to live for them, their breath effect,
with, taken to my inmost core,
sweet looks and words I must accept.

Here is the fate I'm asking for —
those benefits on earth I knew
be known to them: I, suffering more,
would leave this world before they do.

NIGHT

Already now the weary day
towards the purple depths inclines;
the blue above but dimly shines
and then to shadows fades away.
The night assumes its peaceful way
along a quiet path, and day
becomes a wraith-like darkness, led
by Hesperus glimmering ahead.

Heavenly one, come down to us
and have that magic veil impart
your healing of forgetfulness;
give peace to every tired heart.
Bring thus to each tormented soul
the healing balm that makes us whole.
Calm the anguished, tossed and wild
as will a mother with her child.

Konstantin Batyushkov (1787-1855)

Konstantin Batyushkov was an aristocrat, an army officer and diplomat, but his primary vocation was poet, albeit a rather melancholic one. He wrote highly polished light verse, and was an accomplished translator of French, Italian, Greek and Roman poetry. Though he served throughout the Napoleonic Wars, the 1812 Invasion occasioned acute depression, and, on being refused in marriage to A.F. Furman in 1815, Batyushkov suffered a complete nervous breakdown. Thereafter his mental health fluctuated. He served as a Russian diplomat to Italy from 1818 to 1821, but collapsed into incurable insanity in 1822, writing no more until his death in 1855.

Batyushov's early love poems were conventional, somewhat sentimental, with stock phrases, but the tone darkened after exposure to the horrors of war. Several important pieces followed, including *The Shade of a Friend* featured here.

Batyushov's work is varied but held together by the tasteful expression of melancholy, a common tone but sometimes a rather abstract manner.

FAREWELL

A Hussar, on his sabre leaning,
stood where thoughts bowed down his head
on parting from the loved-one keening,
how long he sighed and said:

Don't cry, my beauty, lest Kuchina
have tears to tell where sorrows start.
I swear by honour and appearance,
I will not change this heart.

The power of love's unconquerable,
a faithful shield it stays through war;
with Lila's heart so comparable,
what is this doubting for?

Don't cry, my love, be well-behaved,
lest the shrill Kruchina see.
And should I change, my moustache shaved
shall serve as penalty.

More like my faithful horse betray me,
or to the enemy would flee,
some tangled bridle would delay me,
or stirrup fail for me.

Sooner would my sword and valour
like some rotten stick would break
and I appear in death's own pallor,
in terror start to quake.

The faithful horse, it did not stumble,
still dashing rode the regiment,
no battle saw his honour crumble,
the vow, it was, that bent.

Undone were former tears and passion,
with his dear shepherdess forgot,
so roses scattered in the earlier fashion
in some new lover's plot.

Did his own dear shepherdess long ponder,
or went she to some other breast?
So will the love in beauties wander
at promise made in jest.

So are all, however vehement:
and loyalty is far to seek,
for love is as winds' agreement,
or water arrows speak.

MY GUARDIAN SPIRIT

How much stronger is the heart
than reason's saddening memory:
it's charm that plays the distant part,
and sweetness that bewitches me.

It is the voice I most recall,
remember eyes of azure blue,
how carelessly in gold would too
the curling strands of tresses fall.

Incomparable my shepherdess:
how simple are the clothes you wear.
How neat the image that would bless
me, haunting here and everywhere.

My genius, loving guardian,
my solace when we're far apart.
And if I fall asleep, what then?
Sad dreams of you delight the heart.

SHADOW OF A FRIEND

*Sunt aliquid manes: letum non omnia finit; Luridaque
evictos effugit umbra rogos.*

*(Propertius 4.7. The Shades exist, and death not wholly
bounds our life: a sallow ghost escapes the pyre.)*

When I was leaving Albion's long-misted shores
the country there but dropping into leaden seas:
behind the ship the halcyon winds had cause
to quietly set the mariners more at their ease.

The evening's wind and waves, the check
of strain and flutter in repeated swell of sails:
the steersman calling orders from the deck,
the watchman lulled by languages of long sea trails.

With all things round reviving memories,
as by the mast I stood, there drawn to gentle thought,
when through the night and mists I will confess
it was the north star's kindly guiding light I sought.

My thought was wholly in remembering:
my fatherland of birth beneath the heavenly skies,
and noise that swirling waves and sea winds bring
to languorous oblivion that must cloud the eyes.

Dreams replaced by dreams, but say,
was it a dream? A comrade then appeared to me,
one lost to fire and gallantry,
a worthy death and by the Pleisse waters' way.

The view was not so terrible
nor forehead's wounds one dreadful hole.
The Maytime morning bloomed with joy, and full
were all things heavenly that there recalled the soul.

'Is this then you, my comrade, friend of better days?'
And really you, I cried, true soldier of the brave?
And am I not now here, at your untimely grave,
who fell to that fierce power that marks Bellona's blaze?

And am I not with loyal friends?
Were not those tree-recorded deeds but carved by me?
Does not a shade go with you in that land to be,
with sobs and tears that deep grief sends?

A shadow of the unforgettable! Answer me,
dear brother! Was not the all before but passing dream?
Everything: pale corpse, the grave, the obsequy,
as much as friendship's memory must make its theme?

Oh, speak! And have that past familiar sound now send
itself into my waiting ear.
Give me your hand, and may you, unforgotten friend,
press hard with love and still hold near.'

I flew to him. But now was his high spirit gone
through clear blue skies, fathomless, forever on:
and he, like smoke or meteor, ghost of deepest night,
was fled, and sleep had left my sight.

Yet all were slumbering round me, in one silence strewn
the mighty elements themselves were quiet as these,
and by the light above from thinly clouded moon
were waves, but barely sparkling, and a little breeze.

From me was gone the calm that quiet contentment sends,
and with the soul following the departed shade,
all urging him to stop, these guests from heights conveyed —
this you, my own dear brother, and the best of friends!

MADAGASCAR SONG

How sweet to sleep in this cool shade
while valley scorches in the heat:
the canopies are barely swayed
as leaves are to my breath's slow beat.

Come, gather wives, and with your hands
extend an easy circle here:
with soft, long words he'll understand
sow gladness in a kingly ear.

Sing a song that's soft and sweet,
and weave a basket of the hay,
when maiden, sitting in the wheat,
can scare the greedy birds away.

For heart can understand a song
however tired the spirit be.
And from afar that woven throng
of wives arranges pleasantly.

Be quiet, slow, be passionate:
so will the body live again,
as feelings everywhere relate
so move the leaves and breath in men.

The night air on the evening blows,
bright months upon the river pass:
we're lying here as temple shows
a peaceful bed of leaf and grass.

YOUTHFUL DAYS: TO THE AGEING BEAUTY

Why would you mourn the loss of those once youthful days
with you yourself not changed at all?

To me your loving's gaze
must yet appear, from year to year, more beautiful.

So do not think, my friend, that innocence would suit,
unskilled in love's deep mysteries.

Without life's fire your eyes appear both shy and mute,
with timid the uncaring kiss.

You're mistress of me, and I know
you'd breathe fierce passion into stone,
so, through the autumn of your days, the flames should glow
in life's full flood of blood you own.

Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837)

Alexander Pushkin is Russia's greatest poet, incomparably so. He was born in 1799 to an ancient aristocratic family and died of a duelling wound in 1837. In that short and often thwarted life, Pushkin modernized the Russian language, widening its vocabulary, removing archaic terms, and employing tones of address that would make Russian a fit vehicle for a century of poets, novelists and short story writers, many of them deservedly world famous.

Pushkin was precociously gifted, but the Russian state, autocratic, heavily-policed and backward-looking, saw in these eloquent outpourings only looming trouble. Alexander I was not particularly repressive, indeed brought modernizing notions when he ascended the throne in 1801, but the French Revolution had sent shudders through the thrones of Europe. The much more authoritarian Nicholas I, who recalled Pushkin from exile, himself suffered the Decembrist Uprising. The coup was quickly put down and its participants made an example to others, but the discovery of Pushkin's poems among the Decembrists' papers did not endear him to the authorities.

Thereafter, Pushkin's writing was a continual battle against censorship: that he produced so much of brilliance is an overwhelming tribute to human fortitude. Pushkin's poetry is not one of striking image or melody, incidentally, but of an astonishingly apt use of Russian.

TO ANNA KERN

I call to mind a moment's wonder
when you appeared before my eyes:
a vision of pure beauty under
our poor fleeting human guise.

In that languor, sad surrender
to a world of vain alarms,
that voice stayed with me, ever tender,
calling up your features' charms.

So passed the years; rebellion's thunder
scattered dreams without a trace,
that gentle accent torn asunder;
and I forgot that heavenly face.

In darkness, in the heart's privation,
the sullen days dragged into years.
There was no heaven or inspiration;
there was no love or life or tears.

But all at once the soul's new woken:
you pass before me once again:
a fleeting vision's once more spoken
as beauty shows herself to men.

The heart now beats in acclamation,
restored to that high heaven above:
with holiness and inspiration,
arise his life and tears and love.

BOUND FOR FAR-OFF NATIVE SHORES

Bound for far-off, native shores,
you left the alien land you knew.
What sad, remembered hour would cause
those endless tears I shed for you?
My hands felt colder as they tried
to more prevent your leaving me.
With dreadful longing, still I cried
for all continuing, endlessly.

How bitter then was that last kiss
with which you tore yourself away.
But to our gloomy land comes this
long summoning, where you can say:
some promised day as fate may please,
below that sky's unchanging blue,
we'll kiss beneath the olive trees,
my friend, and kindle love anew.

But there, alas, where that far sky
is vaulted with such brilliant blue,
are shaded ways where there will lie
the other night that bid adieu.
You fell asleep, and so were gone
all pain and beauty. In that urn
were confined kisses, kissing on . . .
and I still waiting their return.

I LOVED YOU

I loved you, love you still, that adoration
perhaps commemorates your lingering sway.
I would not trouble with a dedication,
or have you saddened now in any way.

I loved so silently, so hopelessly,
that all turned envy, as such shyness can.
God grant that true and tender love may be
as fully given by some other man.

WINTER MORNING

Frost and sun: entrancing blend
with you asleep, my lovely friend.
It's time to put that beauty forth,
and open wide those sleepy eyes
towards the cold aurora skies:
become the lodestar of the north.

Last night, recall, a snowstorm blew:
a murky sky, wind howling through.
The pale dun moon but barely rose
but gave the clouds a gloomy hue,
as saddened you were sitting too.
Come, look at what the window shows.

The snow, beneath the deep blue skies,
now as a sumptuous carpet lies,
each feature sunlit and precise.
And, darkly through wood's thin screen
of frost, a fir-tree gathers into green,
as river glints beneath the ice.

The whole room has an amber sheen,
and, adding to this cheerful scene,
the stove puts out a crackling sound.
But from this couch, still dreamy eyed,
it's time for us to take a ride:
let's have the mare and sledge brought round.

My dear friend: gliding through the snow,
we'll have the whole contraption go
as fast as horse will take us, see
in empty squares the fields arranged,
the densest forests vastly changed
by riversides most dear to me.

CONFESSION

Incensed by you, for you I sigh
even as my love is shaming.
Against my will am I proclaiming,
vanquished, at your feet I lie.

Away from you I'm bored and yawning,
with you sad, though I endure
again a passion that is dawning
in my soul for one so pure.

How innocent that girlish chatter,
then I hear your step next door:
instantly my poor wits scatter:
what is all this longing for?

You smile, and happiness I'm feeling:
turn away and dark is day,
but at the torment I'm revealing,
one pale hand is all you pay.

Diligent, you're bent at needle:
against that look the heart is feeble.
By those eyes and curls beguiled
that I'm astonished, of all people,
wondering at you as a child.

Should I tell you, when together
of the jealousies I know,
or when you walk in frightful weather
I dread the distances you go.

And in the carriage to Oepochka
with tears so silent, out of sight,
the corner piece must be the watcher,
as at piano late at night.

I do not dare to ask for love.
Pity me, my dear Alina.
For every sin and misdemeanour
I beg alone of Him above!

My angel: let's pretend it's so,
that your expression may deceive.
See! How happily you leave
me well contented not to know.

THE CAUCASUS

Around me looms the Caucasus: a view
of snow-draped cliffs and slopes, and here my eyes
pick out an eagle, one whose far off rise
seems almost motionless, as I am too.
In these great heights whole rivers have their birth,
and levelling avalanches threaten earth.

The humble clouds are hiding what's below,
but give a glimpse of thundering waterfalls
that echo emptily through mountain walls.
Here mosses starve and shrivelled bushes grow
above the groves: rich canopies of green
where wild deer leap and birds sing on unseen.

Good folk are nestled in these mountain flanks,
and sheep will venture down long slopes of grass.
How happily through valleys shepherds pass,
as must the Aragva through shaded banks.
No timid horseman takes the gorge today
while Terek leaps and foams in angry play.

An animal it is, that howls the more
for prey outside the iron bars of cage.
It strikes at banks around with helpless rage
and through the cliffs it runs its hungry maw,
but finds no food or rest: the rooted force
of huge rocks holds it on its headlong course.

THE PROPHET

Dark wandering through the desert ways,
my soul athirst for Heavenly grace,
I saw a six-winged seraph blaze
above my pathway's crossing place.

He brushed my eyes, as dreams are light,
and with his fingers purged my sight

which, like a startled eagle's eye,
could open wide and prophecy.
He touched my ears and they were drowned
with coming hard and ringing sound.

In Heaven's commotions I could see
the throngs of angels passing by,
huge monsters that in oceans lie,
how slow the growth in vine could be.

He took my mouth and from it wrung
the sayings of my sinful tongue.

From lies and craftiness he planned
to have the serpent draw its sting,
to my unmoving lips he'd bring
the blood-red power of his right hand.

Then with a sword he cut my breast
and from it tore my trembling heart.
He took a burning coal and pressed
it deep within that emptied part.

To me, a corpse in desert lands,
the voice of God gave His commands:

'See, my prophet, and be heard.
Perform my will and let it span
all lands and oceans, that my word
cast fire into the heart of man.'

NATALYA'S LETTER

I write to you, and this confession
leaves little of my thoughts unsaid.
No doubt it makes a poor impression
where you may scorn me, one ill-bred
enough as fall to indiscretion.

But, if there's pity in you, think
of how I feel, and do not shrink
from giving grounds for hoping, seeing
I never wanted you to know
how far this girlish heart would go.
My simple wish? To will your being

round the village once a week
or so, to see you, hear you speak
of something fuller in your greeting,
yes, something other you might say,
and altogether, night and day,
resolve upon another meeting.

But you're, they say, unsociable,
and hate our rural isolation,
and we, of course, are awfully dull
but pleased you grace our invitation.

Why did you visit us, pay call
on such a wretched isolation?
I'd not have known you then at all,
nor felt that wild exhilaration
become the heart's deep laceration.
I could have found some other you,
in time, to friendship acquiescing,
have made a wife, and thence, progressing,
been found a virtuous mother too.

Another? No, there's no one ever
in this wide world to take your place:
by Heaven I am yours forever,
and bound to you by Heaven's grace.
We walk a conjoined path together.
My life till now is as this heart:
what God has made we can't untether,
the grave alone will tear apart.

For you appeared to me in dreaming,
invisible, but dear to me;
that torment was my destiny,
and in my soul your words were seeming . . .

And from the first those thoughts have stayed,
when in you walked, not wild delusion
but adding to my stunned confusion:
I saw the man for whom I prayed,

and heard him also while attending
to what was silence, pure and whole,
as in my prayers, and likewise bending
to clothes of poor folk I was mending:
in pain and rapture was my soul.

And at this moment, as I write,
aren't you the foremost in my sight?

In darkness even, I could hear,
at my headboard, through my slumber,
the words that love and joy encumber,
and hope was with them, quiet and clear.

My guardian angel, aren't you, who
would never tempt with things not true?

Resolve the matter, tell the truth:
this may be all an aberration,
inexperience that comes with youth,
who's destined for some other station . . .

Well, be it so! You are my fate.
I'm wholly under your direction.
I place myself in your protection
though bitter tears may come too late,

Imagine how alone I stood
where no one had the least conception
of my thoughts and my dejection,
of silences then kept for good.

So now I wait. Your words approaching
may, of course, revive my hope
but just as likely give you scope
to censor with deserved reproaching.

I daren't reflect on what I've done,
the fears and shame I may be reaping,
my honour though you cannot shun
that's here entrusted to your keeping.

REMEMBRANCE

When all the mortal din and clangour of the town
lie still, and on the silent squares
the insubstantial shadows of the night sink down
in sleep that's refuge from our cares,

for me a silent languishing fills out the night,
and tedious vigils drag their course,
when through that stilled vacuity there comes the bite
of burning serpents of remorse.

Dreams boil in me. Dark longings overwhelm the mind.
Excessive thoughts weigh down my soul.
Before my eyes the vile remembrances unwind
their silent, all-too lengthy scroll,
where I must stare with horror on my wasted years,
and, trembling, curse my natal day.
How bitterly I wail, but know no bitter tears
can wash a sorry line away.

THE GYPSIES (opening excerpt)

The gypsies in their noisy way
that far through Bessarabia roam
are camped across the river, stay
in threadbare tents that make their home.

5. But they are free. The heavens keep
their welcome for this peaceful race.
Between the wagon wheels they sleep:
the folded rugs give each his place.

A fire burns. Around the blaze
10. are people on their dinner bent.
In open fields the horses graze;
a tame bear's loose behind the tent.

The steppelands come alive with sound
when on the morrow all are found —
while children cry, and women sing —
to exit from their camping ground
to beats the marching anvils bring.

For now there's only silence where
the night for nomads takes its course.
20. The bark of dog or neigh of horse
comes thinly through the steppeland air.

The lights are doused, and everywhere
a calm collects. The moon is bright.
The camp beneath its heavenly care
is flooded with a silver light.

But one old man is not asleep
and from the warmth the ashes keep
still gazes from his tent to see
across the steppeland's distant sweep
30. the night mists glimmer hazily.

There went his daughter, far from sight —
so much in love of freedom grown
she often wandered on her own.
She will return, but now the night

is dark about him, moon foretold
to leave its cloudy-pillared state,
yet no Zemfira comes, and cold
the scraps of food left on his plate.

But here she is, and with her too,
40. impatiently, a young man fares
towards him now, no face he knew.
'This man, my father,' she declares,

'will be our guest tonight. I lead
one lost in steppelands, one I found
far wandering from the funeral mound,
that, keen to learn our gypsy creed,

would now adopt our easy ways.
Although the law may seek his end,
Aleko is my choice and stays
50. my follower and closest friend.'

* * *

A grave was dug beside the road.
The wives in sad succession went
and on cold lids their kiss bestowed.
The old man, on his own, half-crazed,
at those still figures dumbly gazed.

520. But when those looks had drunk their fill
of anguish and of sorrow's worth,
they took each one and in the earth
interred them quietly, cold and still.

Aleko from afar seemed dazed
but watched to see the last soil spill
and put the figures out of sight.
Silently he bowed his head,
from tombstone fell to grassy bed.

And then the old man, drawing near,
530. said, 'Youth, you are not wanted here.
Though wild we may be, know no laws,
exact no blood in penalty,
but with a murderer won't have cause
to live in former amity.

You were not born to freedom's wealth
but seized it solely for yourself.
Repugnant is that brazen voice
to us of quiet communities.
Be gross and strong: such is your choice,

540. which we forgive. So go in peace.'
With wailing cries at his release

the gypsies streamed away. They left
the valley of that dreadful night,
and on that plain, of them bereft,
was but one cart, poor carpet found
to mark that fatal camping ground,
as sometimes, on a winter's dawn,
across the fields the mist is drawn

550. to screen where some such village lies.
Late cranes start up, with haunting cries,

and, flapping ever southward, find
what grievous hurt the hunters bring,
as one bird sadly limps behind
and trails its gunshot-heavy wing.

The night has come. No fire is lit,
no figure's vigil there is kept;
no one has warmth or cheer in it,
or long beneath that awning slept.

Epilogue

560. Such is the magic power of song
that distant memories may stir:
envisioned hopes for which we long,
then sadnesses our lives incur.

And in these lands of long abuse,
where sounds of warfare never cease
and might of Russian arms reduce
the limits of the Turkish lease:

the double-headed eagle reigns
in glory and its ancient gains.

570. And on these steppes I've often met,
beyond the ancient battlefields,
the carts and young of gypsies set
on paths their wandering freedom yields.

Behind those crowds I've also kept
their faith in common fortitude,
have often shared their simple food,
and by their welcome fires have slept.

I too have loved each slow campaign
and in their cheerful manner sung
580. of Mariuly, sweet among
the names that I repeat again.

To all our joys comes ill intent:
the meekest have their frailties,
and under the most airy tent
live painful dreams and memories.

In empty canopies, about
the desert wastes, fierce mischiefs wait.

Our harmful passions find us out:
there is no refuge from our fate.

BRONZE HORSEMAN

Prelude

It was a wave-swept, empty shore
that he was brooding on. Before
him lay great distances. Alone
the rough, uncaring river bore
a small skiff faltering on its own.

A shoreline mass of moss and reeds
where, answering to their modest needs,
the Finns had built a hut or two,
then sunless woods where all recedes
10. to noises far around and through.

It's here, he thought, the Swede will learn
to take good measure of us, see
in well-laid city our concern
that stiff-necked neighbours bend their knee,
when nature here, at our request,
has made a window on the west.

So will these waters, new-possessed,
secure a footfall out to sea,
where any flag may call and be,
20. if well-disposed, our welcome guest.

A hundred years have passed. We see
a realm to wonder at. From thence,
a gloomy place of swamp and tree,
has risen proud magnificence.

Once haunt of Finnish fisher-lad —
mere child of nature, seeking what
on these low shores might yet be had,
which was but fish, and meanly got —
finds now that on such water pours
30. a wealth of commerce. Round its shores

are rows of shipping craft below
great towers and palaces, and each,
from foremost nations' furthest reach,
are seeking berths where fresh ships go.

In granite built each Neva quay,
and over waters bridges lean
to link the islands in between
with gardens of dark greenery.

So now old Moscow is outshone
40. by this new capital, as has been
the porphyritic one, who's gone
before our freshly sceptred queen.

I love you, Peter's prime creation,
how stern and splendid you appear,
the raging Neva's tribulation
that granite banks are guiding here.

I love your railings, iron-cast,
your long and tender, brooding nights,
how pale the moonless evenings passed
50. when book or pen would need no lights.
I looked out from my room to see
a vast, quiescent community:
wide streets lay bare and, tinged with fire,
the Admiralty's bright-gilded spire.

Indeed, that darkness should not smother
for good the heaven's radiant power,
each dawn will chase upon another
and leave for night but half an hour.

I love your winter's biting air,
60. your cruelty in wind and snow,
the sleds along the Neva where
the girls have faces set aglow.

I love commotion, talk of balls,
of bachelors, and madcap names,
the ease by which the champagne calls
to punch bowls lit with thin blue flames.

I love what speed and skill approve:
formations on the plain of Mars,
cavalry, soldiers, proud Hussars:
70. how seamlessly massed ranks will move.

I love to see the regiments
beneath their battle honours go;
the gleaming copper caps that show
the cost that came with great events.

I love our capital of war,
the smoke and thunder of our fort,
our full-fledged queen produce once more
a son to dignify our court.

Or when the news of victory is brought,
80. when motherland has won again.
The blue ice cracks; the Neva bears
away to sea our winter cares,
and soon will joyous spring begin.

Saint Petersburg, all hail to you,
unshakeable as Russia's land:
keep foes at bay, nor yet undo
the offer forged by peaceful hand.

Though enmity of old be true;
let now the Finnish waves forget,
90 and so no futile spite beget
an end to Peter's final rest.
It was a brutal time, confessed
by all who can remember it.

My friends, I have no more to add,
but start my tale, which I admit,
will be but dire and pressing sad.

MONUMENT

I've reared a monument not built by human hands,
nor can the common path to it be overgrown:
with high, rebellious head, it loftier stands
than Alexander's pillared stone.

My name shall echo through the Russian world, be heard
in every tongue that our vast motherland accepts.
In this Slavs, Finns and Tungus grandsons have concurred,
in friendship with the Kalmyk steppes.

For all eternity, I shall be loved by them.
My lyre has given their every cherished feeling birth,
nor would my free voice in an iron age condemn
the abject fallen of the earth.

I will not wholly die when soul is in the lyre.
Beyond this world of ashes and corrupting pain
I stand more glorious when world beneath the moon expire
but still one poet there remain.

Attend God's word alone, my muse. But Him obey.
Fear not inferiors, nor seek the poet's bay.
For you, indifferent to all praise and censure, stay
untouched by what the foolish say.

Evgeny Abramovich Baratynsky (1800-1844)

Evgeny Abramovich Baratynsky was briefly educated in an aristocratic military school, served in the Petersburg footguards, was posted to Finland, and began writing the poetry much admired by Pushkin's friends and their circle. In 1826 he married and settled in Moscow, turning out several volumes of verse. The early work is light verse, but fastidiously turned, and then came three verse novels: *Eda*, *The Ball* and *The Gypsy Girl*, reminiscent of Pushkin, but more realistic and less successful. Pushkin's earlier poetry has an easy naturalness, but in Baratynsky the careful thought and effort remain in the lines, accomplished though they are.

Baratynsky's verse is sonorous, with a cold, metallic brilliance that brings out a carefully tempered wit that belongs more to the previous century. Like the equally famous *Autumn* of 1837, his *Death* of 1829 is also splendidly rhetorical in the grand manner of classicism, but with Baratynsky's own personal note of melancholy.

THE SKULL

Departed brother: who disturbed your sleep,
ignored the sanctity of your small shrine?
That I, descending to the house you keep,
can hold your wan, dry skull in hands of mine?

Here are the remnants of the hair you had,
which shows the downhill course of your decay.
How terrible to know, and passing mad,
that I'm the heir of all your thoughts today.

I have a crowd of youths about me, who
in mindless reverie race round this pit:
But were my hands to lift this head of you
alive: what prophecies would come from it!

If only it had taught us, rich in blooms,
but menaced hourly by approaching death,
what truths can lie within the shade of tombs,
but speak out soberly with level breath.

And say? A hundred times the law will tell
us hold our mouths to what is left unsaid,
and right the ancient customs that compel
us keep to dreams commanded of the dead.

Let the living live; let the dead decay;
let all accept the Lord's omnipotence.
And know, O man, at last, speak as you may,
you've neither wisdom nor omniscience!

We need both passions and our dreams;
they are the law and nourishment we crave.
One law for both we can't obey, nor seems
the noisy world to serve for silent grave.

The wise will not discount what feelings give,
though not the answers that our graves supply.
Let life give happiness to those who live,
and death instruct the leaving how to die.

DEATH

Call death no daughter of the dark
nor yet the dreamings of a slave,
nor will a coffin serve to mark
and stop the scythe above the grave.

It is the offspring of the air,
a radiant beauty, one alive
to what the peaceful olives bear
and not disasters of the scythe.

And when the world arose in flowers
and forces, checked, should find consent,
it was for your almighty powers
that you were called omnipotent.

A ruling all creation sees
you bring an order, bring a peace
and, in this, like a cooling breeze
insist that being's riot cease.

You tame the most rebellious,
and curb the power of hurricane:
and waves, the most tempestuous,
you turn toward the shore again.

You set the bounds to humble plants,
even to forests' enterprise:
you set your shadow over each advance
that grasses do not touch the skies.

As holy virgin to the man
you come to douse his instant fires
that quietly he submits and can
be master of those fierce desires.

Befriended by the righteous, you
will bring all nature to its fate.
To your caressing hand will too
fall both the lowliest and the great.

Compulsions and perplexity,
where all our losses wipe out gains:
in this much-tangled world you free
us of our mysteries and chains.

AUTUMN

1. It's now September, when the dawn comes late,
 though sun shines brightly, thin and cold,
and mirrored waters in their wavering state
 are shaken into trembling gold.

Grey shrouding mists enclose surrounding hills,
 and dews across the valleys spread;
the oaks in coppices show yellow frills,
 the aspen leaf is round and red.

The birds fall silent at a human sound,
and quiet the trees and skies for far around.

2. September, evening of the year: we see
 across the fields and hills how much
the freezing mornings leave a filigree
 of silver on each thing they touch.

Now woken up, the wild Aeolus breeze
 in flying dust-storms whirls and grieves
and, howling through the forest canopies,
 fills thick the air with falling leaves.

The clouds, collecting, stream about and roam,
and rivers, raging, darken into foam.

3. Take leave, take leave of heavens as they were,
of nature throned in beauty's state.

Entranced, the whispering forest is astir;
with scales of gold lies rimmed the lake.

Here all too short are summer's days of bliss.

The woodsman's axe is sounding tight
and hard, for now these empty groves are his.

Soon snow comes covering all with white.
The oaks and hills take on the winter's hue;
as mist are frozen depths of rivers too.

4. The villager now finds the time he lacked
to gather in the twelve-month yield,
and, with the straw now mown and tightly stacked,
he takes a sickle to the field.

The grain falls quickly to his walking blade,
and sheaves are heaped up high about.

In sacks the grain on creaking carts is laid,
the trains of wagons leading out,
or heaped in domes until they overtop
the roofs of dwellings in their golden crop.

5. The villagers now celebrate the day
and even roast a sheep or two.
The sickle done, the millstone grinds away,
and turning mill takes centre view.
Let the great cold come! The serf has gained enough
to see him through the winter's freeze.
The hut is warm. With bread and such-like stuff
and foaming beer they take their ease.
With family, untroubled, each man sits down
to relish what his fruits of labour crown.

6. So when you meet the autumn of your days
and gather up the tillage there,
will yours be merited, the fruits and praise
as this, their earthly life you share?
And have you kept rectitude in force,
as guiding action through the years
as these have through their long rewarding course,
this harvest of their hopes and fears?
And is your harvest there the seeds of thought
sustained in destinies as well it ought?

7. And are you rich now as that farmer was
who sowed like you his hopeful streams,
who vowed that distant day would be, because
of his much cherished, gilded dreams . . . ?
Admire, be proud of one that has rebelled
and count the things you have acquired,
for all that dreams and passions have compelled
contempt for what you once desired,
and the soul's irresistible disgrace
results in lies and insults you must face.

8. Your day has risen now, and all too clear
the force of youth's credulity,
where you have tested to its depth the sheer
folly of hypocrisy,
and found, who once were enterprise's friend
and would with each researcher press,
but only brilliant mists, and in the end
a sad and barren emptiness,
and yet that groaned regret for hopes that died
is barely dampened by your human pride.

9. But if, indignantly, a cry went up
that spoke of wells of anguish there,
that heart's own fountains were in fact a cup
that held but wild and solemn care,
the simple children at their games would stop
and feel a shaking of their bones,
and babies fingering their toys would drop
their playthings and, with sobbing groans,
desert this world before humanity
could summon death itself to set them free.

10. Throw wide your doors, inviting everyone
at once to join your bustling ways.
Seat all your guests, excluding none
from what the tinsel sight portrays.
What dishes you could lay before them, what
delicacies to lead them on:
a glittering banquet, yet the taste they've got
is as the grave where all have gone.
Sit down alone, and at those funeral rites
acknowledge soul must leave these earth's delights.

11. Say what it is you hear within your breast
and offer as enlightenment?
What whirl of thoughts and feelings have their rest
in some sweet truth and are content?
Is it not the triumph of the useless heart
to tremble at the days to come
and each complaining, worthless, babbling part
to then fall silent and be dumb?
Experience of life, the greatest gift of all,
confines the soul within its icy thrall.

12. Or, banishing this vision of the earth,
revived by some great surge of grief,
you see, and not far off, the realms of worth,
beyond the dark of disbelief,
where all is fairly shared, revitalized,
and innate trustfulness renewed;
and reconciliation recognized
in tumult of the songs pursued
to those great harmonies we barely hear
on harps too lofty for our human ear.

13. Before that necessary Providence
you'll fall with glad humility,
with hope that needs no bounding rim of sense,
and minds fulfilled that can agree.
That view is yours to keep, but not pass on;
it stays an inner truth for you:
when all to childish vanities are gone,
to what the everyday calls true,
for deepest oceans and the mountain peak
are not constrained by what poor earthlings speak.

14. Violently there roars the hurricane
while woods return a dialect,
the stormy ocean has an angry train
which waves along the shore reflect.
So sometimes lazy crowds can feel, although
the minds be half dissolved in sleep.
A voice that's crude and commonplace may flow
with some faint echoes of the deep,
but no such echoes of the word are cast
when things most passionate from earth have passed.

15. So let them be, with their mistaken flight,
who turn on back with nothing gained.
A star in heaven's abyss sinks from sight
but yet their number is maintained;
the loss to us on earth does not appear
for few there are to notice it,
and too far off is howling on the ear,
or high the ether to admit
that one new star among her sisters brings
such rapturous welcoming that heaven sings.

16. The winter nears and on the patchy ground
appears a barren emptiness.
Though joyful sheaves of corn lie thick around,
the gold abounding to excess,
in life there's death, and thus in wealth there's dearth,
and soon the year's variety
is spread the same beneath the snowy earth,
and in a sad monotony
will all things lie, for, when our task is done
on earth, there are no further harvests won.

SPRING HAS COME

Spring! Spring! How clear the air!
Unclouded are the skies!
And all around a living blue,
whose brilliance blinds my eyes!

Spring, spring, how very high
the heady breezes reach:
the clouds caressed by sunlight fly
aloft and each on each.

Streams murmuring! Streams glistening!
The rivers, roaring, bear,
triumphantly, in broken pieces,
the ice uplifted there.

The trees are bare, but in the grove
the first of leaves appear.
Beneath my foot, as was before,
spring's sounds and smells are here.

Unseen in sunlight, up it soars,
a high and brilliant thing:
for so the soaring lark begins
its joyous hymn to spring.

So what has happened to the soul
that babbles with the brook?
What murmurs with the bird along
the upward path it took?

Why is it glad to find itself
by sun and spring increased:
a daughter of the elements
attending to the feast?

Happy the one who's drunk full deep
of what he cannot say,
contentedly to not reflect:
in wonder borne away.

DISSUASION

Unneeded are those tempting ways,
and all returns to tenderness:
How strange that disappointing gaze
which fancies of the past profess!

Assurances I don't believe,
nor think that love can last in men.
I can't surrender once again,
and broken dreams I'll not retrieve.

That blind devotion once is gone,
and words are pointless, never end.
So if you'd truly act the friend,
you'll leave him quietly sleeping on.

I sleep, am sweetly lulled to sleep
and dreams, once past, I shall forget.
That tumult in the soul I keep
but love is not awoken yet.

Nikolay Mikhaylovich Yazykov (1803-46)

Nikolay Mikhaylovich Yazykov was a major poet of the Russian 1820s, inferior only to Pushkin and Baratynsky in stylish accomplishments. Like them, he was a master craftsman, but his verse is harder, more forceful and more obviously controlled. Many pieces are tours de force, and have a cold crystalline splendour, where any feeling for subject takes second place to the intoxicating rhythms and sheer nervous energy.

His first poems appeared in 1822, shortly after which he went to the university of Dorpat in Germany and began turning out the riotous Anacreontic verses that celebrated student life. Yazykov was not in any way an intellectual poet, however, and though he was idolized by the Slavophiles, that fame did not extend to the Idealists, who found the work fatally empty of ideas. Yazykov's health was never good, and, weakened by the Dorpat excesses, began to fail early. By 1835, the man was a permanent invalid, wandering from one health resort to another in search of cures for his dyspepsia and gout.

This poem, *The Rhine* of 1840, with its extended catalogue of Volga tributaries, is one of the great triumphs of Russian verbal art.

EVENING

Vast shades of mountains fall about the dormant bay.
The olive and lemons gardens leave the coastal way
in darkness. To the west the brilliant glitterings of the sea
announce a cheerful loveliness. God's day will be
a heaped-up mass of purples and bright golds that pass
across extended waters clear and chaste as glass.

THE RHINE

I've watched your emerald waters in their sport
that, through the morning light of day,
would noisily and brilliantly cavort
and lull me in their easy sway.

I've seen your richly painted tapestries,
your wide slow bends and great expanse,
your poplars and your dancing chestnut trees,
the vines that clothe the mountain flanks.

I've seen your mountains with a lofty tomb
where former heroes are interred:
there strength and chivalry had sumptuous bloom:
how long ago all that occurred.

You've heard of Volga lands I answer for?
These are her greetings, kindly meant:
while you are grand and beautiful, she's more
imperially magnificent.

5. A deeper, faster, wider, fuller blue!
nor are her surfaces so weak
as break in torrents at a storm like you
in which the whipped up waters speak.

She's more tumultuous: in bursts of spring
you cannot see where banks have been:
and those vast distances the wide floods bring
leave seas and islands in between.

And like the river is our empire's course:
she is the mistress of herself.
With waters from their glorious Russian source
come notices of solemn wealth.

All through her hills and mountains, fruiting valleys,
to the Caspian waves are hers
like greetings brought to noble tributaries
of princes and their followers.

There is the Tvertsy where smooth water sees
great spreads of vessels, thousands strong:
each moves in beautiful but varied ease,
as does a swimmer's full-breath song.

10. Greetings from the Oka River's heady spate
across the length of Murom sands,
here notable for brilliant, regal state
through this most venerable of lands.

Here are monasteries, bright cupolas
reflected in clear water depths:
across quiet surfaces the soft peals pass
as cherished centuries elapse.

Though Sura the beautiful is lost in thought,
half hidden in her forest veils,
in fields she is of shining silver wrought
beneath the spread of fan-like sails.

Sviyagi is playful, pagan, ever turning
to worries for her household's sake:
and in her waterwheels a restless churning
hum that working waters make.

Greetings from the far Biarmia lands,
from rivers of the icy queen:
Wide and deep the gloomy Kama stands,
its stormy currents fierce and keen.

15. The Katya: flinty shores and leaden vault
through which the screeching eagle floats,
has iron and timber, mountainous heaps of salt
all carried on gigantic boats.

Greetings from the Samara, hardly heard
above the incessant merchant's noise.
They load their boats with that full wealth transferred
from golden fields their wheat enjoys.

Greetings from the dashing Cheremshan,
with double Irgiz lands on call,
and from the quiet and freely flowing Syzran
sections: rivers large and small.

Flow on with your uncounted tributaries,
illustrious river of the north:
greeting the most glorious contemporaries:
prince of rivers, flow on forth.

So may you shine the same, be undeterred
by rain or storm or enemy:
despite their songs no conquest has occurred
when shores remain at peace and free.

20. It's well to dream and walk beneath the shade
of spreading branches, stop or pass.
May love and youth with sweet exchanges made
clink ringing azure glass with glass.

Alexy Koltsov (1809-42)

Alexy Koltsov was the self-taught native singer that appears from time to time in Russia's literary history. Koltsov was not a 'son of the soil', but a merchant, the son of a cattle dealer in Voronezh. Though essentially remaining a provincial attached to country ways, Koltsov was introduced to literary society in Petersburg and Moscow, and could count Krylov, Viazemsky and Puskin among his friends.

Though seeming simple country songs, often (as here) unrhymed, Koltsov's poems conceal a good deal of literary craft. They are highly finished and coherent pieces. When rhymed, the line endings can be dactylic, i.e. feature an extra unstressed syllable. Many of the poems are on personal themes, of rural poverty and injustice, featuring the runaway serf, the robber, and rebellious youth.

Love is apt to be unrequited, forced or lost through death. Sorrow is a constant theme, combined by a wistfulness, even a resentment. Some of the best-known pieces were set to music by Rimsky-Korsakov, Musorgsky and Balakirev.

KOLTSOV: SONG

Sing not, nightingale,
nor haunt my window here,
but fly to woods
and larger motherland!

And though you keep to window,
my own sweet soul,
bid it now farewell.

Say how much I long,
and am without her lost,
how much I'm withering,
as does the autumn grass.

Without her through the night
how the month is dark,
midday lacks its fire,
the sun goes on its way.

Without her, who am I?
Who will greet me kindly,
on whose breast to lie,
and softly rest my head?

Did I say I'd hear
what greeting song will say,
how it hurts the heart?

Why sing, nightingale?
Fly, fly away,
my own sweet soul.

Fëdor Ivanovich Tyutchev (1803-73)

It was 1854 before Tyutchev's poetry appeared in book form, when he was better known for reactionary pan-Slavic views, which offended the more liberal opinion of the day.

Tyutchev's work, occasional and never abundant, was rediscovered by Nekrasov, and remains celebrated for its lyrical nature pieces and intense love poetry. The last was inspired by wives and mistresses, most particularly by Elena Denisieva, his daughter's associate, with whom he had a long and passionate association that did little to harm his reputation but wholly ruined hers. When, in 1864, Mlle Denisieva died, Tyutchev was plunged into grief and despair, his remorse only sharpened by the forbearance shown by his then second wife.

Tyutchev is now regarded as the true descendent of Pushkin: the little poems sent to *Sovremennik* are known by heart across Russia and the love poems speak of a torment that no one will wish to experience. All the poetry, except the savage invective of the late political pieces, which can rise into true eloquence, is pantheistic, profoundly pessimistic and dualistic, indeed Manichaen. The Cosmos around us is always at the mercy of Chaos. Our existence here is fleeting and precarious. Tyutchev's poems are the more remarkable in that he used Russian infrequently: his wives did not speak Russian, and Tyutchev's everyday speech and correspondence was in French.

SPRING STORM

I love a storm in early May,
when first of thunder crackles through
the frolic of a happy day
reverberating into blue.

New peals of thunder. Spread among
the dust thrown up in plashy spreads
are liquid pearls of raindrops strung
upon the sunlight's golden threads.

Then floods on mountain slopes appear,
and bird songs come from woods around:
the hill and forest calls are here
now gathered in one gladdened sound.

You'll say that Hebe, giving sup
to Zeus' eagle here has downed
the thunder from her heavenly cup
and, laughing, spilled it on the ground.

AUTUMN EVENING

What graciousness the autumn evening has;
what charms are here, mysterious and sweet.
In brightness mixed, the trees are ominous,
and leaves fall red and rustling at our feet.

A blue that's lightly touched with fog now forms
above this sadly-orphaned forest spot:
a premonition too of coming storms,
of cold and gusty winds, as like as not.

Exhaustion, injury, a going hence,
from everything a smile that's fading out,
which, could we read intelligence, we'd sense
as suffering — shy and holy and devout.

WINTER HAS THE SNOW

Winter has the snow
angrily on guard.
Rapped windows show
it driven from the yard.

So the bluster, bringing
warmth and brighter spells:
larks in the sky, ringing
peals of happy bells.

Still the winter tries
to undo noisy spring
with laughter in her eyes:
tumult in everything.

Spring is a mad witch, wild
at capturing the day.
Snow is a beautiful child
running and running away.

Spring will have the snow
rinse itself in heat:
red cheeks begin to glow
and signal cold's defeat.

WINTER IS THE TRUE MAGICIAN

Winter is the true magician,
bewitched by him the forest stands.
Here a snow-hung apparition,
lacking voice and all volition,
brings new brilliance to these lands

How stilled and awed are depths around,
which stay not living nor are dead,
but in a magic dream are found
mesmerized, securely bound
by chains of downy white instead.

Should round them move the winter sun
on wavering shafts of slanting light,
no tremulation brings undone
the flaring beauty it has won:
a dazzling wonderland of white.

I LOVE THOSE FERAL EYES

I love those feral eyes, my friend:
alluringly you glance around,
and, all at once, those lids will bend
as heaven's own lightning to the ground:
such is the fluent power they send.

A stronger charm the head acquires
when from the kissing downward go
the half-closed eyes, and it transpires
that through the lowered lashes glow
the sullen heats of those desires.

A GOLDEN TIME I HAVE IN MIND

A golden time I have in mind
that on the edge of sweetness stayed.
The evening over, we two find
ourselves in Danube's rustling shade.

How ancient too, and clothed in white,
had then that hill-top castle grown:
with you, a fairy in ethereal light,
against the mossed old granite stone.

You had your youthful foot deny
the wreck of age. The sunlight too
in hesitating said goodbye
to hill and castle and to you.

The wind in passing ruffled clothes
and on young shoulders then the breeze
in playing tossed its petalled shows
of colours from wild apple trees.

How casual then was your frank gaze
into the sun's expiring source:
the day burned down to dusky rays,
the surge boomed louder in its course.

For you that day was quickly done,
and carelessly, as not to last:
through our sweet life the fleeting one
above us, like a shadow, passed.

AS ONE THAT'S LOST IN SLEEP

As one that's lost in sleep, all day she stayed
at peace, uncaring how the shadows fell,
or what warm sounds the summer's showers made,
and happily, through greenery as well.

But then, more self-aware, she came awake
and slowly conscious how the rain's soft sound,
which held her fascinated, should now make
her thoughts companionable to all around.

As though then talking to herself, she said —
and now most consciously, to reminisce,
while I, though living, was most surely dead —
'How happily I have enjoyed all this.'

So has she loved, and to that loving's bliss
there's not a soul who could repay the debt.
Dear God, that I must go on after this,
with heart in tatters but still beating yet

LAST LOVE

More gently ebbing at the end
we love, and superstitiously.
Shine on, shine on, let evening send
our last love out more brilliantly.

Shadows cover half the sky,
the west is but a glimmering space.
But stay a little, don't deny
my love this long enchanted place.

Let blood run thinly in the veins,
the heart yet lacks no tenderness,
for in me still and long remains
the you of bliss and hopelessness.

ON THE EVE OF THE ANNIVERSARY OF AUGUST, 1964

Solitary, I walk along this quiet road:
how peacefully the glow of evenings end.
My heart is heavy and my steps are slowed:
you see me, do you now, my dearest friend?

To dark and darker now the earth has grown,
the last light glimmering out to now its end.
This is the world around we both have known:
you see me, do you now, my dearest friend?

We mark in prayers and sorrows what befell
us both tomorrow on that fateful end.
I go, my angel, where our souls may dwell:
you see me, do you now, my dearest friend?

HOW READILY THE SEAS AT NIGHT CONTRIVE

How readily the seas at night arrive
at brightness here and there a shuttered gloom,
to walk in moonlight as a thing alive,
a breathy entity of radiant bloom.

In that great freedom lives eternity,
in light and movement comes the thunder sound,
and in that shimmering softness will not sea
become as solitary as night around?

Immense, unhindered is the sea's vast swell:
what is the festival you celebrate?
And do your intricate, bright movements tell
the watching stars be quietly intimate?

And in this restless, brilliant turbulence
I dream or look into a vast abyss:
how willingly I would be sent on hence,
and wholly have my soul sink down in this.

WHY DO YOU HOWL, O NIGHT WIND HERE

Why do you howl, O night wind here?
O why complain so frantically?
Why does that piteous voice appear
both loud and stilled, alternately?

You echo language of the heart,
you speak of torments we can't know,
and from your depths the tempests start
and into violence voices blow.

How terrible! O do not sing
of chaos, natural order lost.
How avidly will night souls bring
the tales of lovers tempest tossed.

Each bursts the hold that true hearts keep
to gain what vast infinity confers.
O do not wake them from their sleep,
for underneath them chaos stirs.

SILENTIUM

Be silent, hide yourself, conceal
the things you dream of, things you feel:
As the stars in motion, let
these marvels from ascension set.
Let depths of soul then stay unheard.
In awe reflect without a word!

The flowering heart is not divined
so can some other know your mind?
Or say what you are living by
when thoughts once spoken are a lie?
The water's clouded when it's stirred,
so drink the spring without a word:

So live within your self's control:
a world is centred in your soul,
and one of strange enchanted thoughts
that noisy flare outside distorts.
By day's hard glare be undeterred,
take in those songs without a word

Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841)

Mikhail Lermontov is often seen as Russia's greatest poet after Pushkin, though his life was shorter and his output much more restricted. He emphasized a Byronic Romanticism, a greater realism and created a strong sense of poetic persona.

Lermontov born to an aristocratic family in Moscow, lost his mother early, and, after the break-up of the family, was brought up as spoiled child by female relatives, who perhaps exacerbated his morbid self-consciousness and touchy vanity. His poem 'Death of a Poet', denouncing Pushkin's enemies, won him celebrity but also exile to the Caucasus. After a duel with the French ambassador's son he was again exiled to the Caucasus but now demoted. In the Caucasus Lermontov proved a brave and capable officer, but on leave, in a quite needless duel with a former schoolmate, the 27-year-old poet was killed at the first shot.

Lermontov's poetry was a transformation, where the poet willed the raw experience to play a larger part than had been the case with his elders. His later work was less aimed at making a thing of beauty, however, as making something with 'a beautiful language of emotions', i.e. something that expressed an inner state of greatness and altogether transcended the originating experience.

COSSACK LULLABY

Stay, my beautiful, still sleeping.

lullaby-bayu.

On your cot the moon is keeping
silent watch for you.

Tales I'll tell you, any number,
with a song or two.

Close your little eyes and slumber,
lullaby-bayu.

Though the bouldery Terek river
plunges into shade:

and wicked Chechen's creeping hither
with his whetted blade,

your father is a fighter, fearless,
long battles undergone.

So have no fears of that, my dearest:
sleep, my little son.

You'll find in time that's ever nearing,
what soldiering has won.

You'll mount your horse, and not be fearing
to brandish high your gun.

And what I stitch in silk may be
the saddle cloth for you.

So sleep my little darling baby,
lullaby-bayu.

You'll be the fine, young hero,
Cossack to the core,

Mine the task to wave and cheer you,
going off to war.

But many tears I will be weeping
throughout the night for you.

Sleep, my angel, soft be sleeping:
lullaby-bayu.

I long and knowingly will languish,
and wait the whole day through.

I'll look the whole night long in anguish
what future comes to you.

In a foreign land I see you fretting
at what you there must do:

sleep: these cares you're now forgetting:
lullaby-bayu.

A holy icon I will give you

for the journey out,

and when you pray that God be with you

and the fight's in doubt,

you'll place it in your own sight keeping,

and think of mother too:

stay, my beautiful, still sleeping

lullaby-bayu.

A DREAM

In midday heat a gorge in Dagestan:
I lay with bullet lodged in tunic top.
The wound fumed hot and deep: the blood began
to flow in elongated drop on drop.

And stretched out on that valley sand, alone,
I saw the cliffs and ledges stepped around.
Sun sizzled on the yellow tops of stone
and burned me sleeping lifeless on the ground.

Yet what I dreamed of there was filled with lights
as though I'd entered on some celebration.
Young wives there were, and flowers, cheerful sights
with me the subject of the conversation.

But also one who sat detached, not part
of this bright happy chatter, on her own:
perhaps some youthful musing filled her heart
that she was conscious of or could have known.

She dreamed of Dagestan, the valley there,
and some familiar corpse-like figure, dead:
his tunic black with blood that fumed in air
and on the sand through which it spilled and spread.

MY COUNTRY

I love my country, true, but with a love so strange
my mind is scarcely equal to the claim.

No glories bought of blood's exchange,
nor peace entrusted to a haughty name,
nor legends, cherished, born of dark antiquity
can stir such depths of blissful dreams in me.

I love — though why I hardly know myself —
the steppe-lands with their silent chill, the trees
and forests swaying in their boundless wealth,
and rivers flooded out that are as wide as seas.

I love to drive a buggy down long country ways
and peer out slowly, piercing shadows of a night
that sighs around, the two halves joining in a gaze
on saddened hamlets, trembling in uncertain light.

The smoke the burnt-off stubble leaves,
the trail of caravans at night,
a steppeland thick with yellow sheaves,
a hill with birches, thin and white.

With gladness not to many known
I see the grain got in, the harvest stored.
A little hut on which the straw is thrown
its window shutters pierced and scored.

On feast days too, when dewy fall
the hours to midnight, when the throngs
of dancers stomp and whistle, call
up riotous peasant drinking songs.

ALONE, I LOOK OUT

Alone, I look out through the thinning fog:
a flinty path is glimmering from afar.
A silent emptiness communes with God,
with all around conversing, star with star.

Magnificent the heavens' solemnity,
though earth is wrapped in sleep and azure haze.
Why is there here such hurt? Such enmity?
What fear or wait for in the coming days?

I hope for nothing in this earth's short lease,
nor look for reparations I might reap,
no, all I seek is freedom and the peace
that's born of long forgetfulness and sleep.

But not the cold sleep of the grave, not death,
although I sleep forever nonetheless:
but with life's strength continuing, my breath
there filling out my breast with tenderness.

Where all through night and day my ears would lean
toward love's sweet and yearning melody,
when that dark oak tree, arched above and green
will bow and, murmuring, sing songs to me.

THE CLIFF

The whole night long a golden cloud took rest
upon a rock that flanked the mountain side.
It flew off early, when its thoughtless ride
would join the bright blue sky in playful zest.

But to that rugged spot a tear has crept:
the cliff at once was old and felt alone.
How still it stands, in deeply pondered stone
that quietly to the desert air has wept.

NEW YEAR'S NIGHT

How much, surrounded by some motley crowd, I seem
to find a world laid out before me like a dream.
And in this dance and gaiety
there's only whispered nullities declared by rote
by wraiths of soulless entities that also, note,
wear masks of outward decency.

They touch my hands. But cold they seem, the duties
of these bold and all too forward city beauties.
Though tirelessly these hands have led
to vanity's immersion and this brilliant press
of people, still the heart's own dream I'd more caress
in sounds of holy years now dead.

It seemed perhaps in some brief, momentary cast
I'd put aside the recent record of the past,
and, like a bird, was free as air
to visit the lands of childhood, and to know because
of that high manor house what rural childhood was,
in that far ruined green-house there.

Thick-filled with plants, the sleeping pond there lies,
and from the village fields the wisps of smoke arise
until in distant fog they meet.

Through bushy thickets I take a darkened pathway where
where sun in setting tips the leaves with gold, and there
are noises made by timid feet.

Already now an earnest longing fills my breast
with all the cries and declarations love addressed:
what dreams from my creation flow.

I see the eyes so full of azure fire, the smile
so pink and blossoming with day's creation, while
through woods there comes the sun's first glow.

So in the kingdom of the one, all-powerful lord
I sit alone in wonder that long hours afford,
yet still the memory stands.

As after doubt's and passion's great intensity
there's still some island left unnoticed in the sea,
like blooms renewed in desert lands.

And then, revived, I'll know where the deception lies,
the noisy gaiety from which my fond dream flies.

Invited to the wrong address,
I soon will disabuse them of this senseless mirth,
and boldly, in their faces, brandish iron verse
here filled with hate and bitterness.

THE SAIL

The white sail finds itself alone,
among the miles of misted blue. . .
To what far country is it blown?
Why leave the native lands it knew?

The mast heaves, the wind shrieks;
the waves are at their usual game. . .
Alas! not happiness it seeks,
but neither will it flee the same.

Below: a stream of brilliant blue:
above: a flood of golden sun. . .
The storms to which it means to hew
are peace to this rebellious one.

Afanasy Afanasievich Fet (1820-92)

Afanasy Afanasievich Fet entered military service and served in various cavalry regiments, but it was only in 1856 that he could leave as Captain of the Guards and a title. After a short journey abroad, he married the daughter of a rich tea merchant and settled down to make a success of his estate. Fet was exceptionally reserved, but his poetry was well received, making him one of the best known literary figures in the 1850s, familiar with Turgenev, Tolstoy and other luminaries of the day.

Fet was a devotee of the aesthetic aspects of poetry, and was appreciated as such by the creative writers of his time, but not by critics who saw these gently melodic pieces as little better than 'moonshine'.

But for Druzhinin the chief property of Fet's talent was 'the ability to catch the elusive, to give an image and a name to what was before him nothing more than a vague, fleeting sense of the human soul, a feeling without an image and a name'. After 1863, and especially in the 1880s, Fet's poetry becomes more difficult, metaphysical and condensed. The greatest achievements in the last years were the love poems for someone whom Fet had not married long ago for career reasons. They are remarkable in a man of seventy, but more so for the saturation of experience compressed into hard outlines.

GREETINGS

I have come to you with greetings,
to say the sun's about and bright,
that the brimming warmth is meeting
leaves now fluttering in the light,

To tell you too the wood is stirring,
that the leaves and branches sing,
and, with every bird concurring,
all are thirsty for the spring.

To once again affirm with passion,
as yesterday I came to you
that happiness is in the fashion
as is my service, warm and true.

A joy that's everywhere distilling
what I myself have come to feel:
to have this song around be willing
to stay and deepen and be real.

THE STEPPE AT EVENING

The clouds are massing, and a scarlet glow
absorbs the moisture in the dewy grass.
The ring falls silent and the horses throw
no dust up in the latest gap they pass.

No house or habitation to be seen,
no hearth or song that's of a sudden gone,
but steppe on steppe, a boundless stretch of green
and waves of rye-grass ripening, rolling on.

Behind a cloud the moon appears, to be
more visible as darkness comes at last.
A beetle's airborne, whining angrily;
and a harrier, wings unmoving, floats on past.

Across the fields is laid a golden net;
a quail now calls from somewhere far and deep
in dewed and misty silences, and yet
a corncrake answers, sounding half-asleep.

The eye is tricked by twilight: in the haze
are warmth and moistness, coolness drifting by.
The moon is pure; throughout the river's gaze
the Milky Way illuminates the sky.

STORM IN THE SKIES

Storm in the sky at evening,
noise of the angry sea —
Storm on the sea and reasoning,
painful the uncertainty —

Storm on the sea and reasoning,
chorus of growing unease —
Cloud after cloud is deepening,
incensed are the angry seas.

CLEAR AND GOLDEN

Clear and golden is the sunlight's end;
the breath of conquering spring bears all before.
Do not remember me, my dearest friend
nor think our love was all too shy and poor.

The breathing earth gives up its perfumes yet;
and sky unfolds into its breathy wealth:
rich and imperishable will all suns set,
and quietly, bay on bay, repeat itself.

What is happiness, and what is there
to feel ashamed about? Surely now because
of that great light and beauty everywhere
it's madness not to take it as it was.

Apollon Maikov (1821-97)

Apollon Maikov was educated at St. Petersburg, and from 1842 to 1845 studied art in France and Italy. On returning to Russia, he became a civil servant and worked at the Rumiantsev Museum in Moscow. His was a markedly gifted family. An 18th century ancestor was a noted poet; his father was a painter and a brother a literary critic. Maikov sympathized with the French art-for-art's-sake poets and, like Gautier and his followers, was often inspired by classical antiquity. Maikov's work is severely classical in the main, unsentimental but closely observed. His later travel impressions incorporated figures met in journeys around Normandy, the Alps and Naples.

Maikov grew up on his grandmother's estate, and retained a warm affection for the steady rhythms of country life, the good humour of this piece quietly increasing from stanza to stanza. It's also more carefully crafted than first appears, and was one of a series that Maikov wrote commemorating all things Russian at the outbreak of the Crimean War.

HAYMAKING

Across the fields the scent of hay,
and women sing, a happy sound:
with rakes to hand as best they may
they turn and toss the hay around.

Once gathered in, there dry and clean,
the men-folk have their pitchforks fly,
and piled on lumbering carts are seen
vast heaps of hay a whole house high.

The waiting horse looks miserable,
as though it has one pose to keep:
wide ears apart, arched legs to pull
but for the present stands asleep.

Excitedly a dog tears round,
through hay in waves has zigzag raced;
and barking, leaping, in one bound
goes racing off in frenzied haste.

Jacov Polonsky (1819-98)

Polonsky came from the minor gentry, and, after graduating from Moscow University, held various bureaucratic positions in Odessa and Tiflis. Here he published his first collections of poems. From 1851 he lived in St. Petersburg, where he contributed to, and sometimes edited, various well-known literary magazines. Between 1860 and 1896 he served in the office of censorship of foreign literature.

Polonsky was a Romantic poet, but also rather pessimistic and backward looking. He lost his own religious convictions early, became a liberal in politics, but missed the religious support enjoyed, as he saw it, by earlier periods. He also wrote plays in verse and prose, novels, essays and memoirs, none of which have lasted.

Polonsky travelled widely in later years, and many poems have an exotic setting, in Finland, Persia and the Mediterranean world. Most have a clear message, moreover, too didactically presented at times, but Polonsky didn't fit into contemporary literary movements, neither belonging to the civic school or in any way anticipating the Symbolists poets of Russia's Silver Age. He was and remains simply of himself, individual and uncompromising.

POLONSKY: THE BLIND PREACHER

The coarse wind plucking at his clothes, he went,
the blind man, Bede, with evening close at hand.
He lent upon on a boy, who helps him stand
or stumble with bare feet, his strength near spent.
He finds at last an awkward path across
the ancient pines that rose to block his way,
with bluffs of rocks projecting, rough and grey,
in places shaggy, wet and clothed with moss.

The boy is tired, saw berries in his reach,
or, just malicious, wanted to deceive.
'Old man,' he said, 'I'll briefly take my leave.
I have to rest, but you may want to preach.
Shepherds have watched us from the mountainside,
and elders, also, along this roadside plod.
There's wives and children. Speak to them of God,
and of His Son, for our sins crucified.'

The old man's face then brightened instantly,
as though a spring pierced through a rocky layer,
his pale lips moved to mutter some quiet prayer,
then inspiration added to his ringing plea.
Without real faith, there's nothing left to tell,
but now the blind man felt the Heavens cry:
his trembling hand was pointed at the sky,
and from extinguished eyes the thick tears fell.

The bright day's gold has largely dimmed its glare,
and mistiness fills out the mountain steeps;
downwards the damp air of the evening creeps,
as he, though preaching on, becomes aware
of someone laughing, shouting through the glen,
'Old man, enough. Come on, there's no one here!'
The man falls silent, hangs his head, and then,
as though the rocks would burst out strong and clear,
from end to end now echoing, came 'Amen'.

Alexy K. Tolstoy (1817-75)

Count Alexy K. Tolstoy, a distant cousin of the famous novelist, was a many-sided and versatile poet and playwright. After Derzhavin, he was the greatest exponent of the grand manner, but also the writer of the best nonsense verse in Russian. Mirsky calls him the least disharmonious of Russian poets, but also in every respect a gentleman, with a clean and noble expression in all he produced. Bristol calls him the guardian of German romantic idealism, committed to transcendental beliefs and seeing the world as an unending struggle between good and evil.

Alexy Tolstoy was also a wealthy aristocrat who, after an education at Moscow University, was appointed to the Foreign Office and served in Frankfurt from 1837 to 1840. He retired to his estate in 1861, and in 1863 married Sofia Miller, the inspiration for many of his poems. His first play, *The Death of Ivan the Terrible* appeared in 1866, and his first collection of poems in 1867. Tolstoy wrote many narrative poems and ballads, often incorporating his nostalgic views of the past, his political beliefs and, in later life, his religious and philosophical persuasions.

DO YOU REMEMBER, MARY?

Do you remember, Mary,
that house of former times,
the sleeping pool and airy
stands of ancient limes?

How silent the alleyways,
the garden's neglected air,
and in the long gallery the gaze
of high-hung portraits there?

Mary, do you remember
with skies at evening time
a softly glowing ember,
how distant bell would chime?

Behind the garden view
how clear the stream would flow,
how gold was corn, how blue
the cornflower steppes would grow?

The wood where we together
first on our own would go?
Mary, do you remember
the days flown long ago?

TROPARION

1. What sweetness can our life possess
that has no part of earthly grief?
Are not our hopes but vain belief?
Show one who knows true happiness.
Here all that's won by endless toil
is false and insignificant.
What glory deems magnificent
will time itself but fade and spoil.
We are but ashes, shades of ghosts,
that with the winds are blown away.
Unarmed and weak we face the hosts
of death's great darkness and decay.
No power has earth's almighty one,
or issues of the king's command.
Accept, Lord, Thy slave's work done.
Receive us in Thy holy land.

2. And like a fearsome knight came death
and struck me down without a cause,
for death had opened wide its jaws
and took from all their living breath.
So save yourselves, my sons and kin.
It's from the coffin comes my call.
So save yourselves my brothers all
escaping hell's fierce fires of sin.
As vanities are worldly powers
but at approaching death's dark reign
will shrivel up as do the flowers.
Why do we wander round in vain?
Fine thrones have only fine tombs won,

and palaces return to sand.
Accept, Lord, Thy slave's work done.
Receive us in Thy holy land.

3. Who among the mouldering bones
is warrior, king or judge or slave —
God's subject who escapes the grave,
or one for whom no death atones?
What's gold or silver, brothers, where
the hosts of slaves can have no name?
If unmarked coffins are the same,
who can be rich or wretched there?
We are but ashes, smoke and dust,
a shadow, not a real creation.
Only You in Heaven have our trust,
are refuge and our true salvation.
All things of flesh will come undone,
no greatness can that death withstand.
Accept, Lord, Thy slave's work done.
Receive us in Thy holy land.

4. You, who speak for all throughout
and intercede for mourners here,
for brother laid upon his bier,
to Him, Most Holy One, cry out!
Pray to God's begotten son,
to Him who is most holy, pray
for one who can no longer stay,
let equally his griefs be done!
Here all is dust and smoky air,
so put no faith in phantom breath.
For suddenly, when nothing's there,

will come the breath of smouldering death.
All eat the self-same bread, each one
is struck down by the reaper's hand.
Accept, Lord, Thy slave's work done.
Receive us in Thy holy land.

5. I travel on an unknown road
between both fear and hope am thrown.
My sight is poor, my breast a stone,
my ears are sealed, my head is bowed.
Motionless, bereft of speech,
I cannot hear my brethren wail,
nor censer's light blue smoke can reach,
far less I smell the fragrant veil,
for in an endless sleep I fall,
but one where love will never die.
You, my brothers, you I call,
that you upon the Lord will cry.
For one Your trumpet has begun
announcing peace is close to hand.
Accept, Lord, Thy slave's work done.
Receive us in Thy holy land.

THE CONVICTS

The sun goes down: an orange glow
lights up the distant feather grass.
In clanking chains the convicts show:
along a dusty road they pass

With shaven foreheads, prisoners all
are trudging with a heavy tread.
Their grim and sullen frowns recall
the gloominess of life ahead.

Extended shadows lengthen out,
two horses straining at the cart,
and, lazily, and round about,
the guards are left not far apart.

'Let brothers bind themselves in song,
forget our troubles on this earth:
misfortunes, gathering sense of wrong
deep-written in us from our birth.'

And so they sing, continually
more bound together as they go:
about the Volga wide and free,
of long-gone days they didn't know.

They sing of steppes that once were free,
of simple wildness come again.
Though sunlight fades, it's still we see
a road that's swept by this long chain.

Nikolay Alexeyevich Nekrasov (1821-72)

Nekrasov's main theme was, as he put it, 'the suffering of the Russian people.' In this he was entirely sincere, though his own life was often very different from what he espoused — a reason perhaps for the bitter irony, gloom, distraction and guilty conscience that featured prominently. Yet, though subjective, that tortured compassion for his fellow men allowed Nekrasov to get inside his characters, identifying with their humour and native cunning as much as with the monstrous suffering they received at the hands of landowners and officialdom.

Nekrasov was not a careful craftsman, and, though he was an excellent critic of others' work, had little capacity for his own. Nekrasov's work is prolific but very mixed. It was not so much lapses of taste, said his critics, but of no taste at all, of not being concerned with such matters.

At his best, Nekrasov is incomparable, writing with intense humanity, often with biting satire and savage invective. He was also able to incorporate colloquialisms and slang into his verse, compose in loose ternary measures, and carry off such incongruous matters quite naturally.

AT THE ENTRANCE (excerpt)

40. We're at the entrance now. A solemn date.
As though beneath the will of some enslaving rite,
the town compelled them go there out of fright,
they drive up to that all-compelling gate.

Thence, having written down their name and rank,
our visitors will go on home; each one
delighted with the self-importance won
you'd think their status was the thing to thank.

On other days this most imposing entrance sees
a press of squalid faces, each of which aware
50. just what mere words will do. An old man there,
or widow cursed by life's infirmities.

Indifferent to them, shuffling papers, come and go
the buzz of various flunkies. Still they wait
all morning sometimes on this specious show,
while more petitioners besiege the gate.

And once I saw a group of men, our nationhood
of good plain rural Russian folk, each blest
by church attendance. They at distance stood
respectfully, with blonde head bent to chest.

60. They begged admission of the porter; he observed how hope and terror had unmanned each features. Ugly too, for one could see the skin on hands and head was rudely tanned.

Armchyushka's shoulder bones poked through, but shored up the heavy knapsack on his back.

One had a cross, another's legs were scored with blood, and sported peasant shoes of bast.

(In fact they'd walked a goodish length, and some indeed had come from distant provinces)

70. but someone shouted at the ragged scum, affronted by life's wearied instances.

The porter, therewith, in a proper fright, rammed shut at once the door on such affray, refused entreaties, and the pilgrim's mite, and thereby roundly sent them on their way.

'May God who judges truly show what's right,' so said the hands there flailing helplessly. I watched them quietly filing out of sight; it seemed their heads were bared eternally.

THE PEDLARS

See how many goods I pack:
fine braid and cotton for your hair.
Pity me and do not lack
what these manly shoulders bear!

Until the night-time fills the skies,
within the rye I'll wait, and show
how dark will be those dark, dark eyes:
everything I have must go.

Think what prices I have paid:
don't be cautious, do what's right.
Your lips will buy a fine brocade:
come, my sweet, and snuggle tight.

The night assumed a foggy cast,
but on the jolly fellow fares:
The long-awaited comes at last,
and now the merchant sells his wares.

How carefully, carefully Katya trades
apportioning what soon is lost,
but then that care in kissing fades:
he bids her name her highest cost.

She only knows the night is deep,
and what there happened so befell
her where the springing rye would keep
her secret hidden, none to tell.

How easy now to bear the load,
the strap marks do not hurt the skin:
in all I offered her she showed
a preference for that turquoise ring

So not the chintz or coloured scarf,
the shift, or any useful thing.
She wouldn't wear for hay's behalf
the girdle made for harvesting

It was the ring, for all I pressed
her, she'd have nothing of my fare.
'Why flaunt myself with all the rest
if one I want is nowhere there?'

So girls no better than they ought
will stoop to play their silly tricks:
I it was sweet vodka brought,
but she who still refused my gifts.

So you, unyielding one, now wait,
take all I promised, all my wealth,
flaunt the treasures that you hate.
I come to Pokrov, not in stealth,
but celebrate your soul's estate:
I'll lead you to the church myself.

HOME

So here they are again, the old, familiar ways
that saw my fathers' endless empty, barren days,
the gross intemperance, riotous buffoonery,
the filth, debauchery, the petty tyranny.
Here a swarm of wretched, trembling peasants found
themselves more pitiful than master's pampered hound.
Yet here I was to see God's light, and bow to fate,
to learn to tolerate it too, and bear that hate
in silence, hidden in my very soul for shame —
10. for was I not a squire, or so in time became?
Thus, readily corrupted, how quickly would I cease
to look to my own self for blessed states of peace.
My soul was filled with fears and premature desires,
and, to the end, was heart tormented by those fires.
The simple days of youth, so lovingly recalled,
luxuriously, with senses marvellously enthralled,
descended to black thoughts, as, under anger's sway,
they troop before me and in triumph make their way.

This is the dark, dark garden, the path where branches thin
20. to show a figure walking dejectedly within.
And yet I know, my mother, why those tears would flow,
who had destroyed your life: how well I know. I know!
But why give in to sullen, brutish ignorance
when life could surely change, and for the better hence?
Or, worse, accept that fate, put faith in simple trust,
with not a word demurring, as a peasant must?

Your soul, I do know this, was not dispassionate,
and sought the loveliness that is a woman's state:

and yet you chose endurance, intending that your death
30. forgive the one at fault, and in a final breath.

And you in turn, and mutely suffering the same
sad fate, that all-too dreadful, loathsome grief and shame,
yes, you, my sister-soul: in turn you were displaced
by kennelled dogs, by peasant mistresses disgraced.
Hounded out, as though intended by high Heaven above
by one who knew not love, indeed could never love.
You, following as you had to, your mother's own vile fate,
were set, as was your mother, in your confined state
with a cold, strained smile while he, the guilty one,
40. trembling, shed tears at what couldn't be undone.

Here is the old grey house, now empty of all sound
of lackeys, servants, women, yapping dogs around,
none of the degradation forced on everyone,
both high and low. No sooner had I then begun
to run to nanny, my dear nanny . . . so many times would she
brush away tears, dispel an hour's despondency.
How long would I remember her, the very name
calls up the reverences I held for her, the same
unthinking, over generous kindness I would find
50. recovers little of those features in my mind.

Indeed my angry breast is full of enmity
at youth rebellious and harsh, where I can see
nothing of pleasing memories, where a soul,
entangled with my life, from first, beyond control,
was embittered with a curse that ineluctably
began here, in my native land, as destiny.

So now with strong repugnance, I must gaze on round:
to see the shadowed forest felled, the one place found
to give me cooling shelter from the summer's blaze.
60. In burnt-up fields I see the doltish cattle graze,
hanging their heads vacantly above what streams there were.
But not in this dark leaning house will now recur
the sounds of downed cups and riotous revelry,
but only a thin, long hum of suppressed misery,
all crushed in subjugation, where only he
acted, breathed and lived in his own liberty.

RED-NOSED FROST (selected sections)

I

A roan mare stuck there in the snow:
50. two pairs of feet in bast-cold shoes
and sled with cloth-wrapped coffin show
what wretched things she has to use.

The woman's old, large mittened, tries
to clamber down and urge on horse.
55. The icicles that rim her eyes
disclose that frost is out in force.

II

With that sketched in, as poets may,
we change the scene and back may go
to when both hut and village lay
60. beneath a heavy pall of snow.

A hut: whose corner holds a calf,
the bench a corpse, not yet interred.
Around it thoughtless children laugh:
a woman's sobs are barely heard.

65. Her needle tacks a funeral shroud
from fabric scraps she has to spare.
Like rain in prospect, and unbowed,
unnoticed is her weeping there.

III

To three hard fates their futures run:
70. the first be husband to a slave,
the second mother such a one,
the third be one until the grave.

And all these heavy lots from birth
have women born of Russian earth.

75. The ages may correct their crimes,
the world has altered many times,

but God forgot to change but one:
the harshness of a peasant's lot.
Decayed their beauty, strength undone:
80. such is the future Slavs have got.

Unfair descendent of that fate
that you have borne unseen, unheard:
a conflict from that desperate strait,
yet of that grievance not a word.

85. But you will tell me all at last —
who were my friend from childhood years —

the long fatigue of centuries past,
today's enactments of your fears:

And he would lack a living heart
90. who shed no tears for your sad part.

* * *

XXX

No winds to howl through forest ways,
no rivers sweep through mountain chains:
our General Frost patrols: his gaze
855. traverses wintry, vast domains.

He checks that blizzards have concealed
all trace of earlier forest trails,
that every crack and chink is sealed,
a thickly covered earth prevails.

860. Are tops of pine trees fluffed up right,
do oak tree have their handsome bole?
Is vagrant water frozen tight,
in various ice floes locked up whole?

He strides across the tree-tops, makes
865. the frozen waters crackle, lays
the sunlight's brilliance on the lakes
that sets his shaggy beard ablaze.

The sorcerer is everywhere,
the white-haired one. On silent tread
870. he closes on her. Now, beware!
He's suddenly above her head.

On that great pine the sorcerer sits,
that heavy mace of his he swings.
He smashes branches into bits,
875. and what a boastful song he sings.

XXXI

« Be bold, young woman, come and see
what sort of Governor is your Frost.
Could such a handsome fellow be,
or strong, on any path you've crossed?

880. Blizzards with their mist and snow
are in my unremitting vice,
I build where restless oceans flow
my glistening palaces of ice.

By me are roaring rivers stilled
885. to depths of ice, and I can span
vast distances in bridges, build
more splendidly than any man.

Where swift and noisy waters were
quite recently, and freely flowed,
890 today pedestrians barely stir
or push on carts their heavy load.

I love to pierce the last remains,
and sprinkle hoar frost on the dead,
to freeze the blood within the veins,
895. and fill the brain with ice instead.

I'm on the hunt for any thief,
strike fear in man and horseman found.
I love in every tree and leaf
to make my threatening, creaking sound.

900. Then women talk of wood-sprites there:
straight home, unnerved, and fast they run.
And drunks on foot or horseback bear
my yet more riotous zest for fun.

I turn their unchalked faces white
905. and then I make their noses burn,
their beards to reins so frozen tight
to severing axe they have to turn.

I'm far too rich to count each chest,
my wealth will always grow unchecked;
910. with silver is my kingdom dressed,
with diamonds and with pearls is decked.

Come, assume that kingdom, be
my queen within its splendid sweep.
Embrace these wintry realms with me
915. and in the summer fall asleep.

Come, you'll be caressed and warm,
my palace is an azure place. »
The General, on her chilling form,
began to swing his icy mace.

XXXV

At last, whatever price be paid,
she can forget what came before.
1035. she's smiling now and unafraid:
we will not pity her the more.

There is no kinder, deeper peace
than what these forests show our eyes,
when we have fear and motion cease
1040. and stand beneath cold winter skies.

Nowhere peace so generous,
more deeply breathes the weary breast:
if life has been enough for us,
no sweeter place to take our rest.

XXXVI

1045. No sound now comes, nor can it bring
more pain or love: the soul's released.
You stand and feel how conquering
the silence round when all has ceased.

No sound! You gaze into the blue
of sky, the gathered sunshine, trees
apparelled in their silver hue
of miracles that winter sees,

and think of unknown mysteries
removed from us and still unread.

1055. Then comes a rustling through the trees:
a squirrel bounds on overhead.

And with it come soft falls of snow
from branches touched, a drifting stream,
but Dar'ya frozen far below
1060. is lost in her enchanted dream.

WHO CAN BE HAPPY IN RUSSIA? (opening excerpt)

Here ample the pathway
through furnished birches,
far stretching ahead,
both sandy and quiet.

5. From each side extending,
lie welcoming prospects
of fields and of hayfields,
but less the dispiriting
poor wasteland abandoned.

10. Decrepit some hamlets
while some are rebuilding
by rivers and ponds. . .

In forests and meadows,
in streams and her rivers,
15. spring-lovely is Russia.
When field in the springtime,
with short shoots for tillage,
seems only more hurtful.

"Because all the winter
20. (our wanderers thinking)
snow each day it was snowing,
and therefore the story:
if first it was humble,
just falling and lying,
it noisily melted

with waters extending
far through fields flooded,
no bringing the manure,
though year is still early
30. and May's not in sight."
We hate the existing
and more huts new-built
in hamlets we're passing.
What huts are rebuilding!
Though gladdening that action
each penny laid down
betokens the bloodshed.
Daybreak and our wanderers
meet other such folk:
40. brothers of peasants,
beggars and artisans,
soldiers and carriers,
beggars and soldiers.
Our wanderers won't question:
Is life easier or harder
in Russia today?

Konstantin Balmont (1867-1942)

Konstantin Balmont was a Degenerate Poet par excellence. On political grounds, he was expelled from school and Moscow University, but gained a law degree from Yaroslav. After lengthy depression, a broken marriage and a suicide attempt, Balmont became a translator and original poet. His first literary success came with *Under Northern Skies* in 1894, and until 1905 Balmont was probably Russia's leading Symbolist. He was happy to participate in early street demonstrations but turned against the second 1917 Revolution, settling eventually in France, where he became an alcoholic, and was committed to a sanatorium in 1930, dying there largely destitute and ignored.

The Russian Symbolists were slow to win acceptance. They combined a fastidious verse craftsmanship with social attitudes that were rather questionable, if not downright wicked to the common people. That wildness and hit or miss attitude to life was part of Balmont's character. He wrote voluminously, for long periods turning out a new collection every year, but the good poems became fewer and fewer.

It is for six volumes published from 1894 to 1904 that Balmont is remembered, and which have a richness of sound and vocal design new to Russian verse.

THE REEDS

What are they whispering, what do they say?
Or marsh-lights between them in their glimmering way?

Flashing and blinking, again they are gone,
now gathering once more, and are flickering on.

Midnight has come; the reeds quiver and shake
with the movement of toads, the hiss of a snake.

The face, extended, dies as the waters dilate:
the moon in flushed crimson is disconsolate.

A smell of mud and of dampness to slowly begin
as the quagmire sucks and will draw them in.

For whom and what reason? the reeds seem to say.
Why does the glowering between flare up and delay?

How sad is the moon as it wistfully calls,
but knows nothing as the lower and lower it falls.

Now nothing's repeating, but soul as it dies
mournfully in reeds with their noiseless sighs.

DEVIL'S VOICE

I hate the saints exceedingly,
the care they take, so marked and grave,
pathetic thoughts of those that see
themselves among the first to save.

Care for their own soul, that comes first,
and fear of dream in that abyss:
the poisonous serpent stoned and cursed:
unconscionable they are in this.

As such I'd hate a Paradise
composed of shadows, missy smiles.
Eternal May's holidays suffice
for any walk of measured wiles.

No, not for me God's holy land
when I enjoy the Snake's caprice.
From childhood days I've kept to hand,
the Serpent's alluring masterpiece.

So not for me a Paradise
inhabited by imbeciles.
I'll sing in dying and devise
a dream my demon then defiles.

I CAME INTO THE WORLD

I came into this world to see the sun,
the blue horizon's light.

I came into this world to see the sun,
and mountain height.

I came to see what wealth the oceans stored,
or valleys in rich green.

My gaze will gather in the world, I'm lord
of all things seen.

I've conquered what was cold oblivion:
to my new dreams belong
these ever constant revelations, won
by constant song.

My dream of suffering fills the woken hours,
and I am loved for this.

Who can be equal to my singing powers?
No, no one is.

I came into this world to see the sun,
and if that day won't flower,
I still shall sing and sing about the sun
till my last hour.

Valery Yakovlevich Bryusov (1873-1924)

The nominal master of Russian Symbolism was Valery Bryusov, though more recognized for his organizing flair: it was his miscellanies of 1894 and 1895 that probably gave the Symbolist name to the movement. Bryusov was a competent poet nonetheless, and published important collections in 1900 (*Tertia vigilia*) and 1903 (*Urbi et orbi*). There were often classical themes and setting reminiscent of the French Parnassians in his work, but Bryusov's most compelling theme focused on the intractable nature of human evil.

Bryusov was a cultivated man, who took an informed interest in historical periods and personalities. He wrote poems on King Esarhaddon of Assyria, Pysche, Moses, Cleopatra, the Scythians, Mary Stuart and Napoleon. He was also a man of his time, who despaired of tsarist government, seeing it as dysfunctional, authoritarian and oppressive, largely incapable of change. Far from being the prankster and mountebank he first appeared, Bryusov was one of the most solemn and deadly serious figures in the whole of Russian literature. Unfortunately, as in his prose, Bryusov's visions of sensuality and cruelty remain pageants of loud colour, and there is little genuine feeling or psychology in the depictions.

THE HUNS

I sense you future Huns
that now all Russia fears,
your iron-tramping sons
from unknown, far Pamirs.

How dark the horde descends,
hard breaks in drunken flood,
No doubt your hot blood mends
our weak, enfeebled blood.

Hut-dwelling slaves: you raze
down bastions of before,
you ruin our fields to gaze
on lands the throne room saw.

You burnt our books and dance,
nor would at flames repent:
the Temple's undone by chance,
but you are innocent.

Let us, poets and sages,
take secrets to the grave,
and hide the light of ages
in desert tomb and cave.

Beneath this moving storm,
the ruin, the devastation,
who says that Chance won't form
a bright and fresh creation?

Though all things yet may perish,
that we alone once knew,
expunge what we would cherish:
our hymn will welcome you.

TO THE POET

You should be proud as is the banner,
and sharp your words as any sword,
and by deep flames, the Dante manner,
ensure your cheeks are burnt and scored.

Be then impartial as a witness,
that all perspectives seem the same.
Make virtue part of human fitness,
and thrust your hand into the flame.

Make everything in life the power
to have melodious poems heard.
And from the carefree childhood hour
make combinations for each word.

In moments of your love's avowal
ensure that bravery remains,
that crucifixions be espousal
of fearsome ecstasies and pains.

In morning dreams, abyss of evening,
catch what stone's cold whisper shares;
remember thorns are ever weaving
the honoured bays the poet wears.

Fedor Sologub (1863-1927)

The last years of the Russian nineteenth century saw a mix of desperation and modest reforms, to which was added the fin de siècle world-weariness of European culture, with their belief that truths were irrational or knowable only through artistic expression. Symbolism also took on a religious flavour, and in Sologub became markedly Manichean, divided between a universal good and evil. He even invented cosmologies of his own in two volumes published in 1904, some of them deriving from Schopenhauer's pessimism, and some with a more Gnostic view.

To what extent Sologub believed these cosmologies is difficult to say. Primarily, he regarded himself as a poet, and one that until the twentieth century was content to write about nature and her melancholy moods. Sologub could not get his own works published after 1923, and had to support himself by translation. Nonetheless, he was the permanent President of the Leningrad Writer's Union when he died.

Despite these difficulties, and increasing pessimism, Sologub was a prolific writer, sometimes too prolific, critics complained, and too restricted in his themes, moreover, but the verse was always competent and often a good deal more. The vocabulary was limited, and there was little of the suggestive vagueness that Symbolist poets favoured, but Sologub had a good ear for the music of verse.

MOISTENED CLAY

It was from moistened clay God gave me birth,
but not from clay was I set free.
The world of hills and valleys makes the earth,
and, like myself, is dear to me.

When on some far, unwinding road I gaze
it's with myself I understand:
I feel the legs, the wheels and stony ways
as though I held them in my hand.

And with some torrent singing on its course,
it seems to me that it should bring
earth's sap and life-affirming force
to add their vigour to my spring.

HIGH MOON

How high is God's moon overhead.

How hard for me
to suffer so with nothing said
and let all be.

There's not a single barking sound
from any friends:
how dead and dull is all round
that silence sends.

No, no bark: no, not a word.
The world is dead:
no crunching sounds, no footsteps heard
in streets ahead.

Anxiously I sniff the ground
for what's in store,
but then in scent is faintly found
a human spoor.

But no one's waking anywhere,
though brisk steps go.
So is my traveller waiting there
as friend or foe?

Alas, in chilly moon I knew
I was alone,
at windows must, as good dogs do,
make howl and moan.

And so God's moon, how high it is,
how very high.
Today I'm made more sad by this,
in longing sigh.

Let's do down silence and the dark,
and so quite soon,
good my brethren, growl and bark
up to the moon!

LULLABY

Running carefree through the day,
you who have no clothes to shed:
Look: I'll brush the dirt away
the while you rest your pretty head.
Sleep, sleep: I'll sing to you.
"Sleep, my little one: bayu."

A knocking quietly on the door:
And so I whispered, "Sleep, come in."
Flax the little curls I saw,
about his chest his hands had been.
Softly I will sing to you
"Sleep, my little one: bayu."

"Where were you dreaming?" — "On the hill."
"What dreaming of?" — "The moonlight there."
"Was my sister?" — "With you still."
"Did sister come?" — "No, that I swear."
Softly I will sing to you
"Sleep, my little one: bayu."

The moon is in her dreamy reign,
which the fields and gardens share.
Someone's at the window pane;
someone's whispering, "I'll be there."
And so I sing and sing to you
"Sleep, my little one: bayu."

There's whispering at the window pane:
the twigs are crackling in the tree.
"I'm old and ill," the words complain.
Little brother, please help me."
Then softly I will sing to you
"Sleep, my little one: bayu."

"I've been mowing all the day;
I'm sick and tired and much in pain."
I see the shadow dart away
and hide beneath the window pane.
This I sing and sing to you,
"Sleep, my little one: bayu."

Innokenty Annensky (1855-1909)

Annensky was an early Symbolist poet, publishing little in his lifetime but becoming an important influence on Akhmatova, Mandelstam and others. The anguish and torment (*muka, toshka*) of his physical life also run through his poetry, giving it a Baudelaire-like preoccupation with the fabric of existence, often with the same response in spleen and boredom.

These elements are present in his best-known poem, *Among the Worlds*, which is featured below. It has been widely translated, but often sentimentalised into a regret for past love.

Annensky is never that simple, but commonly combines the lyrical poetry of Pushkin and Tyutchev with psychological insight. The star was indeed a personification of hope and faith in eternal values to this most lonely of men, one to whom women remained an abstract ideal, but the mystery in this poem does not lie in complexity, cipher and semantic vagueness, (a feature of French Symbolist poetry) but in a special psychological sharpness that is born from nothing but 'verbal dust'.

AMONG THE WORLDS

In other worlds, in momentary luminaries,
there's one I'd duplicate in everything,
and not because the light of loving carries,
but more that others leave me languishing.

It's hard for me, who in this doubt is living,
to find the one who yet might answer right,
and not because of any light she's giving,
but more because She is perpetual light.

Zinaida Hippus (1869-1945)

Zinaida Hippus was born in a rural area of Tula, and mostly educated at home. In 1889 she married Dmitry Merezhovsky, and lived in St. Petersburg, where the two founded a Sunday salon for like-minded writers. They were later joined by the literary critic Dmitry Filosofov, with whom they formed a *ménage a trois*. Zinaida herself wrote in the masculine gender, and flaunted a bohemian dandyism in clothes and attitudes. Disappointed by the 1905 Revolution, the couple moved to Paris. They supported the earlier 1917 Revolution, but not the Communist one, returning to France, where they lived for the remainder of their lives

Zinaida Hippus was the leading religious poet in Russia of her time, but it was not conventional faith by any means. She drew from Vladimir Solovyev (1853-1900) the concept of a universal love that binds together the earthly and divine. Her poems commonly dramatize the struggle for moral and religious enlightenment, against ennui, and against self-love and pride.

I have expanded and clarified the poem that follows to include the logic I think Hippus is following.

FREEDOM

I can't submit to other people's wrong:
how could I want their slavery?
If judging people lasts our whole lives long
it only ends in death's decree.

I can't submit to God's judgemental wrath
if love of Him should guide my feet,
for He who put me on this needful path
would never sanction my retreat.

I am the breaker of all that holds us in
through happiness, despondency and sleep.
But we are not slaves but younger kith and kin,
and may, like him, both love and weep.

I call out in the name of His most holy son,
of all creation, things divine.
May they be, dear Lord, forever one:
Thy will be also mine.

Ivan Bunin (1870-1953)

Ivan Bunin was born on his parents' ancestral estates in central Russian, became a widely-respected writer, was awarded the Pushkin Prize for Poetry on three occasions, left Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution, continued to write in France, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1933, and became internationally known for his short stories, many of which exhibit an acute nostalgia for a vanished way of life.

Unlike his prose, Bunin's verse is exceptionally quiet, impersonal and unassuming. His long working life spanned the Silver Age of Russian poetry in its entirety, but Bunin remained studiously unaffected by its movements. His poetry shows the influence of Symbolism and Acmeism occasionally, but not markedly so. He knew its celebrated poets personally, and was respected in his turn, but Bunin simply produced collections of very conventional poems on very conventional themes.

In Bunin's work there remained the encompassing love of humanity, but also a stern eye for realism. Bunin thus had little of Gorky's idealism of the common man, or Blok's unrealistic hopes of the Revolution. As his social world collapsed, first in Russia, and then in the Nazi takeover of France, he increasingly adhered to the traditionalist view, that poems give enduring life to what is only particular and evanescent.

LEAF FALL

The forest, a towering, painted wall
of purple, gold and crimson shade
rejoices in the sunlight's fall
from heights into this brilliant glade.

The birch-tree shavings, yellow-white,
thin-glimmer in the azure light,
while tall, dark firs that soar on through
the gaps in maples fade to blue.

In places through the foliage shine
10. odd windows where the sky has won.
The forest smells of oak and pine,
of summers dried out in the sun.

Now autumn, in her sadder shows,
adopts the widow's quieter clothes.

Today, athwart the light, is laid
across an empty courtyard space,
the spider's web of silver braid
that was an aerial net of lace.

About the yard, throughout the day,
20. the last moth flutters, then is still;
it, like a petal in the chill
of winter, in the web will stay.

But in the sun great warmth is found,
as from the splendour all around.
But also silence in the light
that falls from blue and forest height.

What does this close, thick silence hold
that we can hear a leaf unfold?
The forest, a towering, painted wall
30. of purple, gold and crimson shade.

Across this simple, happy glade,
and spell-bound by the silence made,
a blackbird calls and seems to fly
from where the thickest shadows lie.

Deep amber gleams the foliage there,
but scattered through the heaven's air,
wide, scattered flocks of starlings press:
then all is still, as though aware
of this last flood of happiness.

40. So autumn knows its settled lease,
accepting deep and thoughtful peace.

And with bad weather on its way,
the forest heeds that silent call.
Yet dawn and sunset both inlay
their wealth of purple-gold display,
irradiating forest wall.

Afterwards it falls to night;
a sullen moon comes into view,
to throw long shadows on the dew,
50. where all at once is chill and white.

So autumn in the woods, and spread
through thickets patchy, thin and dead:
how sinister the way that led
to terrors in the night ahead.

The silence now seems different;
it's one which — listen — swells and grows:
a sort of whiteness that has lent
to moon its fervour as it slowly rose.

With ever shorter shadows there,
60. it peers through mist-clad thoroughfares
to seek the truth within its lair.
The hazy height of heaven fares
not well this autumn night. Beware,
this hour has strange and gloomy airs!

The fog, a wet and silvered gaze,
is littering the forest ways.
The clearing in that flooded light
has sharp, crisp beauty, edged in white.

It speaks of death. On its behalf
70. the birds like owls are silent, sat
there moping in the branches that
betray at times a spooky laugh.

From those it falls and from a height,
still waving its soft wings, and flies
to find new branches, there alight,
and stare once more with large, round eyes.

Prominent are tufted ears
that in amazement turn to gaze
on forests sinking into haze,
80. a whitish mist that slowly clears
to leaves thick-piled in rotting tiers.

But do not hope for morning sun:
with rain and mist it's overcast.
With chilly fog the day's begun.
No wonder that the night has past,
though autumn's breath will travel deep
in what it overcame at last:
the night is lonely, far from sleep,

and, locked within the towering wall,
90. will see with rage the hard rain fall
blackening the stormy night.
In clearings, spots of fierce green light
where prowling wolf's eyes probe and trawl.

Without a prize the forest stood
in darkened, thin deficiency.
September, whirling through the wood,
removed wide swathes of canopy,
there strewing entrances with leaves
where night fell under empty eaves.

100. Now life retires and starts to yield
a sense that, far away, is felt
the blare of horns that seems to wield
a coppery bluster, soon to melt
in rain-drenched fog and sodden field.

Beyond the valley sounds or tree,
and lost in forest depths around,
a horn is howling sullenly.
It calls to those who hunt and hound,
and to the quarry gone to ground,
110. a threat that's growing, distantly.

And then the cold rain starts to bite.
Like whirling leaves across the glade,
migrating geese above have made
extended caravans of flight.

The days go by, inscrutable,
but at the pillars of the dawn,
the forests, mauve, immutable,
are with a silver pencil drawn

And then the soundless ermine go
120. as shadows flit across a face,
and these last days of autumn show
a forest tossed upon the porch.

The yard is cold and empty, gate
has now two aspens trees, both dry.
The swamp and blue of valley sky
equally look desolate.

The road goes southwards on its own,
and southwards too the birds have flown,
in colds and blizzards every day
130. the winter here will further stay.

From autumn and the break of day
the lonely path goes on and on:
what can the forest do but stay
with all its wealth of foliage gone.

In this, the forest bids goodbye,
though days to come may still be good.
For soon new-fallen snow is stood
on ground where death and silver lie.

How strange that is, though nothing's there
140. but snow and days of desolation.
The woods and village ways are bare,
but all their roofs a white occasion.

Beneath the heavens, fields stretch far,
and make a white-bound entity:
how happy will the sable be,
and as the stoats and martins are.

Basking, running, all at play
in fields' long snowdrifts through the day,

and dancing with the shaman's potion,
150. all through the naked taiga go.
And from the tundra and the ocean
comes the whirling, spinning snow.

Like beasts themselves, the winds are howling,
along the forest walls are prowling.
The trees are stripped to stakes, each gone
into a wind-picked skeleton.

And then the scorching hoarfrost falls
from the overarching blue,
occasioning vast silvered halls,
160. crystalline and icy too.

At night, and through that white divorce,
the firmament will take its course.

The shining points of Pleiades
will glitter in their silent hour,
and flares of frost, that burn and freeze,
see heydays of Aurora's power.

AND FLOWERS AND MUMBLEBEES

With flowers, and bumblebees, the grass, and sheaves of hay,
among this blue and midday heat,
he Lord will ask the prodigal, on some such day,
if life so given him were sweet.

And all that's past will be forgotten, only these
odd paths through fields I shall recall,
and in my flooding tears, and on my grateful knees,
scarce find the words to speak at all.

SIRIUS

Where are you now, my favoured star,
whose sky-born beauty does not fade?
Unrequited is your call from far
who are of snow and moonlight made.

Where is the magic of my youth,
where are those loved and dear to me,
those window banks of snow — in truth,
that home of one far house and tree?

Blaze on, unquenchable in power,
in varied lights that you evince.
You flood my grave in some late hour
God knew but has forgotten since.

MORPHEUS

How beautiful the fire-red poppies of your wreath
to that strange guest inhabiting dark earth beneath:
how pale the sunburnt look, how long the saddening ways
with which you stare at me with mild and point-blank gaze.

How terrible for man the silent hour of Morpheus,
the weave of blaze and darkness with the fabulous.
Divine the wreath is, and to a joyful country he
conveys me: wholly rendered and well-known to me.

No hopes forbidden there, nor is the wild spring far,
this place where self I dream of stays familiar.
No marvels, nor is kindness superfluous
in those from whom the God-made grave divided us.

Sergey Esenin (1895-1925)

Sergey Esenin was born into a peasant family in Riazan province, but lived in Moscow from 1912 to 1915. Thence he moved to St Petersburg, where he met Blok, Gorodetsky and Kliuev, the latter becoming his tutor, friend and perhaps lover. The pupil soon outdid the master, however, and Esenin joined with Shershenevich and Mariengof to found the Imagist school of poetry. Esenin's aesthetic was different, but he shared with them a rowdy hooliganism that began to appear in his themes. In 1923 he married the famous dancer Isadora Duncan, and travelled with her to western Europe and the United States. Duncan spoke no Russian, however, and the couple were divorced a year later. Esenin returned to Russia, gave up Imagism, and remarried. Though often the worse for drink, Esenin travelled extensively, in the Caucasus and beyond, but in 1925 hanged himself in a Leningrad hotel room.

Esenin depicted himself as the innocent country boy spoiled by urban bohemia, a pose that brought him immense popularity but little critical acclaim. Yet Esenin was, and still is, a much-loved poet, appealing to all classes, and the poetry is far from artless nostalgia for a vanished country life. There is a greater awareness of pain, a growing sense of loss of innocence. Images substitute for narrative, which becomes less clear, and the fragmented poems may be ornamented with Modernist and sometimes puzzling imagery.

I'LL LEAVE MY NATIVE LAND

Tired of native lands, I'll roam
where buckwheat offers no relief.
I'd leave the little hut that's home
as does a vagabond or thief.

I'll walk the white curls, rain or shine;
some sorry place can let me in.
I'll get a well-loved friend of mine
to sharpen knife against his shin.

In sunny fields the spring is out;
pale roads twist on without a care.
The girl I cherish, think about,
must turf me off her doorstep there.

I'll go to father's house again
and share the joy its folk receive.
When green is evening's window pane,
I'll hang myself upon my sleeve.

Grey willows weave the wattle fence;
their gentle heads are sideways grown.
Unwashed, I will be carted thence,
interred where barking dog is thrown.

The moon goes sailing, sailing on,
dropping oars in waters. Hence
our life in Russia's always gone,
in tears and dancing to that fence.

Pavel Vasiliev (1910-37)

Pavel Vasiliev was one of many writers, artists and intellectuals who disappeared in the Great Purges of the 1930s. His boisterous love of life, not to mention his rowdy hooliganism and outspoken contempt of Stalin and Stalinism, made him a marked man. He was arrested briefly in 1932, expelled from the Union of Soviet Writers and then barred from publishing in 1934. In February 1937 he was arrested once more, convicted of treason, and shot.

Vasiliev was born in the city of Zaisan (now in Votochnyi Kazakhstan oblast) to a Cossack family and had his first poem published at the age of 16. Abandoning studies at Novosibirsk University, he spent two years as a sailor and gold miner, experiences he later described in two books of essays, *Gold Exploration* and *People of the Taiga* (both 1930).

In 1928 he moved to Moscow, where his promise was immediately recognised. Publications followed rapidly, culminating in the lyric cycle *Poems for Natalya* (1934). Vasiliev was one of the last great exponents of 'peasant poetry', a movement epitomized by Sergei Yesenin. Vasiliev himself used folkloric elements, musical rhythms and violent, colourful imagery in describing the Siberian countryside and its rapid transformation under Communism.

NATALYA

The windows, squinting through the summer air,
are stupefied to find no curtain there.

No lace to hide behind and have its fun
but, startling, to the looker-on proclaim
they have Natalya in their yielding frame:
how bold at windows our unwedded one.

I've just the one request to make,
that you be sensible, for Heaven's sake.
I'm talking of that short-sleeved top you've got,
in which your long, ferocious body nests:
let's have no golden cannon balls for breasts:
no: just to look at them, I sure could not.

The sturdy flesh, I love, its wholesome zest,
and then the widespread eyebrows broadly vexed
to feet, the soles of them, and all the nails.
The night will see your shoulders shed their wings,
and look: your lips disclose judicious things,
while, over all that movement, sense prevails.

Your smile, how faint it is, how small and far;
I'd have you as the ever smiling are:
for then how beautiful you'd be, and graced
with all that's giving, and your 'touch me not'
be like the upturned touch your mouth has got
at its two ends, and where your soul is placed.

And when you walk, my love, all look at you,
and praise and magnify the things you do,
the most intelligent, at every hand,
and in the wake of your great moving say,
'A peach she is, she has a swan-like sway:
a wondrous beauty is abroad this land.'

'She walks and trees are green in every shoot.
She walks and nightingales are mad and mute,
She walks and motionless the great clouds grow.
She walks and harvest corn reflects her hue.
In her is love awoken, warm and true,
as sunlight blesses her from top to toe.'

'She walks and then so lightly it behoves
the tarts like trotting foxes in their droves
to stop and have their startled hair prefer
the smell of dogs or wide, goose-pimpled hips,
or feet so calloused when a new shoe slips:
all pause and falter and make way for her.'

'In her eyes the summer eats and drinks,
and, unafraid of what Vertinsky thinks,
or what the wolves will eat, or devil give
who knew old Nekrasov, his tales of wrong,
but at the Kalinushka sang along,
are we who haven't yet begun to live.'

The first fine weeks of June are in the air:
our land sees merry-making everywhere.
There is no trash about such great events
but great delight appears in everything:
a bride that's only starting out to sing:
the grooms are tuning up their instruments.

Guitars at evening, an infernal noise,
but aren't the tractor-drivers splendid boys —
washed, clean-shaven, with their caps askew?
Life is happiness, so do not linger,
take this ring, my love, from off my finger:
my wedding ring it is, and wrought for you.

I praise Natalya of the good tomorrow,
that life has joys and sadness, smiles and sorrow.
Let any doubt of that be gone from sight,
and have the flowering of her blanket keep
Natalya long in moans and short in sleep:
I sing the praises of the wedding night.

Andrey Bely (born Boris Bugaev: 1880-1934)

Andrey Bely believed that imaginative literature would be a reflection of universal truth, inevitably so, given only the right approach and gifts. Bely was born in Moscow to an eminent mathematician, and rose to prominence with two prose works and a 1904 collection of poems, *Gold in Azure*. His quixotic affair with Blok's wife came to nothing, however, and from this deep personal disappointment flowed the next cycles of poems, the 1909 collections of *The Urn* and *Ashes*. Bely married in 1911, spent the 1912-16 years with his young wife in a theosophical retreat in Switzerland, and was then called up for the army, which the 1917 Revolution superseded. Bely saw a cosmic purpose even in these events.

Bely was the most innovative of Symbolist poets, but his poetry is much less imposing than his prose. Many early pieces are tongue-in-cheek tableaux from historical periods, and there are several sunset sketches in pastel colours. In *Ashes* the subject is Russia, and the despair the country causes Bely. *To My Friends* is an appeal from beyond the grave.

TO MY FRIENDS

Beliefs had the lustre of gold,
but sunlight's arrows brought his end.
Though large in the thought of old
he could not live his life.

Don't laugh at the poet beneath;
but dedicate a bloom to him.
On his tomb is a porcelain wreath
loud summer and winter long.

To flowers there's now no relating,
and icon has faded from sight.
How heavy the flagstones. I'm waiting
for someone to haul them away.

He loved the sound of bells,
the sunsets too.
Why is life only painful spells?
Surely I'm not to blame?

Reflect what your pity will do,
I'd hurry to you in my wreath.
Tell me your love anew —
when what is now dead could awake and return —
to you!

Alexander Alexanderovich Blok (1880-1921)

By retreating into the inner world of imagination, the Symbolists explored a reality beyond the world of the senses, and tried to bring poetry closer to the art of music. In Russia these experiments inspired a whole movement, equal in many ways to the accomplishments of Pushkin and his circle, but where the most confident and accomplished performer was Alexander Blok. He used a metaphoric language to convey spiritual and psychic experience, and his many religious and love poems brought Romanticism back into fashion. Blok hailed the Russian Revolution as liberation from outworn conventions, though he was disappointed by its reality, and indeed died a broken man.

Blok was born into a sheltered and intellectual environment. His father was a law professor, and his mother the daughter of the rector of St. Petersburg University. He was reared in the atmosphere of artistic refinement at the manor of his aristocratic maternal grandparents, and in 1903 married Lyubov Mendelejeva, daughter of the famous chemist. Poetry came easily and naturally to Blok, and the early verse celebrated the exaltation and spiritual fulfilment of marriage. The technical mastery of Pushkin, and the apocalyptic philosophy of the poet and mystic Vladimir Solovyev were important influences on Blok, who developed innovatory rhythms where sound and musicality were paramount.

I FORESEE YOU

Of You I have forebodings. Time moves on:
I see whatever in Your guise appears.

Clear, unbearably, has that horizon shone;
I wait in silent longing, love and tears.

The whole horizon flames. Your face draws near
though I fear You'll change the way You look to me.

Audaciously You raise the very thing I fear,
when Your appearances will cease to be.

Oh, then and sorrowing, how low I'll fall,
and terrible the dreaming come to be,

yet with a clear horizon will Your fire enthral,
though I fear You'll change the way You look to me.

.

BLACK RAVEN

Black raven in the snowy evening:
black velvet round the swarthy sights.
Languorous voice, as soft as breathing,
sings to me of southern nights.

Intense and careless, the heart agreeing,
a sign that's sent me from out the sea.
Across the pit the rider's fleeing,
breathless to eternity.

How chill the snowy breath you're bringing,
intoxicating lips, that seem
but nightingales: how sweet they're singing:
Valentina, my star, my dream!

Delirium of kisses, they too fearing
a world too narrow for the heart:
Dark holds of gypsy songs I'm hearing:
how fast the comets flare apart.

STORMY WEATHER

Let the month shine out and bring
a happiness to life together.
In my soul of love the spring
will not undo the stormy weather

Answering to a dead man's gaze,
the night is stretched above the street:
and dull the poor, sick eyes that blaze
with poison that is sharp and sweet.

Though vain is passion, in the frost
of crowds and early dawning mists
I wander as a soul half lost
but find one cherished thought persists.

Let the month shine out and bring
a happiness to life together.
In my soul of love the spring
will not undo the stormy weather

STEPS OF THE COMMANDER

A curtain, thick and heavy, fills the door,
and fog is pressing the window-pane.

A gross licentiousness, Don Juan: what's it for
when fear is coming, all too plain?

Silent the sumptuous, vast bedroom stays,
night holds its breath, the servants sleep.
And from a blissful, unfamiliar country strays
the daybreak chorus roosters keep.

What's bliss when gross deceit undoes your part,
when hours on earth are also gone?
Now Anna sleeps with arms tight-pressed about the heart:
Donna Anna's dreaming on.

And yet that face is frozen hard, a chill
with which reflecting mirrors gleam.
Does, Anna, sleep within the grave go well, and will
you, disembodied, also dream?

5. Life is crazed and empty, meaningless:
come out to fight its monstrous pride!
Enamoured and triumphant come the sounds that press
of horn from darkened snows outside

Headlights drench and vanish out of sight,
the car goes past as owl for mouse.
And now with steps that seem imperative and light,
the Commander strides toward the house.

The door will open to excessive cold,
nor clock be easy on the ear.
This is the hour your dinner invitation told.
Are you not ready? I am here.

There comes no answer to that probing why,
which in itself must tell the tale.
Here, over-rich, the rooms return a frightened cry:
the staff sleep on and night turns pale.

The night was cloudy, but the day dawns bright,
yet strangely chill that light becomes.
Where are you, Donna Anna, our blessed Queen of Light?
Anna! Anna! Nothing comes.

10. No morning's veil of threatening fog denies
the coming of our final breath,
nor less will Donna Anna in that fateful hour arise
and hold you in that hour of death.

UNKOWN WOMAN

At evening, over restaurants,
the air is hot and wild and deaf:
what rules these drunken, rowdy haunts
is spring and its pernicious breath

Across the far-off alley, dust
haphazardly on houses lies:
a pretzel sign shows pale gold crust,
and somewhere else a baby cries.

Each night, beyond the barriers,
with bowler hats tipped raffishly,
past drainage ditch, each walk incurs
some witty and expected plea.

The rowlocks creak across the lake;
a woman screams; the heavens see —
inured to all, for no one's sake —
the moon's disk wandering vacantly.

Each night my friend's the only one
I notice in the window pass,
and, meek and reeling, I've begun
to sense hard liquor in the glass.

At nearby tables, in the guise
of dozing, waiters lounge about.
The drunks cry out with rabbit eyes,
'In vino veritas', they shout.

And at a certain time each night —
or is the dream but only me? —
a silk-swathed woman floats in sight,
as far as misted windows see.

Manoeuvring round inebriates,
with none escorting, none to meet,
this woman, breathing perfumed states,
will settle on the window seat.

As though much made of ancient lore,
she's wrapped limb-tight in silky things,
and stylish: hat has feathers pour,
the slender hand is draped with rings.

Beguiled by such proximity,
and through her dark-veiled instances,
a far enchanted shore I see,
and more enchanting distances.

Unheard-of secrets I cannot tell,
and someone's sun is also mine:
at every turn my soul as well
is dipped into astringent wine.

The ostrich feathers fall side-wise
but to my mind entice the more.
Unfathomable the blue of eyes
that blossom on that far-off shore.

There is a treasure in the soul,
the key to which is wholly mine.
You're right to be my brutish troll:
I'm drunk, and truth is in the wine.

Viacheslav Ivanov (1866-1949)

Ivanov was first educated in Moscow, where he studied history and philosophy, and then in Berlin where he studied Roman law and economics under Theodor Mommsen. He married Darya Dmitrievskaya, the sister of a close childhood friend in 1886, studied archaeology in Rome, and in 1893 met his second wife, Lydia Zinovieva-Annibal. After receiving their divorces, the two married in 1899, first settling in Athens, then moving to Geneva, and making archaeological pilgrimages to Egypt and Palestine.

In 1903 the Ivanovs made a celebrated return to St. Petersburg, where they established the most fashionable literary salon of the era. Subsequently, on the death of his third wife, who was his step-daughter, Ivanov moved to Baku, where he held the University Chair of Classical Philology. Finally, indifferent to turmoil in Soviet Russia, and staying aloof from émigré politics, Ivanov settled in Rome, being received into the Russian Catholic Church in 1926.

Ivanov continued to write until nearly the end of a tangled but fruitful life: poems, plays, translations and scholarly studies. He was the most erudite of Symbolist poets, indeed of Russian poets altogether, with an enviable learning and range of reference that's reflected in his poems.

BEAUTY'S NOMADS

Your fathers went before you
though thick the graveyards grow,
free nomads having borne you,
in beauty you will go.

Daily comes the treason
of moving camp each day
and hopeless any reason
to lead us from our way.

Invest in distant stories,
spread veils before your eyes.
Spring has emerald glories
beneath extended skies.

Artists, ever drifting,
how wide those dreaming bands:
cleanse, resettle, be sifting,
and flee original lands.

Across vast distances
come whirlwind hordes again,
and proud the instances
of slaves that were free men.

Attila, come and trample,
new waste our paradise:
with flowers our steppes are ample
to fill the starry skies.

TAORMINA

Beyond a dimmed Ausonia, the eastern sky is red
and smoke from snow-capped Etna rises amber-brown.
The snow reflects unbroken purple, which pours on down
as though with oil anointed rose that kingly head.

On through the groves of oak and silent fields it's come,
and then through olive groves and dawn-grey shores it flows,
and thence to airy Pontus. The misted blueness shows
the ruins that glimmer through a blessed propylaeum.

The music's gone, but on this sleeping, broken stage
the soul's forever smouldering, rising from the snow
for you, come east in triumph, to this most holy age.

Though mourning in your citadel, Melpomene,
is Evius, those crags of mystic circles show
a Tartarus still breathing in green captivity.

TRANSCENDE TE IPSUM

The regal serpent is a fork-tongued sayer,
impulse's angel has a two-winged gaze:
your soul has reached the parting of the ways;
one's led by Rachel, and the other Leah.

As two-ways pulled the bit is by the reins,
to one goes action and to one blessed dreams.
One's Repudiation. The other gains
release from Contemplation. Sophia streams

out light for both. Transcend yourself, one cries:
dissolve yourself in All. But Rachel says,
diminish self that vile division dies.

She loves the One that's lost into the All,
and Leah loves the One not All. Unless
they span the dark beneath they both may fall.

Nicholay Gumilev (1886-1921)

Nicholay Gumilev was an Acmeist, i.e. an heir of Symbolism but aiming for greater clarity and objectivity. Beside his contemporaries, Mandelstam and Akhmatova, Gumilev is often seen as 'light-weight', lacking the depth of the first and the passion of the last. But Gumilev was innovative and introduced exotic themes into Russian verse. He created a new direction, moreover, where spiritual matters are nonetheless rooted in the concrete world.

The Gates of Paradise, is articulating something Gumilev held very dear, indeed built his poetry around: that life is a journey which has to be undertaken with special sensitivity and understanding.

Gumilev often dedicated his works to travellers, and people close to him in spirit. To fellow Acmeists, the road or journey is associated with two worlds, marked by a door, gateway, stairway, threshold and boundaries of space. The door to this space is always open to those who are spiritually inclined, i.e. it has objective reality but opens to areas beyond the physical world. That 'golden door', as Gumilev never tired of explaining to Akhmatova, was the object of his continual travel overseas, but which, by 1915, he'd accepted was beyond his reach.

LIKE THE WIND

Like the wind from a happy country
are the petitions from lovers borne,
how stiffly they bend in their bounty,
in those ears of ripened corn.

The Arab sings in the desert places:
'how soul from body is torn.'
On great depths the Greek soul rephrases:
'in the seagull the heart is reborn.'

Is beauty to them not submissive;
does the Greek's lamp not know intent?
Is the friend's Arab seed not hissing,
does the incense not fill the tent?

So the call goes on, ever enlarging,
much wider and more wonderful yet.
Have you not guessed the secret, my darling,
in the ramblings my songs beget?

My dear, this is a song of the summer:
fine hands but too feeble to dare.
Two thousand years old is the honey
and still heady the ebony hair.

GATES OF PARADISE

Not by seven diamond seals is locked
the gate eternally to paradise.
It's not with glitter or temptation stocked,
and may be absent to unknowing eyes.

This is the door. The mossy walls attest
to long neglect, for nothing else has grown.
A beggar's here, an uninvited guest,
though clearly on his belt the keys are shown.

Knights and men at arms go riding by,
a howl of gold and silver's in the air.
Who keeps the gate is catching no one's eye:
for the Apostle Peter none to care.

Yet all still dream that at the Tomb of God
the gates of paradise are in their power.
Beneath Mount Tabor there is nothing odd
for peal to answer at their promised hour.

A monstrous crowd flows by, to brag
of earth's accomplishment in blaring sound:
The Apostle Peter in a tattered rag
is sat, a poor pale beggar on the ground.

TREES

I know the trees are given, but not to us,
to life that's perfect under this vast dome.
The stars on this rich earth are sisters thus,
although they're native in what's not our home.

The empty fields are wet with autumn's hem,
deep coppers risings and the sunsets face.
The mornings lend their coloured hues to them,
this green and airy, open populace.

There are Moses trees among the oaks,
and Mary in the palms, whose souls must mark
while sending calls to other quiet folks,
with waters flowing into endless dark.

In depths of earth, what sharpened gems are found.
On crumbling granite the babbling water flows.
It sings and shouts; the elm tree falls to ground,
and sycamores have donned their leafy clothes.

If only I could find some other land
where I, who need not then to sing or cry,
but in that towering silence only stand
as sky's uncountable millennia go by.

Mikhail Alexeevich Kuzmin (1872-1936)

Mikhail Alexeevich Kuzmin was a greatly gifted man. He had the artistic skills sufficient to professionally illustrate his many books of verse. He studied music under Rimsky-Korsakov, and was able to set many of his poems to music, accompanying himself on the piano in literary salons. He published twelve books of poetry in conventional and free verse forms, exhibiting a craft mastery in both. Besides a great deal of translation in his later years, he wrote several novels, over a hundred short stories and forty dramatic works. And yet, though on good terms with the great poets of the Silver Age, Kuzmin is not normally mentioned in the same breath. Why?

Perhaps because he was too accomplished and versatile, as Cocteau was in France, exhibiting a facile ease that showed little of the hard struggle with outmoded conventions expected of the revolutionary future. Mirsky calls this style 'stylisation': work of great delicacy but to some extent a pastiche, employing forms from earlier decades.

ABANDONED

To be abandoned brings great happiness:
immense the light that clarifies the past.
After summer, winter storms impress
with sun remembered, though that's gone at last.

It's what dried flower, or bundled letters say,
or smiling eyes of lovers when they meet:
though now it's dark and uphill all the way,
you walked the springtime grass on naked feet.

Another lesson for voluptuaries:
a path where wide and empty shadows fall.
To be abandoned: happiness it is —
to be unloved: the bitterest fate of all.

Vladislav Khodasevich (1886-1939)

Vladislav Khodasevich was born in Moscow but of Polish-Lithuanians: his mother was Jewish and his father Catholic. That combination of sources gave Khodasevich some independence from Symbolist influences: he was a genuine mystic and his style is closer to the poetry of the past, to Pushkin and his circle with their love of wit and craftsmanship. Khodasevich bought out his first collection in 1907, but it was his 1917 *The Grain's Past* that brought him fame. *The Heavy Lyre* followed in 1922, but in 1922 Khodasevich left Russia with Nina Berberovna, settling in Sorrento, Berlin and Paris. A third important collection, *European Night* followed in 1927, but depression, ill health and poverty made poetry writing difficult. Nonetheless, Khodasevich did receive well-deserved acclaim for his critical articles and for an admirable and still standard biography of Derzhavin.

In Khodasevich there is also bitterness, the malaise so characteristic of the 20th century. The earlier poems are marked by decadence, but this gives way to cynicism and rancour at the banal 'horrors' of life, to nebulous anxieties and the falsities of society.

KHODASEVICH: MONUMENT

In me is death and a beginning,
so little here I have been winning.
Yet as a link I've nonetheless
been given this great happiness.

When Russia comes again to power
my Janus idol gains its hour,
and looks about the crossing ways
at wind and sand and endless days.

Anna Akhmatova (1899-1966)

Both Anna Akhmatova (real name Anna Andreyevna Gorenko) and Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941) were love poets, but not generally of happy love. Both suffered under the Soviet regime. Akhmatova was able to publish little after the 1920s, and Tsvetaeva committed suicide after returning friendless to Russia in 1941.

Akhmatova early work was generally short lyric poems on the joys, and more usually the difficulties and sorrows, of love, but her later cycles, such as *Requiem* (1935–40) also acted as witness to the Stalinist terror. Her early (1912-25) style was quite distinctive: strong and clear but still economical and restrained, focusing on women's troubles seen from a feminine point of view. She was rarely in favour with the Soviet authorities, but pointedly chose not to emigrate.

Akhmatova saw poetry as a high, exacting art, but popular elements in her work made her into a celebrity. Acmeism to Akhmatova was not simply a poetic style but a way of living, a pledge of personal honour.

Much of the early poetry was a personalization of fictional incidents, moreover, something the Soviet regime regarded as bourgeois and self-indulgent. Only in the 1960s did the poet really become well known outside Modernist Russian circles.

LAST MEETING

Confused and cold the heart;
though footwork deft and light.
With gloves not told apart,
the left got tangled with the right.

How many the steps down there?
I knew there were only three,
but maples in the autumn air
were whispering they'll die with me.

By saddening gloom denied,
ill-fortune runs me through.
'Ah, my dearest,' I cried,
'How willingly I'd die with you.'

So song when last we met,
and dark the house became,
with candles in the bedroom yet
indifferent in yellow flame.

I DON'T ASK

It's not your love I'm asking for,
that's safely tucked away if smart.
Your fiancée's not about to start
some 'how I'm wounded' letter war.

Better take my shrewd advice:
let her read the things I wrote,
because you grooms are really nice,
ensure my portraits get her vote.

Such fools like her need more than praise,
their victory is an avocation:
it's likely friendship's conversation
will touch on our first tender days.

Trust me: when that bliss is spent,
this new sweet living with your friend,
there comes the boredom, at the end
you're shocked to find how fast it went.

For you and her are not to last,
but as poor pennies in the till
your jaded friend becomes, and fast,
a superannuated thrill.

So on my solemn night, no less,
don't come to me; I don't know you.
There's nothing here to help or owe you,
and I don't heal with happiness.

ALL IS TRADED

A sold-off cheap decade,
black death before our eyes,
to hungering greed betrayed.
Why does this light arise?

Long days with cherry scent;
beneath towns vast forests grow;
new constellations for firmament;
through skies clear as Julys know.

The wondrous comes closer still
to huts filthy and ruinous:
the unknown will fulfil
the millennia for us.

Osip Emilievich Mandelstam (1891-1938)

Osip Mandelstam was born in Warsaw but raised in St. Petersburg, Russia. His first collection, *Kamen*, or *Stone*, appeared in 1913, when Symbolism was the dominant movement, but Mandelstam slowly moved to a more direct treatment of thoughts, feelings, and observations under the aegis of Acmeism. In 1922 his second book, *Tristia*, secured his reputation, and both it and *Stone* were released a year later in new editions.

Mandelstam initially supported the Revolution, but grew increasingly unhappy with its political control of the arts, writing a great deal of essays and literary criticism in the twenties. In the following decade came the Great Purges, and Mandelstam, who had unwisely compared Stalin to a beetle in one of his poems, was arrested, twice exiled and finally met his death in one of the transit camps of the Gulag Archipelago.

The musicality of that poetic line also changed radically in the 1930s, giving way to off-rhymes, repetition and irregular rhythms, sometimes jarring effects from the most musical of poets who, consistent with his dialectical nature, also at times aspired to escape reality and fashion pure poetry composed of its sounds and internal harmony.

SILENTIUM

Unborn she is to all beyond,
she is both music and the word:
by all things living she is heard,
unbreakable that early bond.

The ocean's breast breathes calmly through.
Abundantly the day is bright
and foam is shown in lilac light:
the vessel in dark azure blue.

Deny my lips a deeper thirst,
for what is silence in the throat
becomes itself a crystal note
in harmony as from the first.

Aphrodite, stay as foam,
and word as music keep your part,
the heart's unneeded by the heart
when life is fused with its first home.

ST. SOPHIA

So you here stay, Hagia Sophia, where
the Lord is judge of nations and their kings.
That dome is yours, the witnesses declare,
as on a chain hung down from heavenly things.

The years thereafter were Justinian
in using gods' own goods as foreign loan,
Diane of Ephesus the origin
of one o seven green piles of pillared stone.

What was the builder thinking of, who laid
out apses and exedra thus? Blessed
the mind and spirit that are here arrayed
in architecture pointing east and west.

Beautiful is the land that's bathed in peace:
and forty windows celebrate that light,
as on the pendatives, in dome's vast lease,
the four Archangels beautify the sight.

So will the building in its wise beliefs
outlast whatever centuries and people found.
Nor will the Seraphim's deep-sounding griefs
detach dark gilding from the walls around.

TRISTIA

The science of farewells I've had to learn
from sad and loose-haired pillow talk at night.
The oxen chew, and city vigils yearn
for daylight's flooding back. That well-known rite,
when cocks in night-time choruses defy
the watch, has my respect. The burdens that belong
to women weeping lift, each tear-stained eye
attending more to distant Muses' song.

Who truly knows what each new parting sends,
what kind of separation comes in this
retelling some excited cock portends
with fires that burn on the acropolis?
Perhaps at the dawn of some new life, the ox
will be but ruminating in its stall,
or the heralds of rebirth, the afore-said cocks,
be walking, flapping wings, on city wall?

I love the skills acquired in weaving flax:
how the spindle's singing, the shuttle fetched.
She comes to me aloft in down-soft facts,
this Delia, barefoot, with her wings outstretched.
How poor our speech is of its joy and laughter,
how thin a thread our meagre lives recite.
Everything is old, and will repeat thereafter,
and only recognition bring delight.

So be it then. A figured wafer lies
out on a clean white dish of earthenware.
A squirrel's skin is flattened out to size,
and on the wax a musing girl will stare.
Not ours to question the Grecian Erebus.
Wax serves women, as bronze must serve for men.
It's only in battle that lots can fall to us,
but theirs the gift to die, not guessing when.

Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941)

Marina Tsvetaeva's life was even harder than Akhmatova's. She married early, and in 1912 her daughter Ariadne was born. During the Civil War her husband, Sergey Efron, fought with the volunteer White Army in the Crimea, and she was able to join him only in 1923. The couple emigrated and lived in Berlin, Prague and Paris. A son was born in 1923. Unfortunately, Efron was unmasked as a Soviet agent and returned to Russia with their daughter. Tsvetaeva followed with their son in 1939. Efron and Ariadne were subsequently arrested. Bereft of family, friends and future, Tsvetaeva was evacuated to the small town of Elebuga, where she hanged herself in 1941.

Tsvetaeva was a member of no particular literary movement. Many of the poems are autobiographical, relating to a life that was lived intensely but unhappily, with exaggerated feelings of attachment to individual poets of both sexes, which sometimes grew into romantic infatuations. From 1917 to 1922, Tsvetaeva wrote poems commemorating the White Army, but it is poems written in the mid twenties, celebrating mother Russia, that are her most accomplished and popular.

Tsvetaeva's style was quite radical. She mixed an everyday language with one that was much more bookish (even incorporating eighteenth century words), often incorporating references to the classical world.

AN ATTEMPT AT JEALOUSY

So how's life with the other one?
Simpler, isn't it? One stroke of oar
and then the whole long coastline's gone,
with thoughts of you know who before

become a floating island — of
the sky, of course, and not the waters.
May the spirits up above
pronounce you sisters, never lovers.

So how's your life with that dumb broad?
She's not aspired to godhead yet?
A sovereignty she can't afford?
(Or stepping down from it, my pet.)

No trembling yet? Nothing lost?
You get up, mornings, best you can?
Banalities don't come at cost?
But you will cope, my poor dear man.

'What ugly tempers we have got!
I'm moving out. No, that's enough!
How's life with any woman not,
my dearest one, a chosen love?

No doubt the food is fairly good?
But anyway, don't bitch to me.
Grand the life with someone stood
bold as brass on Sinai?

So, now you're with a stranger not
of this wide world, are bedtimes torrid?
You really love her? Shame you've got
the reins of Zeus to lash your forehead.

So how's your health? Still keeping well?
You sing that much, these days — at all?
An immortal conscience doesn't spell
out impotence and likely fall?

In short, how's life now with that rather
over-promoted bit of fluff?
After dealing with Carrara
marble isn't the plaster stuff

a big step down. A god was hewn
from stone, true, but smashed to bits.
You chose from thousands one poor loon
and not the one that Lilith fits?

Happy with this market fling?
Or cold to all the magic hence?
How's living with some ordinary thing,
a woman lacking my sixth sense?

So tell me, you are happy? Tell
me it's not feeling emptier than
our lives that were. Nor hard as well —
as mine is with this other man?

NEWSPAPER READERS

Underground it crawls,
the snake, carries passengers.
On their own — each hauls
out newspapers (his, hers

5. own itching skin disease!)
White space aligns the features
that mastic chewers squeeze
out for newsprint readers.

Readers — athlete? Near gone?
10. Soldier? — No features, faces,
years. A skeleton —
the faceless newsprint graces!

Which — is an all-Paris worth
of top to navel dressers.
Girl: stop! —
No birth
for what such print possesses.

"Lives with his sister" — sway —
"Killed his father" — press
So is their lurching way
20. pumped up with pettiness.

Are such folk — followers
of sunrise or sunset? Do
such emptiness swallows
read newspapers through?

Newspapers — read slander.
Newspapers — embezzlement.
Every column — will wander,
paragraph worse — it went.

And when the Last Trump dawns
30. you'll emerge to light!
You grabbers of small sums
who are the newsprint readers!

— Go! Gone! Disappeared!
a mother's fear's allowed us.
Is — mother! — the press feared
more than Schwartz's powders?

The grave is best at once
than lewd infirmary
with scab-scratching dunce
40. and news confirmatory!

Tell us why each son,
festers in their prime:
what has mixed blood done?
Made writing news a crime!

Do we, friends — appear
the stronger for these lines?
What have we to fear
at manuscripts' designs?

and I stand before the face
50. — there is no emptier place —
there is no personal space
that editors must grace
 but trash.

POETS

A long way off is the poet's speech.
The poet's carried by distant speech

by way of omens, planets, roundabouts,
of parables with potholes, yea in nay.
As bell-tower swings his hands are hereabouts,
whose curve will take in all. The comet's way

is the poet's way. Indeed the broken links
for him are good connections. Yes, despair,
it is a hopeless case. A poem's eclipse
is not as set down in the calendar.

He muddles up the cards, appears the chancer,
supposing the weighing of things arithmetic.
He is the desk-bound child demanding answer
who confounds good Kant when he needs to think.

His coffin is in stone in the Bastille's fold;
he is like the tree in its loveliness,
the one with the footprints that are always cold,
or the train all take and for togetherness.

It is late, of course, for the comet's way
is the poet's way: brilliant, not warming,
breaking up, not growing, leaving the door ajar,
with the curved trajectory is always performing
but in no way pictured by the calendar.

Boris Pasternak (1890-1960)

Though best known in the west for his *Doctor Zhivago*, Boris Pasternak was widely respected in his native Russia for poems that introduced Modernist techniques and approaches, sometimes prefiguring their appearance in the west. Pasternak came from a markedly cultivated family. He spoke several languages, studied music under Scriabin, and had published his first important collection (*My Sister — Life*) by 1923. Though commonly at odds with the Soviet government, he survived the terrible purges of the 30s, and was well known internationally even before *Zhivago* appeared.

My Sister — Life, written in 1917 but published in 1923, is Pasternak's first important collection of poems. It continued an exploratory, experimental attitude to writing and loosely commemorates a failed love affair on the eve of the 1917 Revolution. The poems, which incorporate impressions of small towns encountered on train journeys in southern Russia, are rather enigmatic and fragmentary, but enthusiasts — of which there are many, then and now — speak of a liberating openness to life coupled with striking metaphors and connections that may not come over in translation. Many allusions seem far-fetched in English, however, and, stripped of their Russian verse texture, seem more novel than convincing.

FEBRUARY

February. Get ink and weep,
then of that sobbing February write.
The tire-track-brindled slush will keep
the springtime burnished black on bright.

Hire a cab for six hryvias,
hear wheels and bells assault the ears;
go back to where the raining has
more noise in it than ink and tears.

The rooks strung out like blackened pears
will fall in thousands from the trees.
They splash in puddles where their cares
bring eye's dry sadness to its knees.

The thawing parts beneath are black.
The screaming wind is torn to bits.
To random things more truth comes back
than sobbings which some poem fits.

Velimir Khlebnikov (1885-1922)

Together with Mayakovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov was Russia's most important Futurist poet. He was far more versatile than can be illustrated here, but a retiring nature, and nomadic existence close to penury in his last years, kept him out of the public eye. His only published volume of poems, *Creations*, appeared in 1914, though other poems, epics, plays and essays were published by futurist small presses from time to time. Much was simply lost in his hand-to-mouth existence, or had to be published posthumously. Khlebnikov carried manuscripts and books around in a pillowcase, which, adding to his odd appearance and habits, caused him to be arrested by both the Red and White Armies on occasion. His travels in the east produced poems set in the Caucasus, Baku, central Asia and Persia, but he died, neglected, in a Russian provincial hospital of an undiagnosed disease, when his contemporaries were enjoying wide celebrity.

Khlebnikov's experimental work prepared the way for Mayakovsky's breakthroughs, and influenced both Pasternak and a long line of later poets. He broke the practices of Symbolism, and encouraged a new 'trans-sense language' (*zaumnyi yazyk*, or *zaum*), something beyond the inherited language. The result was complex, chaotic, and unassembled syntax, where phenomenally accomplished lines could be interspersed with bewildering enigmas.

HUNGER

Why through the forest leap the elk and hares,
diminishing?

Or people eat the poplar bark,
the green shoots of the firs?

Why do wives and children through the forest
go gathering leaves of birch
for soup or broth or borsch?

Why have the tops of fir trees and the silver moss
become the forests food?

10. Children, all good forest scouts,
go searching deep into the thickets.

White worms are roasted on a fire.

Wild cabbages and caterpillars,
fat spiders, too — much sweeter than are nuts.

Moles they hunt for, and grey lizards,
shoot arrows after hissing snakes,
and bake quinoa bread.

The hunger drives them on to moths,
of which whole bags are filled:

20. today there's borscht of butterflies —
which Mother cooks.

They see the hare that ventures through the forest,
as children do, as in a dream.

To them the focus of a brighter world
that they can see with saucer eyes,
the sainted look that hunger gives.

But no, they don't believe.
The hare is canny and escapes,
They see the black tips of the ears,
30. and arrow flying after,
but it's all too late, that hearty lunch has gone.
The children stand transfixed but see . . .
'A butterfly! And look! It's over there!
Run and catch it! There's a blue one too!'
In gloomy depths a wolf has come long distances
to places where the year before
it finished off a lamb.
So round it goes, close sniffing everywhere,
but finds there's nothing left —
40. the ants worked hard — but one dry hoof.
In bitterness, with ribs pressed in,
the wolf lopes off and mingles with the trees.
Perhaps there will be black grouse and the grey
that, sleeping in the snow, the wolf can find,
bringing its paw to crush, as sprinkled thick with snow.
A fox, a fiery mass of fluff,
has clambered on a stump of tree
to think its future out. Could
it become a dog?

50. Or serve some human need?
The open traps that all around
it could just occupy.
No, that's dangerous,
for they would eat a good red fox
as they have done the dogs!
No barking in the village now.
The fox began to wash itself with downy paws,
and hoist its fiery brush aloft.
The squirrel too went grumbling on.
60. 'Where have my nuts and acorns gone? —
Have those people eaten them?'
In quiet, transparently the evening closed.
The pine tree kissed, still murmuring
to the aspen tree.
Perhaps they'll both be felled for breakfast soon.

Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930)

Vladimir Mayakovsky was the unofficial poet laureate of the Soviet Union. He started as a communist agitator, was arrested on three occasions and spent six months in solitary confinement at Butyrki Prison. From 1924 Mayakovsky made annual trips to Paris, and also visited Cuba, Mexico and the USA. His love for a Russian émigré woman in Paris was unrequited. In Russia he was obliged to join the government-sponsored RAPP, and in 1930, disillusioned with the Soviets, and life in general, Mayakovsky committed suicide.

Mayakovsky's early work expresses the resentment felt by the working classes towards the bourgeoisie, but also his unbridled love for gambling and the low life. He also celebrated the Revolution, becoming famous for *Our March*, the poem featured below. He genuinely hoped his poetry had social benefit, paving the way to a better future, but the poetry naturally merged with political propaganda, in time extinguishing the early lyrical phase.

Mayakovsky cultivated a larger-than-life figure, complete with outrageous figures of speech, soaring fantasies and vulgarities new to Russian poetry, and is credited with freeing its forms with free verse and inexact rhymes. He sympathized with the lower classes, but did not identify with them, remaining to the end his own brawling and flamboyant self.

OUR MARCH

Beat through the squares with high rebellious tread,
hold heads as topmost mountains seen:
have earth to deluge fed
and wash our cities clean.

The days concede
that slowly years will come.
Our god is speed:
hearts beating with the drum.

What gold's more bright than ours?
The bullets merely sting.
Our songs are mighty powers.
In ringing gold we sing.

Green meadows: make your mark,
Days: cover up the last.
Rainbows: bend your arc
of years as horse flies past.

Ignore the reactionary heavens:
alone stay songs below.
Big Dipper: make concessions;
alive to the stars we go.

Drink with joy! And sing!
Spring's spilling from our veins.
Breast: fight well, and bring
heart's cymbals to campaigns.