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1
The tradition

This is a book about Russian poets of the twentieth century. All these poets knew or know the Russian poetry of the past and they usually assume on the part of their Russian readers some familiarity with the tradition. Mayakovsky, it is true, called for Pushkin and the rest of the classics to be thrown overboard from the 'steamship of modernity', but he knew his Pushkin by heart, addressing him as a colleague in his poem 'Jubilee'. At the other extreme Mandelstam saw his work largely as the attempt to continue an ancient tradition and wrote for what he called the 'average literate reader' – in reality a rather well-read person who knows Derzhavin, Pushkin and Tyutchev as well as Homer, Ovid and Racine. Whether as model or as challenge, the past is always present.

Most English-speaking readers are not likely to know the earlier Russian poets very well. The purpose of this opening chapter is to give a few hints about what is meant, for instance, when Pasternak dedicates *My Sister Life* (*Sestra moya zhizn'*) to Lermontov or when Brodsky entitles a Petersburg poem 'Almost an Elegy' ('Pochti elegiya') and alludes in its final line to a famous line by Derzhavin. A few hints only however – this brief introduction is not a complete survey, and those who want to know more are advised to follow up some of the suggestions in the appendix.

It is usually held that Russian poetry as we know it began in the eighteenth century, when the basis was laid for the prosody of all subsequent verse writing and a common literary language was gradually created. But of course there was poetry in Russia long before this. The *Lay of Igor's Campaign* (*Slovo o polku Igoreve*), a short epic poem of the twelfth century, occupies a similar position in Russian literature to the *Song of Roland* in French literature, except that it is an isolated example of its kind. Its theme, national defence against the Tatar, is one that has been given new currency in various recent historical situations, and its powerful imagery (swans,

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birds of prey, rain, steppe) resounds in much modern poetic writing, notably that of Blok and Tsvetaeva.

While the *Lay* no doubt draws heavily on an ancient oral tradition of heroic poetry, it survived as a written poem, in a manuscript which was discovered in 1791 and destroyed by fire in 1812. A vastly greater body of poetry was handed down from the pre-Petrine age by popular oral tradition. As in Western Europe, the main impetus for writing down these songs and poems was given by the Romantic movement, and almost all subsequent poets have drawn on this stock of folk poetry or acknowledged its influence.

Oral poetry includes such things as riddles and spells (on which Blok wrote a study), but the two main popular genres in earlier periods were the lyrical song and the narrative poem. The former includes such things as the lament of the abandoned peasant girl and has provided such poets as Anna Akhmatova with a rich store of thematic models. Among the oral narrative poems, the best known are the *byliny*, fairly short folk epics in verse which were first composed at some unknown time in the Middle Ages and were still being sung comparatively recently by illiterate bards (*skaziteli*) in Northern Russia. They tell of the improbable deeds of the heroes of old, *bogatyri* such as Ilya of Murom, figures to whom the modern Russian poet may allude nostalgically or ironically. Occasionally complete long poems are written in a stylized imitation of such narratives (for instance Marina Tsvetaeva's *Tsar-Maiden* (*Tsar'-Devitsa*)), and one often finds echoes of their leisurely repetitious style, which may be glimpsed in these opening lines of a *bylina* about the healing of Ilya, who was at first a cripple:

В славном городе во Муромле,
Во селе было Карачарове,
Сиднем сидел Илья Муромец, крестьянский сын,
Сиднем сидел цело тридцать лет.
Уходил государь его батюшка
Со родителем со матушкою
На работушку на крестьянскую.
Как приходили две калики перехожие
Под тое окошечко косявчато,
Говорят калики таковы слова[1]

In the famous city of Murom,
In the village of Karacharov,
Sat Ilya of Murom, the son of a peasant,

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Sat unmoving for thirty long years.
His father went out to work
Together with his mother who bore him,
Went out to work in the fields.
One day two wandering pilgrims came
And stood under his framed window,
And the pilgrims spoke these words

Quite separate from this oral poetry is the written poetry which evolved in Russia from the eighteenth century onwards, and which was the preserve of the privileged classes. A crucial development here was the mingling of two distinct varieties of Russian to produce the modern Russian literary language. The first of these was Church Slavonic, the old language of the Orthodox Church, the second was the normal language of everyday educated speech, which was constantly changing. These two languages, together of course with more popular elements, gave (and give) the Russian poet a very broad and varied register. There are many doublets in Russian, with 'poetic' words (such as *grad*, a town) existing alongside more prosaic ones (*gorod*). The effect can be akin to the combination of Latin and German words in English poetry, as in those celebrated lines from *Macbeth*:

this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.

The Enlightenment philosopher and poet Lomonosov codified the deployment of these different linguistic elements, setting up a distinction (inspired by Western rhetoric and poetics) between three styles, the high, the middle and the low; these were suitable for different sorts of poem, for example the ode, the elegy and the satire. This hierarchical division was rejected by most of Lomonosov's successors, but it remains present in the background, so that poets may still obtain powerful effects from what Lomonosov would have called a mixing of styles (see Brodsky's 'Almost an Elegy', below, p. 203).

The second main novelty in eighteenth-century poetics was the establishment of the syllabo-tonic prosody which has continued to dominate Russian poetry until the present day. This offers no difficulties for Anglo-Saxon readers, since the concept of regular stress patterns in lines of regular length is the basis of traditional English poetry (though English prosody allows much more freedom

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than Russian). In Russian as in English poetry the last hundred years or so have seen considerable deviations from the old forms, deviations which of course gain much of their power from the continuing felt presence of the ancient norm. Generally speaking, Russian poets have been less willing than their English counterparts to make radical moves in the direction of what is loosely called free verse.

The most common verse form in the Russian poetry of the nineteenth century is the iambic tetrameter; this metre occupies something like the position which belongs in English to blank verse. Because Russian words normally bear only one main stress whatever their length, the pyrrhic foot (i.e. one without a marked stress) is a frequent deviation from the metrical norm. Unrhymed verse is relatively rare, and since Russian words often end with one or more unstressed syllables, feminine and dactylic rhymes are common, as indeed are the ternary metres, the dactylic (/˘˘), the anapaest (˘˘/), and the amphibrach (˘/˘). The combination of these factors makes it difficult to transfer Russian prosody directly when translating into English without producing something that sounds like doggerel to modern British ears.

The prosodic rules of the eighteenth century were based on foreign models (Latin, German and French); they may perhaps be regarded as the equivalent of Peter the Great's attempt to reshape Russian society on the pattern of Western Europe. The ambivalent relation to the West has been a dominant theme in Russian history of the last three hundred years, and the same is true of Russian literature. Whether one labels them classical, baroque or mannerist, the best-known poets of eighteenth-century Russia were all influenced by the poetry of Western Europe, particularly France. Catherine the Great invited French artists and philosophers to her court, the Russian upper classes spoke French on many occasions (and would continue to do so until the time of the Revolution), so it is not surprising that Boileau was regarded as an authority in literary matters and that many of the works produced in the second half of the eighteenth century were attempts to recreate in Russian the writings of Racine, Boileau, Molière, La Fontaine or Voltaire.

As far as poetry is concerned, the central form of this period was the ode, a lengthy succession of solemn stanzas, oratorical, grandiose and impersonal in tone. Lomonosov and Tredyakovsky, who are usually considered the creators of Russian syllabo-tonic verse,

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both left odes, but the most impressive are those of their successor Gavriil Derzhavin (1743–1816). In fact Derzhavin was a varied and original poet, and one who did violence both to the Russian language and to the literary rules laid down by his predecessors, but because he was the greatest poet of the eighteenth century, he has become for subsequent generations a representative of traditional eloquence. An idea of his grand manner may be gained from the opening stanza of his poem 'On the Death of Prince Meshchersky' ('Na smert' Knyazya Meshcherskogo'):

Глагол времен! металла звон!
Твой страшный глас меня смущает;
Зовет меня, зовет твой стон,
Зовет – и к гробу приближает.
Едва увидел я сей свет,
Уже зубами смерть скрежещет,
Как молнией, косою блещет,
И дни мои, как злак, сечет.[2]

Metallic clangour! Tongue of time!
Your awesome voice oppresses me;
Your groans call me insistently,
Call me and speed me to the grave.
I scarcely see the light of day
And death already grinds her teeth;
Like lightning flashes gleams the scythe
And cuts my days like stems of grass.

This is the first of eleven similar stanzas, and obviously much of the effect of such a poem is in its overall architecture, but even a single stanza demonstrates the impersonal grandeur of this classical work. The theme is a time-honoured one, and although personal pronouns have an important place here, the 'I' is a generalized poetic voice, not one particular individual marked out from the rest. If the theme is traditional, so are the images, the beating clock or bell as the voice of time, the death's head and scythe and the grass of Psalm 103: 'as for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourishes'. The language is uniformly noble (but by no means archaic for the period) and as in a comparable French poem, Malherbe's 'Paraphrase du psaume CXLV', much of the force comes from the patterning: repetition, parallelism and the deployment of sentences across the stanza. The most remarkable feature of the stanza quoted above is the formidable sonority of the first line:

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Glagól vremyón! Metálla zvón! The heavy regular stresses of the iambic tetrameter, the internal rhyme and the play of sounds all make this a vigorous and memorable opening chord.

'On the Death of Prince Meshchersky' is a relatively early poem (it dates from 1779). The complete corpus of Derzhavin's poetry includes many pieces which are quite different from this, personal, playful and sometimes experimental. But the grand manner was a constant in his writing; one of his most famous poems is an ode on the capture of Izmail which follows the pattern of Boileau's 'Ode sur la prise de Namur', and in 1795 he published under the title 'Memorial' ('Pamyatnik') a partial adaptation of Horace's *Exegi monumentum* – a monument more lasting than bronze. The great theme of mortality, treated early on in the Meshchersky poem (which leads to a 'Carpe diem' conclusion) is reiterated in a famous fragment, an isolated stanza written on a slate when Derzhavin lay dying:

Река времен в своем стремленьи
Уносит все дела людей
И топит в пропасти забвенья
Народы, царства и царей.
А если что и остается
Чрез звуки лиры и трубы,
То вечности жерлом пожрется
И общей не уйдет судьбы.[3]

Time's river in its rushing course
Carries away all human things
And drowns in oblivion's abyss
Peoples and kingdoms and their kings.
And if the trumpet and the lyre
Should rescue something from this fate,
Eternity will swallow it
And bring it to the common state.

This is the fragment which is Mandelstam's point of reference in his great 'Slate Ode'; it speaks of oblivion and destruction, yet with a solidity – *aere perennius*, more lasting than bronze – which seems to belie the meaning of the words. It is above all this formidable eloquence ('dear old-fashioned eloquence' said Blok) which later generations have admired in Derzhavin.

He died in 1816, and to the young Pushkin, writing to his friend Delvig a few years later, he seemed both powerful and barbarous:

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'When you read him, it seems that you are reading a bad free translation from some wonderful original.'[4] Pushkin was writing at a time when the language of Russian poetry was reaching a peak of classic perfection, becoming a harmonious, elegant, varied and natural-seeming instrument which in Pushkin's own hands proved capable of an immense range of literary effects. This is usually called the golden age of Russian poetry.

In the early years of the nineteenth century there was in Russian literature a battle of the Ancients and the Moderns. The reforms associated with the novelist and historian Karamzin had brought the literary language more in line with the speech of the educated gentry and with the language of Western Europe, particularly France. Against the Karamzinians the 'archaists' defended the Church Slavonic strain in Russian and protested against what they saw as the corruption of the language by contamination with the effeminate culture of France. They mocked for instance the invasion of Russian by such words as *moral'nyy*, *esteticheskiy*, *epokha*, *stsena* (a scene), *entuziasm* and *katastrofa*. As is the way of things, this rearguard action failed, at any rate in its extreme form. Pushkin's most important immediate predecessors, Batyushkov and Zhukovsky, both supported the Karamzin line and looked west for inspiration, though not so much to France as to Italy, Germany and England.

Konstantin Batyushkov (1787–1855) wrote poems of great formal beauty; the reader is struck by his moving elegiac tone (in some of his later poetry in particular) and by the importance in his work of the vision of classical antiquity – in some ways he may be seen as a distant precursor of Mandelstam. Vasily Zhukovsky (1783–1852) is important primarily for his translations; his version of Gray's 'Elegy' has often been favourably compared to the original, and some historians have dated the beginning of modern Russian poetry from its appearance in 1802. In his original work the expression of private emotion (often of a melancholy kind) takes on a new prominence. One might be tempted to call Zhukovsky a Romantic poet, with Batyushkov perhaps figuring as a Classic. However this pair of labels, which already causes a good deal of confusion when applied to the literature of the West, is not much help for classifying the Russian poetry of the first third of the nineteenth century, at least until the time of Lermontov. Pushkin was born three years before Victor Hugo and was influenced by Byron, but in him and in most of his contemporaries what one would normally call classical

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and romantic elements mingle or follow one another in fascinating harmonies, dissonances and counterpoints (as indeed in such Western writers as Goethe or Stendhal). Russian poetry was much younger than that of France, for instance, and it is as if it compressed into a few decades the different currents which succeeded one another in France over two centuries or more.

The golden age produced many great and interesting poets, but I must pass over such important figures as Batyushkov, Zhukovsky or the philosophical poet Evgeny Baratynsky (1800–44), in order to dwell a little on the one man who is the undoubted summit of Russian poetry, Aleksandr Pushkin (1799–1837). For most subsequent writers or readers, Pushkin has been *the* national writer, the one who fixed the Russian literary language and showed its possibilities in many domains. Most modern Russian literature is seen to spring from him, and it is he rather than, say, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky who occupies the central place in the Russian pantheon. Often, indeed, attitudes to Pushkin are as idolatrous as British attitudes to Shakespeare ('Others abide our question . . .'). It is for this reason that those writing about Pushkin for non-Russian readers usually feel the need to discuss the reasons for his failure to reach an international audience (like Dante, Goethe or Shakespeare). I have not the space here to engage with this baffling question, but it certainly seems to be true that Pushkin loses more in translation than most great writers, perhaps because he does not lend himself easily to a philosophical or ideological reading. In order to convey some idea of his quality to the puzzled outsider, critic after critic has invoked the name of Mozart – but Mozart worked in an international medium.

During his short writing career between about 1820 and his death in a duel in 1837, Pushkin explored many different kinds of writing. 'Protean' is the stock adjective for his genius. Poetry seems to have been his natural language, and he moved easily through all its tones and registers, from the frivolous to the solemn, the cynical to the passionate, the vehement to the meditative, the popular to the aristocratic. His predilection was for narrative, and much of his greatest work consists of long poems, outstanding among which are *The Bronze Horseman* (*Mednyy vsadnik*) and the novel in verse *Eugene Onegin* (*Evgeniy Onegin*). In the last ten years of his life he devoted more and more attention to prose fiction, and he also wrote a number of short plays as well as the Shakespearian history play *Boris Godunov*.

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Throughout his career, however, Pushkin also continued to write shorter poems, and it is on these that I must concentrate here. Many of them are brief love poems – and these are probably the hardest to translate. Here is a short poem of 1830, written in the album of a young woman whom he had met during a period of exile in Southern Russia and again in Petersburg:

Что в имени тебе моем?
Оно умрет, как шум печальный
Волны, плеснувшей в берег дальный,
Как звук ночной в лесу глухом.

Оно на памятном листке
Оставит мертвый след, подобный
Узору надписи надгробной
На непонятном языке.

Что в нем? Забытое давно
В волненьях новых и мятежных,
Твоей душе не даст оно
Воспоминаний чистых, нежных.

Но в день печали, в тишине,
Произнеси его тоскуя;
Скажи: есть память обо мне,
Есть в мире сердце, где живу я . . .[5]

What is there in my name for you?
It will die away like the sad sound
Of a wave splashing on a far shore,
A noise in a deep wood at night.

It will leave on the memorial page
A dead trace which is like the words
In an impenetrable tongue
That decorate an unknown tomb.

What is there in it? Long ago
Forgotten in wild new joys and fears,
It will not awaken in your soul
Pure and tender memories.

But on some sad and quiet day
Pronounce my name in grief and say:
There is a memory of me.
There is a heart where still I live . . .

It is a quiet poem, taking its modest place in a social ritual (the young lady's keepsake book). The voice is not raised, the language is

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clearly that of poetry, but a poetry which does not set itself ostentatiously apart from ordinary speech. The metre is the familiar iambic tetrameter which served Pushkin in so many ways. There are alternating masculine and feminine rhymes, but the rhyme scheme shifts in the third and fourth stanzas, so that the poem does not seem a regular and rounded whole. Indeed it ends on a feminine rhyme and the three dots of incompletion which are such a marked feature of Pushkin's lyric verse; it appears therefore (though this is no doubt an illusion) that this is a chance fragment from a life rather than a finished performance. And this is perhaps the main point of the poem: it sets continuity against finality. There is the finality of death and oblivion, evoked above all in the comparison with the dead (because unintelligible) words on a gravestone. But the dying fall of a wave on the shore is not final; wave will follow wave as rhyme follows rhyme, and the poet's name and experience will be carried forward beyond the end of the poem into a future time – the time of the recipient, but also that of the reader. And if these lines can (as I think they do) speak to the reader of today, this is above all because of the subtly varied rhythms and sounds of the poem (the sensuous hush of the second sentence for instance) and their aptness to recreate feelings, apprehensions and hopes.

In so far as this poem is occasional verse, its occasion sets it clearly in upper-class culture, a largely French-oriented culture of urbanity and decorum. But Pushkin, like many members of his social group at this time, was also aware of the appeal and power of more popular forms of speech and writing. Soviet critics have laid great stress on this aspect of his work and have directed a bright spotlight on to Arina Rodionovna, the old nurse who shared Pushkin's exile with him and whose story-telling he evokes in many poems. Like many Western poets of the time, Pushkin drew extensively on popular sources, using motifs and images from folklore and trying to reproduce something of the style and tone of popular song and ballad. As in the literature of France, England and Germany, this involves a degree of stylization, some adaptation to polite taste and a shifting blend of commitment and irony. In his first long poem, *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (*Ruslan i Lyudmila*), Pushkin is more influenced by Western European literature than by Russian folklore. Although his subject belongs to the ancient Kievan tradition which survived in the *byliny*, his style is more like that of a Voltaire. In John Bayley's words, he achieves a balance of 'lightness and

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