The Routledge Companion to Russian Literature

Edited by
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London and New York

First published 2001
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2001.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
The Routledge companion to Russian literature / edited by Neil Cornwell.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Russian literature–History and criticism. I. Title: Companion to Russian literature.
II. Cornwell, Neil

PG2951 .R68 2001
891.709–dc21 2001019769

ISBN 0–415–23365–8 (hbk)
ISBN 0–415–23366–6 (pbk)
ISBN 0-203-19387-3 Master e-book ISBN
ISBN 0-203-19390-3 (Glassbook Format)

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The Golden Age of Russian poetry

Donald Rayfield

'Golden Ages' are recognized only in hindsight: not until the 1880s, when Russian poetry and prose seemed to be in the doldrums, did it become usual to refer to the age of Pushkin, and particularly to its poetry, as a Golden Age. When Russian poetry revived in the 1900s to create a Silver Age, the term implied the emulation of a Golden Age a century before. For our purposes, the Golden Age begins in 1813, with the surge of creative optimism that followed on Russia's defeat of Napoleon, reaches its climax in 1825 at the end of Alexander I's reign and persists until about 1845, when Nicholas I's censorship, the emergence of a wider readership and the triumph of prose genres over verse marks the Age's demise. The Golden Age, inevitably, is studied as though it were a planetary system of poets revolving around Pushkin the Sun and, although the Golden Age marks the appearance of the first truly great works of prose fiction and verse comedy in Russian literature, we shall nevertheless here survey the age as primarily one of poetry, when lyric poets incorporated into an already established Russian verse canon all that European Neoclassicism and Romanticism could give, and gave poetry not just a proliferation of originality and musicality but a public importance that it would take many decades to regain.

The Golden Age built on the achievements of the eighteenth century in arriving at a literary language that could bridge the colloquial speech of educated Russians and the official Church Slavonic patois that had been cobbled together as the language of administration and commerce. Technical questions of poetic form, metre, rhyme had been solved by the middle of the eighteenth century. In its choice of genre (elegy, ode, fable and so on), however, the eighteenth century had been motivated primarily by the fact that poetry's main function was to be a response to patronage, its role as a court entertainment. The Golden Age moved away from genres subservient to the state and the patron, such as the ode, and thus from the ruler as patron. As educated circles broadened, poets could find readers among their peers, even if the Russian reading public was still too small to make a poet, or any journal he or she published in, financially independent. The confidence of a poet that he was an autonomous being, even the romantic pretension to being an unacknowledged legislator of the world, was a precondition of the Golden Age.

The generation of young officers returning from the Napoleonic wars included two key poets in the first years of the Golden Age: Konstantin Batiushkov and Vasilii Zhukovsky. Those who sojourned in Paris and London brought with them not just the fruits of Romanticism, the verse of André Chénier, Walter Scott and Friedrich Schiller: they brought back the concept of a poet's independence. Those

who did not fight but were educated in St Petersburg and Moscow did not lag behind. The *lycée* at Tsarskoe Selo, where so many poets were schooled, was staffed by many a survivor of the French Revolution or refugee from Napoleon, who gave their pupils a sense of history and an intellectual's role in shaping it. Moscow University numbered among its teachers such refugees as Baron Stein, future Foreign Minister of Prussia. The education of poets to come – who, by some enigmatic demographic wave, were born in unprecedented numbers in the late 1790s and early 1800s – was thus not just infused by printed examples of Romanticism and its beliefs in the primacy of nature, folk poetry, the rights of man and the power of art: it was stimulated by a living generation of revolutionaries, royalists and renegades. The one element of Romanticism that is strikingly absent in the poetry of Russia's Golden Age is the renewed Christianity that infuses so much English and French Romantic poetry. In this respect the Neoclassical and Voltairean eighteenth-century spirit remained undimmed.

The poetry of Konstantin Batiushkov (1787–1855) was the main bridge from the eighteenth century to the Golden Age. Batiushkov could write satire in the same mode as eighteenth-century radicals such as Radishchev; but his Neo-classicism went further, with his elegies which mourned not just the loss of life but the loss of love and of inspiration. First an officer in the Napoleonic wars, then a diplomatic official in Italy, Batiushkov saw in western Europe an Arcadia, from which he was very soon expelled. In his earlier verse he took plasticity of syntax and melodiousness of phonetic line further, emulating the virtues of the two main works of the unjustly neglected French hedonist and free-thinker Evariste Parny: *La Guerre des dieux* and *Les Déguisements de Vénus*. Without incorporating any new system of beliefs into his work, Batiushkov's extraordinary gift for cadences gives his work a deep melancholy which approximates it to Romantic 'spleen'. As disasters struck him – he was dismissed from the service, jilted by his fiancée, prone to more and more persistent bouts of clinical depression, Batiushkov's elegiac mood deepens: his poem of 1815, *The Shade of a Friend* (*Ten' druga*), in which the ghost of a warrior companion appears during a journey at sea, has the Romantic conviction in the reality of the otherworldly which is to infuse the best of the Golden Age. Like his successors, however, Batiushkov was to discover that no Romantic beliefs in the numinous could overcome the tragic Hellenic outlook that Russian poets had inherited from their eighteenth-century predecessors. Batiushkov's light touch with the sounds of Russian, miraculously approximating it to Italian, was emulated by Pushkin. But by the time Pushkin had matured, Batiushkov was in an asylum, and the example of his melancholy was to act as a *memento mori* for the next decade of the Golden Age. Batiushkov's only partly demented *Imitations of the Ancients* (*Podrazhanie drevnim*) shows a remarkable synthesis of Hellenic pessimism and Romantic aspirations which is typical of the Golden Age: numbers 4 and 6 of the elegies run:

> When the maiden departs in suffering and the livid corpse grows cold, – vainly love pours ambergris and flings a cover of flowers over it. She is pale as a lily in the corn-

> flowers' azure, as a wax cast; limp fingers take no joy in flowers, and fragrance is vain . . .
>
> Do you want honey, son? then fear not the sting; a crown of victory? – boldly to battle! You long for pearls? – then go down to the bottom where the crocodile gapes under the water, do not be afraid! God will decide. He is a father only to the bold: only the bold win pearls, honey or perdition . . . or a crown.

Batiushkov had mined deeper the French (and Italian) vein which permeates the Golden Age; Vasilii Andreevich Zhukovsky (1783–1852), another returning officer, turned Russian poetry in a direction that was primarily German and secondarily British. Zhukovsky's work was mostly translation or adaptation, but was nonetheless influential for that, however much his imitation provoked his contemporaries to parody and even mockery. Germanic maidens borne off to the other world by their dead lovers are given their Russian equivalents by Zhukovsky:

> And Minvana is no more . . . When mists rise from the currents, hills and fields, and the moon shines without rays, as through smoke – two shades can be seen: merging, they fly to the shelter they know . . . and the oak moves and the strings sound.

But these popular Romantic ballads of ghostly love are only part of the baggage that Zhukovsky had brought back from the West. He also presented Russia's poets with a new role, as a demiurge, as a mouthpiece for the people. As well as pursuing melodiousness, Zhukovsky widened the genres available with pseudo-folk ballads and songs, with the concept of effusion and fragment to replace the symmetrical ordered classical poem. If Zhukovsky, appointed by Nicholas I to sift through Pushkin's heritage, to compose a national anthem and even a ceremony for carrying out capital punishment, and to tutor the heir to the throne, seemed in the 1830s to betray the role of the free spirit, then we must remember those other Romantics who failed to die young: Wordsworth with his *Sonnets on the Death Penalty* or Lamartine with his candidacy for the Presidency. Zhukovsky for most of his life set the younger poets of the Golden Age an example of idealism: 'Blessed is he who amid life's destructive disturbance has . . . scorned and forgotten the vileness of the real'.

From 1815 to 1818 Batiushkov and Zhukovsky, together with Pushkin's uncle Vasilii, became closely linked with their successors, especially Pushkin, when they became founder-members of the Arzamas circle: the society was founded in the name of a tavern in the provincial town of Arzamas, known for its fat geese, and was meant to satirise the 'Conversation of Lovers of the Russian Word' ('Beseda liubitelei russkogo slova'), a conservative, chauvinist group of writers surrounding the now forgotten Admiral Shishkov. These innovative and disrespectful poets were known by nicknames: Batiushkov was called 'Achilles', Zhukovsky was known as 'Svetlana', Petr Viazemsky was 'Asmodeus', the adolescent Pushkin was 'Cricket'. In its short existence (which ended when Shishkov's group melted away), Arzamas became a centre not just for burlesque mockery of the establishment but for the propagation of Romantic ideas and Romantic genres. It brought together many

St Petersburg poets of the Golden Age – notably, Petr Viazemsky – and its mock-conspiratorial aura led many members into the more ominous secret societies that fomented the Decembrist revolt of 1825.

If Batiushkov and Zhukovsky widened poets' horizons, out of the Napoleonic wars came a new confidence in the intellectual's ability to see further than the statesman. The poetry of the Golden Age is inseparable from the *Lettres philosophiques* circulated by Petr Chaadaev, Russia's first original political thinker (until he, too, like Batiushkov was overcome by depression – in his case a self-fulfilling diagnosis of madness made by an indignant Tsar). Chaadaev's mission was to infuse Pushkin and his circle with a belief in the flame of history, in Providence: a cornerstone of Romanticism being its conviction that history was not a series of senseless recurrences, but the unfolding of Providence, a journey from the fall to paradise. The prospects of western Europe, spiritually free even in political turmoil, were articulated so well by Chaadaev that almost all the poets of the Golden Age became, at least for a while, convinced of man's ability and duty not just to understand but to change the world with the word.

If the officers returning from the Napoleonic wars were responsible for the import of new ideas and modes of poetry, a new model of the poet-rebel and poet-innovator came a decade later, when many of the poets of the Golden Age were scattered over Russia. Byron's reputation (largely because of the common sympathies of Russian and British poets for the Greeks' struggle to win independence) spread all over Russia, as it had over Europe in the 1820s, a reputation that became godlike when Byron died of fever at Missolonghi. When we consider that Pushkin and the other Golden Age poets who were influenced by Byron read him not in English, but in a mediocre French prose version by Pichot, the extent to which Byron influenced Russian poetry is astounding. Byron showed how to develop intuitively, almost cinematically constructed narrative poems, and gave Russian poets, if only for a few years, new themes: doomed love that transcended the boundaries of Christian and Moslem; the poet as an unrepentant Faust, Don Juan and Don Quixote all rolled into one.

If the Golden Age is a solar system, then we should begin by examining the work of the poets who were closest to the sun – those who were educated in close proximity to Pushkin and whose work is often a dialogue with him: the poetry of Del'vig, Iazykov and (although he is almost a decade older) Viazemsky.

Anton Antonovich Del'vig (1798–1831), Pushkin's closest friend, has been somewhat underestimated: a short and slothful life left a slender *œuvre*: one volume of verse published two years before his death, a narrow range of vocabulary and images have led critics to consign him to the rank of a minor poet. His theme, however, was the end of a private and poetic idyll, the death of Arcadia, and was best expressed in a poem *The End of the Golden Age* (*Konets zolotogo veka*) – written, ironically, at the very climax of what was to be known as Russia's Golden Age. Del'vig seems to have welded Shakespearean tragedy into the Neoclassical games of Daphnis and Chloe: in Del'vig's Arcadia, the nymph drowns as she sings, like Ophelia:

> Amarylla was borne by the current, singing her song, not feeling perdition close, as if born to be in water by her ancient father Ocean, without finishing her sad song, she drowned.

The death of an abandoned heroine was a theme inherited by the Golden Age from Karamzin's sentimental prose tale *Poor Liza* (*Bednaia Liza*), but Del'vig raised it to a far greater significance, which we find echoed in Pushkin's narrative poems – *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* (*Kavkazskii plennik*), *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai* (*Bakhchisaraiskii fontan*). Del'vig's last elegies, inviting death to dinner and to bed, foreshadow the elegies of Pushkin's last period: Del'vig's death affected Pushkin perhaps more deeply than that of any of his circle. In one aspect Del'vig went further than even Pushkin: he was the first Russian poet to master sonnet form, and his sonnet *Inspiration* (*Vdokhnovenie*) is not only a perfect example of a form which succeeds relatively rarely in Russian but quintessentially Del'vigian in its stress on a private morality in an amoral world, for Del'vig places the poet even higher than his fellow Golden Age poets:

> Wandering alone under the skies, He speaks with ages yet to come; He puts honour above all other parts, His fame takes vengeance on slander And he shares immortality with the gods.

Del'vig's techniques and themes were a century later to exert an influence on Mandel'shtam. Even better than avowedly folk poets, such as Kol'tsov, Del'vig was able to catch the tone and subtly displaced rhythms of folk poetry in a number of pastiches; he was also one of the most successful poets of his day in providing texts for the Russian equivalent of *Lieder*: a number of his poems are now best known as *romansy* set to music by Glinka.

Petr Andreevich Viazemsky (1792–1878) appears to be the opposite of Del'vig, and not only in longevity. He was more heavily influenced by his cosmopolitan background. Irish–Swedish on his mother's side, he was influenced by a Voltaire-francophile father. Although seven years older than Pushkin and (like Batiushkov and Zhukovsky) a veteran of the Napoleonic wars, Viazemsky mixed with Pushkin and his fellow lycéens on equal terms. Viazemsky was (with Baratynsky and Iazykov) one of the Golden Age poets who for reasons not entirely of his own choice moved to Moscow – a move which seemed to almost all Russian poets, in the 1920s even more than in the 1820s, to be an exile from Europe and order into Asia and chaos. Unlike the depressive Del'vig, Viazemsky was combative, dissident to the point of physical discordance. In Gogol' 's essay of 1846 'What is Actually the Essence of Russian Poetry . . .', the first thorough appreciation of the Golden Age's achievement, Viazemsky comes in for harsh criticism; Gogol' 's main point still stands:

> next to a verse which is stronger and firmer than any other poet's, we find another sort, quite unlike the first; at one moment he will show the pain of living flesh ripped from the heart, at another he will repel with a sound that is almost alien to the heart,

> which is quite out of tune with the subject; you can feel his lack of inner consistency, a life which is not filled with strength.

Pushkin, as a close friend, was bold enough to tell Viazemsky in 1826: 'Your verse is too clever. Poetry, God forgive me, has to be a bit stupid.' To this criticism might be added Viazemsky's refusal to make concessions to melodiousness: he is perhaps the only poet of the Golden Age whose texts no composer was able or willing to set to music.

Like Fedor Tiutchev, Viazemsky was the only poet of the Golden Age to live his full three score and ten; unlike Tiutchev, he was not restored to the canon by the critical re-evaluations of the early twentieth century. His life-long disgruntled and uncompromising stance made him unattractive: to write on Russia (*The Russian God* [*Russkii bog*], 1828) as he did, as unpatriotically as Turgenev in the novel *Smoke* (*Dym*) was not to court popularity:

> Full of grace to the stupid, mercilessly strict to the clever, God of everything inappropriate, that is him, the Russian God. God of everything that is outlandish, unseemly, out of place, God of mustard after supper, that is him, the Russian God.

The death of Pushkin (not to speak of five of his own children) led Viazemsky into a pessimism bleaker than even Pushkin's darkest moments. Though he was to know Europe and modern times better than any other survivor of the Golden Age, progress only deepened Viazemsky's gloom. A train journey from Prague to Vienna left his convictions unaltered:

> Man has been armed with a bold and rebellious force; he is burning for ever with an insatiable, uncontrollable passion. The battle of elements, of contradictions, the discord of conflicting forces has all been trampled down by the human mind and subordinated to calculation. Thus ploughing through the universe, because of his passions and plans the master of limited days arrogantly forgets himself. But if the slightest mishap occurs and our mighty giant goes off the tracks, if only by a hair's breadth, Then all the calculation, all the wisdom of the age is just zero, and the same zero and nonentity of man will fly off its stilts into dust and ashes.

Viazemsky, unlike the other rebellious spirits of the Golden Age, consistently saw life as an old dressing-gown, a comforting membrane that could never be discarded. His *Farewell to the Dressing-Gown* (*Proshchanie s khalatom*) of 1817 is echoed in 1877 with the lines: 'Our life in old age is a worn-out dressing-gown . . . The two of us have long since grown together like brothers; We can't be repaired or renovated.'

If Viazemsky represented the irredentist intellect, then Pushkin's friend Nikolai Mikhailovich Iazykov (1803–46) was all instinct and impressionable emotion. Although he knew Del'vig and Zhukovsky from his student days and mixed with Pushkin's friends and relatives during his university years at Dorpat (Tartu), he did not actually meet Pushkin until the Golden Age had endured its great crisis,

the retribution exacted in 1826 by Nicholas I on real and suspected Decembrists. At Trigorskoe, next to Pushkin's estate Mikhailovskoe, the two poets met and in his poem *Trigorskoe* Iazykov celebrated one of the most productive encounters in Russian poetry: Iazykov expresses Pushkin's feelings at having escaped exile to the south or, worse, to Siberia with an effusiveness that Pushkin's reserve would not have allowed:

> How sweet for the young prisoner, leaving the darkness and weight of chains, to look at daylight, at the shine of the rippling water, to walk along the meadow shore, to sate himself on the fields' air. How comforting for the poet to escape the world of cold vanity, where numerous hopes and dreams run to the Lethe, where in a heart beloved of the muse, sometimes, like a stream of flame extinguished by thick smoke, because of the unbearable roar of passions, the life forces weaken, – to take refuge, a free man, in the beautiful world, in nature's gardens and suddenly and proudly forget his lost years.

Iazykov's poetic fire was dampened very soon after this climax. His elegies on love are full of erotic fire, and his poetry from his years of travelling Europe's spas being treated for syphilis produces some memorable scenic poetry in a Byronic genre. But Iazykov's burning radicalism, despite the execution of friends such as Ryleev, cooled and he even began to deplore Pushkin's free-thinking and narrative fecundity.

Those poets who took an active role in the revolt of December 1825 ran on an orbit more distant from Pushkin's closest circles. Nevertheless, two of them, Kondratii Fedorovich Ryleev(1795–1826) and Vil'gel'm Karlovich Kiukhel'beker (1797–1846) were poets of note, if not of genius. Ryleev was one of the youngest veterans of the Napoleonic wars, but what he had learnt and wished to propagate was more political than literary. Patriotism and civic courage were ideals blazed by the heroes of his narrative poems, and of modern poets only Byron influenced him, more as a fighter than a poetic innovator. Before his fatal involvement with revolution, however, Ryleev and a co-conspirator founded an annual almanac, *Poliarnaia zvezda* (*The Polar Star*) which was to be the model for Russia's 'thick' periodicals which, from the 1830s to this day have been – even more than book-publishing – the mainstay of all imaginative literature in Russia and can be regarded, together with the monthly *Sovremennik* (*The Contemporary*) that Pushkin subsequently founded, as the most durable of the Golden Age's bequests to posterity. Ryleev's political views, like most of the Decembrists', were eclectic and contradictory; his high regard for the constitution of the United States of America was at odds with both the aristocratic constitutionalism of the 'northern' rebels and the totalitarian dictatorial views of the 'southerners' – views which were, unfortunately, to prevail among Russia's opposition thinkers.

Although Kiukhel'beker fired a pistol at a Grand Duke and was sentenced to beheading, he paid for his involvement with the Decembrists not with his neck but with his liberty and, eventually, his eyesight. More naive and independent than Ryleev, he was the more original and productive poet. Although his family was

German-speaking and he was heavily influenced by Goethe's mythopœia, he was (perhaps in compensation for his Germanic surname) an ardent Slavist, adhering more to the archaicists in his determination to write a purely 'Slavonic' Russian. He was a fellow-pupil of Pushkin's and his traits were copied to create the naive poet Lensky in *Evgenii Onegin*. It might be said that he was Pushkin's polar opposite, as Lensky was Onegin's, and his departure for hard labour and exile in Siberia affected Pushkin as deeply as Lensky's death is described as affecting Onegin. Classical Hellenic values, as much as Byronic romanticism, underlie Kiukhel'beker's radical stance. Like many Russian intellectuals of the Golden Age he saw no contradiction between his defence of Greek national self-determination and his valiant military service in the Caucasus in the early 1820s, waging under General Ermolov a genocidal war against Chechens and Dagestanis.

In solitary confinement Kiukhel'beker was allowed to continue writing. Arguably, his best poetry came from reflection. Of all the Golden Age poets he was the most ambitious: his long verse work *Izhorsky* is a mystery play that appears to emulate Goethe's *Faust Part II* and he produced two very long historical verse epics. In his lyric verse, however, Kiukhel'beker remains close to the best of the Golden Age. He remained convinced of ultimate justice and, in a poem *To a Slanderer* (*Klevetniku*) attacking the officers in charge of his fate, warned:

> Believe me, there is Nemesis in the world, and she notes any offence and enters it in a book, and silently a mysterious maiden reads this book day and night and chooses victims and punishes them without wrath, but without pity too. Lies and slander will eventually be paid for with the same slander, and the murderous arrow of evil lies will penetrate your heart too . . .

His poem on *The Fate of Russian Poets* (*Uchast' russkikh poetov*) remains a harsh but well-judged model for later poets' self-induction:

> Bitter is the fate of poets of all races; fate punishes Russia worst of all . . . God gave their hearts fire, their minds light, yes, their feelings were inspired and ardent – What then? They are hurled into dark prisons, killed by the freezing cold of hopeless exile . . . Either disease brings night and fog to the eyes of the far-sighted and inspired; or the hand of despicable favourites puts a bullet in their sacred brows; Or else rebellion rouses the deaf rabble, and the rabble tears to bits him whose flight, dazzling us with thunderbolts, would have flooded his native land with radiance.

Many Russian poets were to be threatened with execution and punished with exile; when, a hundred years later, Stalin made it the normal fate for almost any poet worth his salt, none was so eloquent in his self-defence as Kiukhel'beker had been.

The Golden Age's greatest poets, it might be argued, are those who escaped Pushkin's orbit and became luminaries in their own right. Those who lived and wrote in Moscow escaped the Pushkinian influences that were particularly overpowering after 1827, the year of Pushkin's return from exile. Of all Pushkin's cohort Evgenii Abramovich Baratynsky (1800–44) was most clearly an equal. He

too began his literary career writing melodious elegies under the influence of Batiushkov and Parny; he too was exiled (but to Finland rather than the South). Like Pushkin, Baratynsky developed the narrative poem, with a Finnish rather than a Crimean or Caucasian setting, as his main genre. But Baratynsky's often touching narrative poems are no longer widely read, even though Pushkin praised them; his early elegies – despite the fact that some, for example 'Do not tempt me with the return of your affection', are still treasured as the texts for the most affecting Russian *Lieder* – have been superseded in critical esteem by his later work. Baratynsky was alienated first from Moscow life and then from life in general. His increasing discontent led him to a language which is more and more austere and precise and to a conviction that art was the only salvation:

> Chisel, organ, brush – happy is he who is drawn to them as to sensual things, not stepping across their boundary. He has intoxication at the world's feast-day. But before you, as before a naked sword, o word, bright ray, earth's life goes pale.

Particularly after Pushkin's death, Baratynsky became a poet very modern for his times: the poems of his 1842 collection, *Twilight* (*Sumerki*) compare with Théophile Gautier's *Émaux et camées* in their pursuit of pure form in art and thought, and his conviction in the power of death to divest all experience of any meaning anticipates the world-view of the Symbolist and Decadent. Like Gautier, Baratynsky symbolized the destruction of poetry by technology by the image of a steamboat crushing water nymphs. Baratynsky was the first to foresee the nineteenth century ousting the aesthetic from life. In his poem *The Last Poet* (*Poslednii poet*) he declares: 'The age marches along its iron path, acquisitiveness is in hearts, and the common dream is every hour more obviously and shamelessly about the everyday and the useful.' His economy of language echoes his idealization of the sculptor as the ideal artist, adding and making nothing, merely removing surplus material. Baratynsky achieved greatness towards the end of his life and that of the Golden Age: it was left to the Symbolists, on the centenary of his birth, to recognize his extraordinary importance. The frequent and vibrant echoes of Baratynsky in Mandel'shtam's work suggest that of all Golden Age poets Baratynsky has most to communicate to the twentieth century.

Those Golden Age poets for whom Moscow was home, rather than exile from St Petersburg, lived in an atmosphere imbued with German Romantic mysticism rather than French Classical rationalism: Schelling meant more to them than Voltaire. They were relatively immune to radical political ideas or to the Byronic model, and out of their ranks would come the Orthodox theology and Pan-Slavist political ideals of the Slavophiles. The most charismatic of these poets was Dmitrii Vladimirovich Venevitinov (1805–27) whose short life, terminated by tuberculosis and pneumonia, has led readers to infer from the handful of poems he left a potential genius. For a brief time, surrounded by a circle of friends to whom his poems were addressed, Venevitinov played the same solar role in Moscow

as Pushkin did in St Petersburg, but the impassioned rhetoric of his valedictory verse is valuable mostly as a harbinger of unrealized greatness.

Far more significant was Venevitinov's fellow Muscovite, a lowly poet, the illegitimate son of a merchant, Aleksandr Ivanovich Polezhaev (1804–37). Because of his bawdy masterpiece *Sashka* (which has never been published in full), Polezhaev was both famed and destroyed. A pastiche of Chapter One of Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin*, its hero Sashka is likewise a roué dependent on his uncle; Polezhaev's witty verse evokes the debauchery of Moscow's students and whores. Polezhaev shows all the talent for graphic burlesque of the eighteenth-century erotic poet Ivan Barkov and of Pushkin's uncle Vasilii. The poem's notoriety led to an interview with Nicholas I and the Minister of Education. Polezhaev was forced to recite the poem in full, after which he was sentenced to serve as a rank and file soldier in the Caucasus. Although Polezhaev fought bravely, his plebeian status deprived him of protection. Floggings and military prison wrecked his health and before he died of tuberculosis his achievement was limited to little more than one fine narrative poem, *Chir-Yurt*, on the vicious war of attrition against Chechens and Circassians – a poem which anticipates Lev Tolstoy's sketches of the Caucasian wars – and a valedictory poem entitled *Consumption* (*Chakhotka*): its portrayal of a doomed poet anticipates Apollon Grigor'ev's record of self-destruction thirty years later and the despair of the Symbolists:

> Fateful consumption stares me in the eyes and, distorting its pale face, I can hear, it hoarsely says: 'My dear friend, you have long invited me to come with the ringing of bottles. Thus I appear with a bow – give your slave a corner to live in. We shan't live a boring life, believe me: you will cough and groan, and I shall always, inseparably, be ready to console you.'

The Golden Age was not ready for Polezhaev, and like Pushkin's and Lermontov's bawdy verse, his work was consigned to the foreign or private press and to manuscript circulation.

If Polezhaev was a Moscow parodist of Pushkin, Russia's greatest metaphysical poet, Fedor Ivanovich Tiutchev (1803–73), took as his point of departure Pushkin's lyrics on the otherworldly nature of inspiration, on the indifference of nature to man and on the fatal, unrequitable nature of love. In the 1830s some of Tiutchev's lyrics were published by Pushkin in *Sovremennik*. Tiutchev's work, however, followed other directions; his Moscow education and his diplomatic career took him into a Germanic orbit. In Munich he met Heinrich Heine and an improbable mutual respect sprang up between the left-wing German Jew and the right-wing Russian aristocrat, a respect founded on their common pessimism about the outcome of their poetic and political struggle. In 1833 Tiutchev, an intensely self-critical poet, whose surviving lyrical poetry (if we exclude political and translated verse) barely amounts to a hundred poems, destroyed a large amount of what he had written. Publication in 1836 attracted little attention – a subsequent edition in 1854 passed almost unnoticed. Tiutchev may belong to Pushkin's generation, but his poetry, so scandalously ignored in his lifetime, is not really

part of the Golden Age: its dawn came posthumously and his poetry, based on a systematic opposition of light and dark, order and chaos, male and female, belatedly found its place in the twentieth century's Symbolist and Acmeist schools. In his metaphysical poetry, Tiutchev did not scorn the dissonant sounds and displaced rhythms of the eighteenth century's first experimenters; in his later love poetry, chronicling the distress and death of his mistress, Tiutchev found a simple tone, breathtakingly dangerous in its closeness to banality, a tone which is not to recur in Russian poetry until Pasternak's last lyrics. Tiutchev thus does not belong to the Golden Age – he is too much a timeless poet even to belong to the nineteenth century.

The Golden Age's last generation was born in the mid-1810s: writers such as Turgenev were soon to abandon verse for prose fiction and belong to the so-called Realist school of the 1850s and 1860s. The only major poet of this generation is Mikhaíl Iur'evich Lermontov (1814–41). Lermontov is linked to Pushkin primarily by his obsessively (however much denied) Byronic poetic persona and by his insistence on hiding his deepest feelings, outside the parameters of his verse, behind the mask of an officer and gentleman. His permanent adolescence meant that Lermontov's thought, a refusal to accept a world governed by a hostile God and despicable humanity, developed little; his outlook was never matured by observation or experience, even though at the end of his life he was able to produce a novel *A Hero of Our Time* (*Geroi nashego vremeni*) which is one of the most original pieces of psychological prose ever written and stands, together with *Evgenii Onegin*, as the Golden Age's main achievements in the novel. Conversely, Lermontov's verse became more and more plastic in the last four years of his life, reaching its extraordinary combination of evocative musicality and hypnotic narrative in his two poems of the Caucasus, *The Demon* (*Demon*) and *The Novice Monk* (*Mtsyri*). Lermontov and Pushkin, alone of the Golden Age poets, raised the narrative poem to parity with the lyric.

The Golden Age did not die a sudden death. From the mid-1840s poetry began to recede from public esteem. The only estimable woman poet of the Golden Age, Karolina Pavlova, emigrated to Germany. By a strange demographic response, nature seemed to have dried up the supply of poets. The late 1810s–1820s gave birth only to Afanasii Fet, Nekrasov and Aleksei Konstantinovich Tolstoy. Afanasii Fet, like Tiutchev, was to be largely ignored, even mocked, in his own century, and his daring love lyrics, sometimes verbless, sometimes shaped vertically as if a translation from the Chinese, had to wait until the twentieth century to make their impact. Nikolai Nekrasov, on the other hand, was to be idolized from the middle of the century to his death in 1877, but only as a honorary prose writer, because of his laudable democratic sentiments and his choice of subject matter among the impoverished peasantry and urban poor. His poetic genius, which at its best was extraordinarily innovative in rhythm, passed with little comment. Aleksei Tolstoy was one of the few poets of the nineteenth century to articulate Christianity – both Orthodox in his recreation of the hymns of St John Damascene, and evangelistic in his cruel *Ballad of Delarue* (*Ballada o Delariu*) about the gruesome fate of the

altruist. Alone, he revived the eighteenth-century genre of historical verse drama. Like Fet, Aleksei Tolstoy was to be valued only posthumously.

In the forty years after 1825, even fewer poets were born: only six major poets, compared with, say, two dozen in the preceding forty. True, 'junk' poetry (by poets now largely forgotten, such as Maikov, Benediktov, and Mei), not to mention a still overrated pseudo-folk poetry by the Voronezh poets Kol'tsov and Nikitin, commanded a somewhat Philistine following, in the same way as the neo-Romantics of the late nineteenth century in England, France and Germany provided a diluted bourgeois version of the true Romanticism of the Napoleonic era.

The heritage of the Golden Age is a dual one. The Russian novel took from poets many of the themes first explored by poets: Pushkin's Onegin and Lermontov's Pechorin are models for superfluous heroes in Turgenev and Tolstoy; the intuitions of Tiutchev's love poetry are the underlying force behind the tragic fate of *Anna Karenina*. Baratynsky and Iazykov in Italy outline the reactions to be found in Russian novelists' peripatetic heroes. The less immediate heritage came into force with the birth of the Silver Age. Without the rediscovery of Batiushkov, Tiutchev and Baratynsky at the beginning of the twentieth century, the development of Aleksandr Blok or Osip Mandel'shtam would have been unthinkable; and, at a broader level, Russian poets would have not been able to foresee and cope with their ephemeral role, had they not had before them the example of their forefathers a century earlier.

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