

# RUSSIAN POETRY

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## OVERVIEW

Although the beginnings of Russian poetry date to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the history of written verse dates back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century in medieval Russia. During Peter I's creation of Russian secular culture, most of the poets spent time abroad adopting the models they encountered in Europe. While they modelled their works on the style of European verse, they also established a genuine, secular, Russian poetic tradition. The 18<sup>th</sup> century poetry was state-sponsored, and its main function was as court entertainment and responding to the patron. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry changed its direction and moved away from genres subservient to the state and the patron, and adopted the role of patron. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the turbulent social and political environment in Russia called for radical changes. Poets were endeavoring to create new artistic forms, ways of expression and a new language, but were required to be registered in the official system and were subject to official censorship that isolated Soviet poets from the world's cultural developments. Without being registered in the official system, a poet was prohibited from earning a living from his art. For the Soviet system any cultural effort should inspire loyalty to the party. In some ways this system resembled to the patronage system of tsarist Russia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but with far greater risks for the poet. Expressing opposition to the Soviet regime could result in prison or worse. The writing of unofficial poetry in relative freedom would not resume until after Stalin's death.

## POST CLASSICAL PERIOD

**Byliny (Epic Songs):** Russia's earliest poetic form was *bylina*. Between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries a type of epic called *byliny* (pl.) emerged. *Byliny* were a type of short story, often in the form of a poem that was sung and accompanied, at times, by a type of string instrument called a *gusli*. Their topics varied from events in the Kievan state, nomadic groups, the deeds of Novgorod, and mythology. Three different groups played a role in the dissemination of *byliny*: travelling performers, *skomorokhi*; peasant performers, *skaziteli*; and itinerant pilgrims, *kaliki perekhozhie*. Although *byliny* were initially recited by professional bards in the courts of the nobility, over time they came to be sung or recited by peasant storytellers in rural areas. The theme of many Russian *byliny* is some variant of the hero's quest; for some reason the hero, *bogatyr*, leaves his home, is given a task or tasks to accomplish, accomplishes his task or tasks in spite of numerous obstacles, and, in the end, becomes wealthy or gains the hand of a beautiful maiden. Popular heroes in many *byliny* are *Ilya Muromets*, *Alyosha Popovich*, *Sadko*, and *Dobrynya Nikitich*. Frequently encountered villains include *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, *Ivan the Fool*, *Grandfather Frost*, *Baba Yaga, the Firebird, the Immortal Kashchey*, etc.

**Dukhovnye stikhi (spiritual poems):** These are oral poems with religious content composed between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Their themes were taken from the Bible, hagiographic and apocryphal texts. These spiritual verses also described events from the lives of saints and their miracles, heroes, punishment, torture of the people, religious holidays etc. For example, the spiritual poem *The Saturday of St. Dimitry (Dmitrievskaya subбота)* explains the origin of a church holiday. These spiritual poems are still recited today.

**Epic Poetry:** The distinguishing characteristic of epic poetry is heroic content. The heroes of epic poetry strive for their people, not for petty, personal interests. These heroes must use all of their abilities to

overcome the difficulties in their path and be willing to even sacrifice themselves to attain their goals, but in epic poetry this is their path to success. *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* (*Slovo o polku Igoreve*) is Russia's first written anonymous work, written in Old Russian, is set in the context of the feudal conflicts 12<sup>th</sup> century Russia, and describes the unsuccessful campaign led by Prince Igor against the Cumans (Polovtsy) in 1185. The poem describes Igor's defeat, escape from captivity and eventual return to his people and serves as a warning to other Rus' princes on the need for unity in the face of continuing threats from Turkic tribes. The other epic poetry *Zadonshchina* (*Beyond the River*) is about the Russian victory over the Mongols at Kulikovo battle in 1380, and it follows the style of the Tale of Igor's Campaign.

**Verbal poetry (skazovy stikh):** Examples of verbal poetry from old Russia are limited; most are found in the riddles, proverbs and incantations recited by the *skomorokhi*, hymns composed in Church Slavonic, and in Daniel's *Supplication*.

## EARLY MODERN PERIOD

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century Russia, apart from oral songs, there was no real tradition of poetry; it existed in the context of *virshi*, *byliny*, and *lyric songs*. The scale of the production of Russian verse is difficult to estimate due to the limited availability of texts, and existing texts have survived only in manuscript copies whose handwriting was hard to read and reproduce. Between the 1650s and the early years of Peter I's reign, poetic composition was increasingly centered at the royal court. Although the number of courtiers, poets and theologian involved in this writing was relatively small, their production was prodigious, totaling tens of thousands of lines of verse.

It was during Peter the Great's struggle to secularize Russian culture, that talented, well-educated poets who had spent their time abroad adapted European models and began to create Russian poetry.

During Peter the Great's reign, printing was put under the supervision of a new Printing Office, and the departments that were responsible for the publication of state and liturgical decrees, and liturgical books, came under the authority of the Head Chancery (*Bolshoy dvorets*). Russian poets became part of a patronage system within this office. Promotions were entirely dependent on service in the Head Chancery and to the Patriarch (since a clerk's duties included both the correction and publication of religious and liturgical texts), as well as reciprocal patronage. Publication required support from institutions such as the Academy of Sciences which was subject to the tsar's authority, and the court. Poets confined themselves to writing odes commemorating some specific occasion, or praised of the heroism of the sovereign and the military.

Several features distinguished poetry in the 18<sup>th</sup> century from that of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. First, the corpus of poets' works was compiled in anthologies, rather than remaining a collection of scattered works. Another was the motivation for poetic composition. Previously poets claimed that writing for the sake of art and future generations was their primary motivation, while in the 18<sup>th</sup> century self-expression became the motivation. Finally, novel patterns of behavior and new literary customs were introduced via the translation and imitation of French, German and English literature.

**Syllabic Verse:** When Russian writers began the process of creating secular literature, a number of different traditions were available to them as models. However, this new literature was expected to have certain distinctive characteristics, such as being "European", urbane, and as different from the entertainment of common, uneducated Russians as it could be. As a result, Russian poets turned to foreign poetic traditions.

The Ukraine, Belorussia and Poland were the sources for the development of Russian syllabic poetry. In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century Ukrainian and Belorussian poems were the models for the first *virshi* (secular poems based on spiritual verse). *Virshi* took the form of either isosyllabic couplets or couplets whose lines contained a varying number of syllables (relative isosyllabism).

In 1678, Russia's first and only full-time court poet Simeon Polotsky introduced a syllabic verse system in Church Slavic and in Polish that dominated Russian poetry for a century. Prince Antioch Kantemir, who was widely known as the first Russian writer to blend life and poetry in his works, also supported this type of verse. During the period of Peter I, pastoral and amatory poetry composed in Russian syllabic verse and modelled on French and German poetic forms was fashionable among his courtiers. Feofan Prokopovich was a well-known poet who wrote syllabic verse during Peter I's reign, but following Peter's death in 1725 Feofan's style began to change, becoming increasingly varied and experimental, and showing the influence of the Italian *ottava rima* style of stanza composition.

**Syllabo-tonic System:** A truly Russian poetic tradition was established within a few decades, in part due to the efforts of poets such as Vasily Tediakovsky and Mikhail Lomonosov who not only composed poetry, but also wrote treatises on the composition of verse.

Russian syllabic verse rapidly fell out of favor following the appearance of Trediakovsky's syllabo-tonics, verse composed in equal disyllabic metrical feet, a form frequently utilized in Russian popular ballads.

By the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century new genres such as satire and didactic poetry made their appearance. Both were standardized by Lomonosov, while poets such as Aleksandr Radishchev and Gavrila Derzhavin took more experimental approaches to these genres.

In addition to establishing standards for satire and didactic poetry, Lomonosov established three stylistic levels – high, middle and low - for poetry in his *Letter Concerning the Rules of Russian Prosody* (*Pismo o pravilakh rossiyskogo stikhvorstva*). The "High Style", characterized by the use of elements from Old Church Slavonic, was considered appropriate for the composition of tragedy and heroic poetry. The "Middle Style" could be used for writing ordinary dramas, while the more colloquial "Low Style" was restricted to farce, correspondence and daily speech.

**Lyric Poetry:** Towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century lyric love poetry challenged the prevailing religious, philosophical and political themes, and the masters of this genre were Aleksandr Petrovich Sumarokov and Gavrila Derzhavin.

**Ode:** 18<sup>th</sup> century Russian odes were characterized by their political subject matter, nationalist tone, extreme deference to the monarch, and archaic language. Odes were generally presented to the monarch in the name of the Academy of Science and composed in honor of some official event (coronations, birthdays, etc.) However, the writers of odes in this period were also attempting through their art to help Russia catch up with the West, culturally and scientifically, and adapt contemporary western culture to Russia's particular needs. Lomonosov was the first eminent poet writing classical odes, while Gavrila Derzhavin, with his panegyric ode *Felitsa*, marks a turning point in the history of Russian poetry with its semi-humorous style. Derzhavin presaged the style that would be developed by early 19<sup>th</sup> century poets through his combination of awareness of the natural world and emotional subjectivity with a clearly classical style.

**Karamzinian movement:** The literary movement created by Nikolay Karamzin dominated the last decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the first two of the 19<sup>th</sup>. Inspired by the French elegant style, Karamzin wrote in a novel literary language modeled on the language of the educated gentry, composing poetry that was clearly classical, but that also had a new sensibility. This language, later elaborated by Pushkin, became the standard language of 19<sup>th</sup> century literature.

## NINETEENTH CENTURY

Russian poetry underwent a profound transformation in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that affected almost every aspect of it, from who wrote poetry to themes and language. Poets were no longer exclusively members of the aristocracy, and while many were civil servants, none were state-sponsored poets, since state-sponsored poetry had come to an end. Poetry was now primarily written for peers and friends in the

salon, rather than for rulers and nobles in the court. Love, longing, and friendship replaced official themes, while the language of poetry grew closer to the spoken language than it ever had in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**Golden Age:** The period between 1813 and 1845 is often regarded as the Golden Age of Russian poetry. It begins with the surge of creativity that followed Napoleon's defeat, reaches its apex in 1825 at the end of Alexander I's reign, and concludes around 1845 due to a combination of increased censorship under Nicholas I, and the growing popularity of prose genres with expansion of Russia's readership. Poetry in the 18<sup>th</sup> century had primarily served the needs of noble patrons, and was written by professional poets. In contrast, poetry of the Golden Age was written for a small, but expanding, number of educated readers, often the poets' own peers, by writers who made their living by other means.

Two of the most important poets in the early years of the Golden Age came from the ranks of the young officers returning from service in the Napoleonic wars, Konstantin Batyushkov and Vasilii Zhukovsky. Among their contributions to the poetry of this period were elements of Romanticism and the idea of the independent poet.

Vasily Zhukovsky, who followed Karamzin's reforms, expanded the poetic vocabulary that became the standard idiom for the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century. The contributions of other poets such as Yevgeny Baratynsky, Konstantin Batyushkov, Denis Davydov, Pyotr Vyazemsky, and Anton Delvig were also very important. Later Zhukovsky's and Batyushkov's style influenced the early poetry of Aleksandr Pushkin.

Pushkin's style was a synthesis of his own innovations and those of earlier writers, and was masterfully employed in a number of literary genres – love poems, epigrammatic insults, fairy tales, religious verse, comedy and tragedy. His works, clear and profound, became literary models not only for the writers of his time, but also for the writers who came after him.

Russian poetry reached its peak with Aleksandr Pushkin's poem *Ruslan and Lyudmila*. His "novel in verse", *Eugene Onegin* depicted contemporary Russian life, and the *The Bronze Horseman* foresaw Russia's later descent into totalitarianism.

The last great poet of the Golden Age was Mikhail Lermontov, an uncompromising and powerful Romantic reminiscent of Byron. Due to his solitary nature, much of his work was only published after his death. Since it was believed that Pushkin's style could not be improved upon, Lermontov chose to write in his own style, characterized by its energy, emotional tension and unique forms of expression.

Whether Russian poetry suffered a qualitative decline following Lermontov's death is a subject of debate, but the rapid decline in poetry's popularity among the Russian intelligentsia is undeniable. Social issues and struggle began to attract the attention of this class and as early as the late 1810s-1820s poets such as Fyodor Tiutchev, Afanasiy Fet, and Nikolay Nekrasov found themselves ignored or mocked by radical critics such as Pisarev who criticized their aestheticism. Mediocre poets known as "civic poets" became popular with the public for a time, but poetry's popularity began to decline in the mid-1840s. When the view that the value of literature was directly linked to its concern with social issues became dominant in the 1860s radical critics subjected poetry as an art form to serious criticism.

**Ballads:** This genre of poetry only appeared in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, inspired by German romantic poetry. Generally composed on the themes of family and romantic relationships, their subject matter is less diverse than the *bylina*. Vasily Zhukovskiy is generally regarded as the first composer of Russian ballads, with his first, "Lyudmila", written in 1808. Ballads were eventually displaced by shorter songs called *chatushki*.

## TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Silver Age:** The early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Russia was a tumultuous period of political crises and calls for profound change, and this atmosphere was reflected in the literature of this period. Dissatisfaction with the realism of 19<sup>th</sup> century writing combined with exposure to new ways of expression and artistic forms resulted in new literary movements that attempted to express poets' innovative ideas. The first of these literary

movements was Symbolism, which continued until 1910, and is regarded as the first phase of the Silver Age. The second phase, known as ‘post-Symbolism’ or ‘avant-garde’, saw the emergence of two major, rival movements, the ‘Acmeists’ and the ‘Futurists’ which took the tenets of Symbolism and developed them in their own distinctive ways.

**Symbolism:** According to the theory of symbolism, the use of symbolic images can assist an artist in creating new art that expresses his/her emotions, thoughts and experiences more accurately and more subtly. Symbolist art is distinctive for its urbane, cosmopolitan character that encourages the artist to strive to reach the most distant places and beyond. In addition, Symbolism encourages artists to challenge frontiers, even cultural and linguistic frontiers.

Symbolism in Russia originated as a reaction to the predominant “civic poetry”, and despite being a foreign artistic movement, it soon developed a distinctive Russian form. The European origins of this artistic movement lie in France and this outside influence is reflected in the stylistic similarities between Russian Symbolist poetry and Western European poetry written between 1890 and 1910.

The pioneers of poetic Symbolism in Russia were Merezhkovsky, Bryusov and Balmont, who all defended Symbolism and its tenet of ‘art for art’s sake’ in the face of its populist critics, the doctrine of utilitarianism, and even conventional morality. Russian Symbolist poetry displayed great thematic diversity; while Bryusov produced poems in the manner of European Decadence, the poetry of Zinaida Gippius was dominated by religious themes. Other Symbolist poets, Aleksandr Blok, Andrei Bely and Vyacheslav Ivanov in particular, attempted to go beyond the physical world in their mystical poetry. Taking the philosophy and mystical poetry of Vladimir Soloviev as their starting point, Blok, Bely and Ivanov merged myth and religion with their aesthetics to produce poetry that would provide knowledge of a mysterious dimension beyond this mundane life.

**Acmeism:** The Symbolist lasted until 1910 when two new schools appeared: Acmeism and Futurism. A direct development from Symbolism, Acmeism emerged in 1912 and continued until 1917. It was a neo-classical form of modernism which replaced the vagueness, shadowiness, and uncertainty of Symbolism, with clarity and the visible world. Returning to the classical tradition, Acmeists argued that poetry should deal with culture, human existence and the world rather than mystical themes.

In the history of Russian poetry Acmeism was known more through three prominent poets - Nikolay Gumilev, Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam – rather than as a coherent, organized artistic movement. For these poets Acmeism was a movement with an independent voice, and its advocates would soon pay a heavy price for daring to criticize the Soviet regime headed by Stalin who had no tolerance for any art form that did not serve to further his political aims. Akhmatova was charged with treason, deported, and her works were banned. Her husband, fellow poet and the founder of Acmeism, Gumilev, was executed. Her second husband was sentenced to the Gulag where he would die of exhaustion. Mandelstam, after writing a poem critical of Stalin in 1934 was denounced, arrested and sentenced to three years’ exile in the Urals. However, he was later deported to Kolyma and in late 1938 died in a field there.

After Stalin’s death, Evgeny Evtushenko was influential in the development of a more unofficial style of poetry. Beginning in the 1970s numerous avant-garde poets emerged, with Joseph Brodsky being the most familiar to readers in the west.

**Futurism:** The second offshoot from the Symbolism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a Russian avant-garde movement known as Futurism. Futurism not only rejected Symbolism’s lyricism, but also strongly rejected conventional society, culture and accepted ways of life. Such strong anti-establishment attitudes generated strong opposition to Futurism who referred to Futurist tenets as ‘animalistic Nietzscheanism’ and its followers as ‘savages’.

Futurists claimed that their movement was a radical break with the past, and turned their energies to bringing innovations to art, technology, and politics, often in the form of primitivism. The visual arts were a favorite media with Futurists to challenge and provoke conventional society.

**Zaum:** Russian Futurists even applied their artistic philosophy to language. Taking their cue from abstraction in the visual arts, they attempted to develop a new form of verbal expression they called *zaum*, a language that transcended reason by directly evoking an emotional response despite not referring to anything clear and specific.

**Cubo-Futurism and Ego-Futurism:** Just as Symbolism had earlier split into two main branches, Russian Futurism also fractured into two sub-schools, namely Cubo-Futurism and Ego-Futurism. Cubo-Futurists attempted to enrich the Russian language through a new vocabulary of derived and arbitrarily created words. Among the more important Cubo-Futurist poets were Aleksey Krucenyx, Viktor Khlebnikov, David Burlyuk, and Vladimir Mayakovsky. Ego-Futurism, founded by Igor Severyanin were, opposed to what it regarded as the excessively objective attitude in the poetry of the Cubo-Futurists and argued for a more subjective attitude in poetry.

Futurism rapidly declined as a coherent artistic movement after 1917, but its influence continued to be felt in Soviet poetry until around 1930.

**Imaginism:** The Imaginists were active between 1919 and 1924 and were indirectly influenced by the works of Ezra Pound. For Imaginists the image was almost the sole basis for poetic composition, and Imaginist poems were created by linking a series of striking, unexpected images, sometimes without the use of verbs. Sergey Esenim, Vadim Shershenevich, and Anatoly Marienhof are among the better known Imaginist poets.

**Constructivism:** Constructivism was another short-lived artistic movement from the early years of the Soviet Union, 1924-1930. While supportive of Soviet ideology, Constructivists also labored to form a new theory or aesthetics of artistic creation. They argued that the subject matter of a poem should determine its form, included scientific and technical terms in their works, and attempted to employ some of the methods of prose writing in their poetry. The two leading figures of Constructivism were Eduard Bagritsky and Ilya Selvinsky.

**Letter-poems:** Folklore, folklore studies, and old literary genres began to fall out of favor with the regime following the implementation of Stalin's first five-year plan in 1928. Regarded as reactionary and expressing support for both the tsar and capitalism, epic poetry was no longer considered an appropriate format for praising the Soviet leadership or its actions. Instead, in the mid-1930s letter poems addressed to Stalin began to make their appearance. Folk performers and professional poets would create an initial draft that was then re-worked in numerous later meetings until agreement was reached on a final text. Thousands would then sign this final version before it was sent to Stalin. Important events for workers and other professional groups across the Soviet Union could also be commemorated with a letter poem.

**Russian Heritage-Going Back to its Roots:** Some poets attempted to combine the old and the new in their work by combining elements of Symbolism with other elements taken from Russia's earlier literary heritage as well as its classical literary tradition. Two of the more prominent poets of this movement were Boris Pasternak and Marina Tsvetayeva.

**After Stalin:** For a brief period under Khrushchev, Russian poets were allowed a degree of freedom unheard of under Stalin. Some who had been imprisoned were released, and the poetry of this period explored themes, public and private, that had previously been off limits.

However, these freedoms came to an abrupt end with Leonid Brezhnev's assumption of power in 1964. Literature was once again brought under strict state control, with some poets being forcibly exiled and others choosing to emigrate to the West. Despite the restrictions imposed on poets and their work under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, the poetry of Robert Rozhestvensky, Andrey Voznesensky and Yevgeny Yevtushenko that was deemed politically acceptable was able to reach the public. In contrast, some poets of the post-Stalin period towed the standard Party line, among them Nikolay Rubtsov, and Yury Kuznetsov.

However, those poets whose works put them in clear opposition to the Soviet regime could take one of two paths. They could decide to write "for the desk drawer", to keep their work private to avoid trouble with the

state. If they chose to try and make their voice heard and disseminate their poetry, they faced exile or even death. Two poets who took the latter path were Joseph Brodsky and Yuri Galanskov.

Russian poetry flourished with the end of most official censorship after 1985, part of Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* introduced after his ascension to power in that year. With permission more easily granted for gatherings and the publication of new anthologies, poets sought larger audiences for their work, and young poets were also able to have their works made public. In addition, numerous works that had been suppressed in previous years began to see the light of day. Some of the most prominent poets from this era were Viktor Sosnora, Ivan Zhdanov, Gennady Aygi, and Aleksandr Kushner.

### **Discussion/Questions**

1. Why did Russian poetry go into relative decline after Pushkin's and Lermontov's death?
2. Although the Soviet period was characterized by strict censorship in the arts and intolerance of poetry, how were artistic movements, such as Acmeism, Futurism and avant-garde able to emerge and develop under these conditions?
3. Why did the Soviets revert to a patronage system similar to that of the 18<sup>th</sup> century?

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