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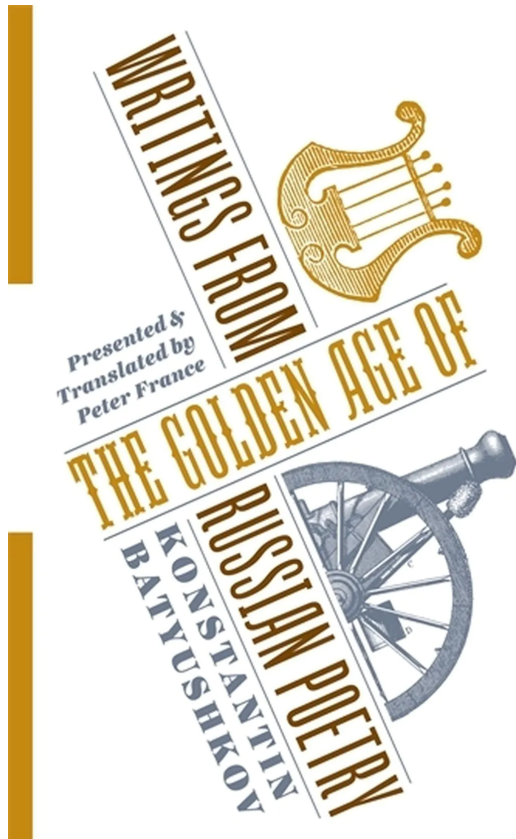
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“Reader, Have You Not Heard?": On “Writings from the Golden Age of Russian Poetry”

 lareviewofbooks.org/article/reader-have-you-not-heard-on-writings-from-the-golden-age-of-russian-poetry

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Writings from the Golden Age of Russian Poetry cover describes Peter France as presenter and translator, which understates what he has done: besides introducing the volume, he is the author of a substantial artistic and intellectual biography of the poet that provides a large selection of Batyushkov’s own writings in France’s translation. The verse is set apart graphically, making it easy to flip through the book following the poetry — ideally after reading the whole thing through.

Batyushkov was a translator of note, as *Writings from the Golden Age of Russian Poetry* often reminds us. The attention to Batyushkov’s poetic sources suggests interesting ways to compare his translations or adaptations with the originals in Greek or Latin, English, French, or Italian. Of course, it also means looking at a translation of a translation, something of a *mise en abîme*. It is refreshing that France’s book makes the role of translation explicit (while sometimes offering the original, as with a late stanza or two from Byron’s *Don Juan*). The

IF YOU NEED to ask who Konstantin Batyushkov is, this is the book for you. For fans of Russian poetry, and especially for Russophone poets, Batyushkov (1787–1855) is a vital figure who wrote exquisite verse and helped to usher in what is known as the Golden Age of Russian poetry. Admired by contemporaries, he is read and cited by later poets as well. Peter France, framer of this book, notes that Batyushkov is too often mentioned or discussed merely as a precursor of the best-known Golden Age poet, Aleksandr Pushkin (1799–1837); Pushkin is a relatively minor presence in this narrative, though often “name-checked” to provide context. This selection-cum-biography of Batyushkov is part of the Russian Library now emerging from Columbia University Press, underlining the commitment of that series to making Russian classics available in English. The

approach is valuable for poetry of the early 19th century, and especially for Russian literature, which has on the whole been much readier than most European literatures to acknowledge its foreign sources and their arrival via translation.

France stresses Batyushkov's dual role both as gifted individual author and as shaper of what quickly became a world-class literature with a more flexible system of poetic genres. This entailed assimilating and recreating poems from other languages as part of his own poetry: "through translation, Batyushkov could create his own individual voice, something different from existing Russian poetry [which was a] still young poetic culture." As France reminds us, "the first great poet in modern Russian, Lomonosov, preceded [Batyushkov] by only two generations."

In the first two decades of the 19th century, Russian poetry was indeed a small and largely private scene, featuring almost exclusively aristocratic authors. In this era, poetry often spread in manuscript and could build a reputation without being published, like Batyushkov's mocking "Vision on the Banks of Lethe." Batyushkov knew everyone who was anyone at least well enough to exchange letters or to tease in a poetic parody. The likes of Nikolay Karamzin, Vasily Zhukovsky, and Pyotr Vyazemsky make frequent appearances in this volume as friends, authors, and correspondents. (It is too bad that there is no index to help retrieve these moments, especially given the solidity of many of the text's insights and summaries, but that adds value to the searchable ebook.)

Writings from the Golden Age of Russian Poetry interweaves translations of poetry (plus excerpts from prose essays and personal letters) with history and biography. This usefully lets France prepare his reader for a work's significance before its translation appears. It also lets him select only high points, whereas the usual poetry anthology would be obliged to include complete poems. The welcoming narrative presentation of information, explanation, and interpretation opens the work to understanding while still putting the poetry at center stage. By the time we reach the poem "My Penates" on page 85, for instance, we know it is important, and reaching it even feels like a reward. This is a wise choice for the first significant presentation of the poet in English. (There have been PhD dissertations on Batyushkov in North America, but they appeal to a different readership.)

Historical background includes Batyushkov's time in the army, with visits to Finland, Germany, and France, and details of the Napoleonic era as a whole. Batyushkov did much of his best work in isolation in a village, for financial reasons. Some background is left unmentioned; we hear, for instance, that Batyushkov inherited a village from his mother, and that he often stayed there, especially when he was short of money, but not that the village came with serfs, whose labor made living there so much less expensive for him. Many Russians at the time considered serfdom distinct from slavery, indeed a sensible way of caring for the land and accommodating the various roles of the different "estates" (aristocrats, clergy, merchants, and — the huge majority — peasants). Batyushkov probably shared that way of thinking; France notes his conservative tendencies and cites some distinctly unrevolutionary comments from his letters. In fairness, one volume cannot do

everything, but social background is particularly important, since the Decembrist movement was brewing, even if the 1825 uprising and Tsar Nicholas I's response came after Batyushkov had left public life. We do hear about the poet's more radical cousin, Nikita Muravyov, who was condemned to death in 1826 but had the sentence commuted to exile in Siberia.

France clearly likes Batyushkov as a person. Without smoothing away contradictions, he draws attention to the poet's wit, cleverness, and congeniality, stressing the elevation of friendship in his elegies and the importance of his friendly missives (as the Formalist critics of the early 20th century pointed out, these were an active part of the literary system at the time, meant to be read aloud in salons). The narrative cherry-picks the most interesting parts of Batyushkov's letters to fellow poets like Nikolay Gnedich, the translator of the *Iliad* into Russian and Batyushkov's close friend, and prepares the reader to appreciate their significance.

These letters [from 1811] to friends are real works of art, frequently prefiguring the new kind of poetry that Batyushkov was writing. They are written from the heart, with frequent complaints about illness, boredom, poverty, and other woes, as we have seen. But they are also performances, full of zest, veering from familiarity to mock pomposity — the sort of letter that needs to be read aloud.

As that excerpt demonstrates, France's text is highly knowledgeable but refreshingly unacademic. Poets and general readers should appreciate this volume as much as teachers and scholars who can now quote elegant translations. When a work must be seen as a whole to be appreciated, the volume gives it, be it short or long; these include adaptations/translations from the anthology that Batyushkov translated from Sergey Uvarov's French versions of classical poems and "Tasso Dying," one of Batyushkov's masterpieces.

Batyushkov's connection with Italian language and literature was (and is) unusual in Russia. Tasso (1544–1595) was his favorite, and the Russian poet's friends sometimes called him Torquato in tribute to this enthusiasm. The attraction to Italian was not just an example of his use of significant foreign models; it expresses his quest for musicality, the sonorous acoustic quality for which his poetry has been noted ever since. Batyushkov eventually managed to get himself posted to Italy in the diplomatic service, though it seems to have happened too late: his health did not improve, he didn't get along with his first boss, and he was lonely (not many Russians in Naples). He asked to retire after two years and left even before that request was approved.

Among other helpful spoilers, the book quickly mentions and regularly repeats that Batyushkov went mad and wrote almost nothing (as far as we know) in the last three decades of his life. For a reader unaware of this, the retroactive foreknowledge may create tragic suspense, the question of when and how it will happen. Surely the eventual madness has attracted some later readers (especially poets): more than a personal tragedy, it

somehow suggests the risks poets (or any sensitive artistic souls) run in Russia, even if, like Batyushkov, they are not at all political radicals or dissidents. His last “sane” poem was written between 1821 and 1824:

Reader, have you not heard

Of gray Melchisedec’s last words?

Man is born a slave,

A slave goes to the grave,

And can he hope that death will say

Why he walked through this lovely vale of tears

Suffered, complained, accepted, disappeared?

We get a compressed picture of the “mute” final decades, as the poet strolled in the provincial city of Vologda, attended theater, smiled at children. One “crazy” poem has survived, and is extremely interesting from today’s point of view, informed by Russian Futurism and other avant-garde movements. France wisely offers both a literal translation of the phonetic play at that poem’s end (“Tsaritsas, rule as tsars, and you, the empress! / Tsars, do not rule as tsars, I myself am a tsar on Pindus! / Venus my sister, and you my little sister. / But my Caesar is the holy reaper [*a kesar’ moy — svyatoy kosar*],”) before giving his freer version, which creates similar phonetic play in English (citing the same final four lines):

Be stars for us, my empress, my tsaritsas!

Tsars are not stars: Mount Pindus is *my* state,

Venus my sister, you my little sister,

My Caesar — scissors in the hands of Fate.

In his translations France strives for metrical and rhyming equivalence, though never at the cost of poetic quality. He uses slant rhyme frequently, and he employs a rich vocabulary. His gift for scansion results in effective and sophisticated deployment of rhythm — whole long sections read without “jingling” or growing monotonous. Given the typically shorter length of common English words, the lines in translation are often a foot shorter (e.g., pentameter rather than hexameter). The reader may find herself settling into the longer translations and

wishing there were more, even of a long poem. France is very responsive to form and addresses it explicitly here and there, though in other places a curious reader would have to pick up or look up the original to check for differences (Batyushkov's work is widely available online, like other Russian poetry of every era). It would be worth citing much more than space will allow here.

One early example, excerpted from a letter, France calls doggerel:

I'm shivering with cold,
Though I'm sitting by the stove,
Lying under my coat
I see the fire's glow,
But I tremble like a vole,
Or like a wretched mole,
I love the warmth of coal
But I wander through the cold,
Only verse keeps me whole.

Humor flashes again in a longer complaint about village life: in one stanza, the village doctor "Treats me with wormwood potions / And soups made out of bone, / And with these clever notions / He'll see me dead and gone." The poetry rests firmly in its context in Batyushkov's career and in the whole development of Russian poetry: France notes that the 1813 epistle "To [Dmitry] Dashkov" "marks a turning point in his work. It deals with a subject — war — which in the traditional poetics would have been treated in a high formal ode; Batyushkov's treatment shows his innovative genius, breaking down the barriers between genres, mixing different styles, solemn, lyrical, and familiar, to express an individual take on life." The text dwells for many pages on the two-volume collection of Batyushkov's work, *Essays*, edited by Gnedich, which included a volume of prose (largely essays: Batyushkov was a particular admirer of Montaigne) and one of verse. France writes:

The first and much the longest section is entitled 'Elegies' — and Batyushkov is often seen as a crucial figure in establishing the elegy as the central poetic genre of the Russian Golden Age. The term is a capacious one in Russian literature, but essentially it is distinguished from the more formal ode by its concentration on the expression of personal feelings.

Batyushkov's groundbreaking anthology translations of classical poems emerge elegantly in France's translations:

IV

When a girl in agony is fading

and her body is blue and chilled,

it is in vain love pours out flowers

and amber; she must lie still,

pale as a lily of the fields,

like a waxen form; and now

flowers cannot warm her cooling hands

and perfume has no power.

The poem begins with appropriate stiffness, but its end is genuinely moving, an example both of Poe's "most poetical topic in the world" and of Batyushkov's ability to warm it into something vibrant.

France's recurrent but non-irritating reminders of things and people already mentioned ensure that everything makes sense and resonates where needed with its proper significance. (This should be especially helpful for readers unfamiliar with Russian names.) After the biography ends, the last full chapter gives an evaluation of Batyushkov's place in Russian poetry. As France suggests by opening his volume with the great Modernist Osip Mandelstam's poem "Batyushkov," the 19th-century poet is important enough merely for his impact on other poets, from Pushkin to the present day.

And let me say a few words about Peter France himself, who has translated Russian poets including Evgeny Baratynsky, Mikhail Lermontov, Osip Mandelstam, and Gennady Aigi, not even mentioning his work with French. Many of these turn out to be connected to Batyushkov in ways that are productive for this project; if France needs to cite a poet, he can usually do so in his own version. Toward the end of the volume, he cites Maria Rybakova's 2011 novel in verse *Gnedich*, devoted to Nikolay Gnedich, who plays such an important role in this book, as well as Elena Dimov's excellent 2015 translation of that work from the Russian. France generously credits Rybakova with inspiring his interest in Batyushkov, and thus the volume at hand.

Like the whole Russian Library series, *Writings from the Golden Age of Russian Poetry* has beautiful production values, and its cover is especially successful, bringing out the best of

perpendicular text and the pleasing geometric juxtaposition of a lyre and a cannon wheel. Almost at the end of the volume, following the notes, is a “Translator’s Note” in which France briefly discusses his work on Batyushkov and calls translation “this daunting but (for me) irresistible task.” This draws attention to the book’s double value: it treats an essential Russian poet, and it shows a master translator at the height of his powers.

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