

## Russian Poets and Russian Culture

**Vasily Andreyevich Zhukovsky, 1783 - 1852,**

Zhukovsky was among the first Russian writers to cultivate the mystique of the Romantic poet. Zhukovsky was the foremost Russian poet of the 1810s and a leading figure in Russian literature in the first half of the 19th century. In artistic terms, he represents a bridge from the pre-Napoleonic era, and a foundation for what followed. Zhukovsky, the illegitimate son of a landowner and a Turkish slave girl, was educated in Moscow. He served in the Napoleonic War of 1812 and in 1815 joined the tsar's entourage, becoming tutor to the heir to the throne in 1826. In 1841 he retired to Germany.

**Vasily Andreyevich Zhukovsky**

### **The Mysterious Visitor**

Spirit, lovely guest, who are you?  
Whence have you flown down to us?  
Taciturn and without a sound  
Why have you abandoned us?  
Where are you? Where is your dwelling?  
What are you, where did you go?  
Why did you appear,  
Heavenly, upon the Earth?

Mayhap you are youthful Hope,  
Who arrives from time to time  
Cloaked in magic  
From a land unknown?  
Merciless as Hope,  
Sweetest joy you show us  
For a moment, then  
Take it back and fly away.

Was it Love that you enacted  
For us all in mystery? . . .  
Days of love, when one beloved  
Rendered this world beautiful  
Ah! then, sighted through the veil  
Earth did seem unearthly...

Now the veil has lifted; Love is gone;  
Life is empty, joy - a dream.

Was it Thought, enchanting  
You embodied for us here?  
Far removed from every worry,  
With a dreamy finger pointing  
To her lips, she sallies forth  
Just like you, from time to time,  
Ushers us without a sound  
Back to bygone days.

Or within you dwells the sacred spirit  
Of Dame Poetry? . . .  
Just like you, she came from Heaven  
Veiling us twofold:  
Using azure for the skies,  
And clear white for earth;  
What lies near is lovely through her;  
All that's distant - known.

Or perhaps 'twas premonition  
That descended in your guise  
And to us with clarity described  
All that's sacred and divine?  
Thus it often happens in this life:  
Something brilliant flies to meet us,  
Raises up the veil  
And then beckons us beyond.

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**Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin** 1799 – 1837

Pushkin is, by common consent, the greatest Russian poet. He was a visionary who changed Russian poetry so drastically that he is commonly cited as the impetus for a Golden Age of poetry that began as a result of his exceptional work.

Pushkin wasn't a figure who limited his passions solely to poetry. He was a political revolutionary as well, a Decembrist. The Decembrists were a group of

young students who wanted to change Russia to a parliamentary monarchy. They failed to succeed in this effort and only Pushkin's exceptional talent allowed him to keep his life after the Decembrists failed. He was sent into exile for a time. Pushkin didn't manage to live for a very long time after his return from exile, however, though not due directly to his political leanings.

Duels were an accepted way to settle quarrels among the nobility in this period. As a man of relatively unrestrained passions, Pushkin was prone to calling people out for the tiniest trifles. Most people experiencing this behavior, perhaps due to his artistic renown, were inclined to settle matters peacefully. Finally, he called someone out who would not be satisfied with anything less than a violent encounter, and he died in a duel at the age of 37, in 1837.

**Aleksandr Pushkin To \*\*\* (I still recall the wondrous moment...)**

I still recall the wondrous moment:  
When you appeared before my sight  
As though a brief and fleeting omen,  
Pure phantom in enchanting light.

In sorrow, when I felt unwell,  
Caught in the bustle, in a daze,  
I fell under your voice's spell  
And dreamt the features of your face.

Years passed and gales had dispelled  
My former hopes, and in those days,  
I lost your voice's sacred spell,  
The holy features of your face.  
Detained in darkness, isolation,  
My days began to drag in strife.  
Without faith and inspiration,  
Without tears, and love and life.

My soul attained its waking moment:  
You re-appeared before my sight,  
As though a brief and fleeting omen,  
Pure phantom in enchanting light.

And now, my heart, with fascination,  
Beats rapidly and finds revived  
Devout faith and inspiration,  
And tender tears and love and life.

**Alexander Pushkin "I loved you..."**

I loved you, and I probably still do,  
And for a while the feeling may remain...  
But let my love no longer trouble you,  
I do not wish to cause you any pain.

I loved you; and the hopelessness I knew,  
The jealousy, the shyness - though in vain -  
Made up a love so tender and so true  
As may God grant you to be loved again.

**An Elegy by Alexander Pushkin**

The senseless years' extinguished mirth and laughter  
Oppress me like some hazy morning-after.  
But sadness of days past, as alcohol -  
The more it age, the stronger grip the soul.  
My course is dull. The future's troubled ocean  
Forebodes me toil, misfortune and commotion.

But no, my friends, I do not wish to leave;  
I'd rather live, to ponder and to grieve -  
And I shall have my share of delectation  
Amid all care, distress and agitation:  
Time and again I'll savor harmony,  
Melt into tears about some fantasy,  
And on my sad decline, to ease affliction,  
May love yet show her smile of valadiction.

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**Yevgeny Abramovich Baratynsky (1800 – 1844)**

Baratynsky's earliest poems are punctuated by conscious efforts to write differently from Pushkin whom he regarded as a model of perfection.

Baratynsky aspired after a fuller union with nature, after a more primitive spontaneity of mental life. He saw the steady, inexorable movement of mankind away from nature. The aspiration after a more organic and natural past is one of the main motives of Baratynsky's poetry. He symbolized it in the growing discord between nature's child — the poet — and the human herd, which were growing, with every generation, more absorbed by industrial cares. Hence the increasing isolation of the poet in the modern world where the only response that greets him is that of his own rhymes

Baratynsky is a solitary figure compared to others because of his pessimism. Baratynsky is bitter, but what makes him interesting is that he is also intellectual in vision, where other poets are more emotional.

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### **Evgeny Baratynsky**

#### **"What use to those enchained..."**

What use to those enchained are dreams of being free?  
Just look – the river flows, and uncomplainingly,  
Within its given banks, according to its course;  
The mighty fir is powerless before the force  
That binds it where it stands. The stars above are caught  
Within the paths an unknown hand believes they ought  
To go. The roaming wind's not free – for it a law  
Dictates the lands in which its breath has right to soar.  
And to the lot which is our own shall we submit –  
Rebellious dreams accept as dreams or else forget.  
We, reason's slaves, must learn obediently to bind  
Our deep desires to all those things fate has in mind –  
Then happiness and peace shall demarcate our time.  
What fools we are! Is it not boundless freedom's sign  
That gives us all our passions? Is it not freedom's voice  
We hear within their torrents? O how hard's for us the choice  
To live while feeling in our beating hearts the fire  
That rages in the bounds set by our fate's desire!

### **Evgeny Baratynsky**

#### **"O thought..."**

O thought, your fate's that of the flower  
Which calls the moth with every hour;

Draws in the golden bumblebee;  
To whom the loving midge does cling  
and whom the dragonfly does sing;  
When you have seen your wonders flee  
And in your turn have faded grey -  
Where then those wings that blessed your day?  
Forgotten by the host of flies -  
Not one of them has need of you -  
Just as your failing body dies  
Your seeds bring forth another you.

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**Michail Yurievich Lermontov 1814 – 1841**

Michail Yurievich served his career in the military as a Captain in the Russian imperial army. His poem "Borodino" was inspired by a hard-won war against France in 1812 and it fuels patriotic feelings of Russian people up to this day.

Russia's abundant natural beauty, its folk songs and tales, its customs and ceremonies, the hard forced labour of the serfs, and stories and legends of peasant mutinies all had a great influence in developing the poet's character. Because he was often ill as a child, he was taken to spas in the Caucasus on three occasions, where the exotic landscapes created lasting impressions on him.

Next to Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, who personifies Romanticism, is probably Russia's most frequently anthologized poet.

**Mikhail Lermontov "The Sail"**

Amid the blue haze of the ocean  
A sail is passing, white and frail.  
What do you seek in a far country?  
What have you left at home, lone sail?

The billows play, the breezes whistle,  
And rhythmically creaks the mast.  
Alas, you seek no happy future,  
Nor do you flee a happy past.

Below the mirrored azure brightens,  
Above the golden rays increase —  
But you, wild rover, pray for tempests  
As if in tempests there was peace!

**Mikhail Lermontov**

**“Confession”**

I'm to believe, but with some fear,  
For I haven't tried it all before,  
That every monk could be sincere  
And live as he by altar swore;  
That smiles and kisses of all people  
Could be perfidious only once;  
That, sometimes, they forgive the little  
Mistakes, the others make by chance;  
That time heals sufferers around,  
The world is one of joy and gleam;  
That virtue is not just a sound,  
And life is more than a dream.

But rough and hardened life's experience,  
Repulse my warm faith every time,  
My mind, sunk, as before, in grievance,  
Has not achieved its goal, prime,  
And heart, full of the sharp frustrations,  
Holds in its deep the clear trace  
Of dead – but blest imaginations,  
And vanished senses' easy shades;  
There will be none for it to fear,  
And what's a poison for all them,  
Makes it alive and feeds it here  
With its ironic, mocking flame.