

Baring Maurice

An Outline of Russian Literature



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PREFACE

The chief difficulty which Englishmen have experienced in writing about Russia has, up till quite lately, been the prevailing ignorance of the English public with regard to all that concerns Russian affairs. A singularly intelligent Russian, who is connected with the Art Theatre at Moscow, said to me that he feared the new interest taken by English intellectuals with regard to Russian literature and Russian art. He was delighted, of course, that they should be interested in Russian affairs, but he feared their interest was in danger of being crystallized in a false shape and directed into erroneous channels.

This ignorance will always remain until English people go to Russia and learn to know the Russian people at first hand. It is not enough to be acquainted with a certain number of Russian writers; I say a certain number advisedly, because, although it is true that such writers as Tolstoy and Turgenev have long been naturalized in England, it is equally true that some of the greatest and most typical of Russian authors have not yet been translated.

There is in England no complete translation of Pushkin. This is much the same as though there were in Russia no complete translation of Shakespeare or Milton. I do not mean by this that Pushkin is as great a poet as Shakespeare or Milton, but I do mean that he is the most national and the most important of all Russian writers. There is no translation of Saltykov, the greatest of Russian satirists; there is no complete translation of Leskov, one of her greatest novelists, while Russian criticism and philosophy, as well as almost the whole of Russian poetry, is completely beyond the ken of England. The knowledge of what Russian civilisation, with its glorious fruit of literature, consists in, is still a sealed book so far as England is concerned.

M. B.

CHAPTER I THE ORIGINS

For the purposes of the average Russian, and still more for the purposes of the foreigner, Russian literature begins with the nineteenth century, that is to say with the reign of Alexander I. It was then that the literary fruits on which Russia has since fed were born. The seeds were sown, of course, centuries earlier; but the history of Russian literature up to the nineteenth century is not a history of literature, it is the history of Russia. It may well be objected that it is difficult to separate Russian literature from Russian history; that for the understanding of Russian literature an understanding of Russian history is indispensable. This is probably true; but, in a sketch of this dimension, it would be quite impossible to give even an adequate outline of all the vicissitudes in the life of the Russian people which have helped and hindered, blighted and fostered the growth of the Russian tree of letters. All that one can do is to mention some of the chief landmarks amongst the events which directly affected the growth of Russian literature until the dawn of that epoch when its fruits became palpable to Russia and to the world.

The first of these facts is the existence of a Slav race on the banks of the Dnieper in the seventh and eighth centuries, and the growth of cities and trade centres such as Kiev, Smolensk, and Novgorod, which seem already to have been considerable settlements when the earliest Russian records were written. Of these, from the point of view of literature, Kiev was the most important. Kiev on the Dnieper was the mother of Russian culture; Moscow and St. Petersburg became afterwards the heirs of Kiev.

Another factor of vital historical importance which had an indirect effect on the history of Russian literature was the coming of the Norsemen into Russia at the beginning of the ninth century. They came as armed merchants from Scandinavia; they founded and organized principalities; they took Novgorod and Kiev. The Scandinavian Viking became the Russian *Kniaz*, and the Varanger principality of Kiev became the kernel of the Russian State. In the course of time, the Norsemen became merged in the Slavs, but left traces of their origin in the Sagas, the *Byliny*, which spread from Kiev all over Russia, and still survive in some distant governments. Hence the Norse names Oleg (Helgi), Olga (Helga), Igor (Ingvar). The word Russian, *Rus*, the origin and etymology of which are shrouded in obscurity, was first applied to the men-at-arms who formed the higher class of society in the early Varanger states.

The next determining factor in the early history of Russian literature is the Church. Vladimir, Prince of Kiev, married the sister of the Emperor of Byzantium and was baptized; henceforward Christianity began to spread (987-8), but the momentous fact is that it was the Christianity of the East. The pearl of the Gospels, says Soloviev, was covered over with the dust of Byzantium, and Russia was committed to the Greek tradition, the Greek rivalry with the West and was consequently excluded from the civilization of the West and the great intellectual community of which Rome was the centre. This fact is of far-reaching and momentous importance. No less important was the introduction of the Slavonic liturgy, which was invented by two Greek brothers from Saloniki, in the ninth century, who tried to force their Macedonian dialect on all the Slavs, and succeeded in the case of Bulgaria and Servia. A century or so later it reached the Russian Slavs. Through Bulgaria, the Russians acquired a ready-made literature and a written language in a dialect which was partly Bulgarian and partly Macedonian, or rather Macedonian with Bulgarian modifications. The possession of a written language acted as a lever as far as culture was concerned. In the eleventh century, Kiev was one of the most enlightened cities in Europe.

The rulers of Kiev were at this time related to the Kings of France, Hungary, Norway, and even England. The Russian MSS. of the eleventh century equal the best MSS. of Western Europe of the

same period. The city of Kiev was a home of wealth, learning, and art. Byzantine artists went to Kiev, and Kiev sent Russian painters to the West. There seemed at this time to be no barrier between East and West. Nothing could be more promising than such a beginning; but the course of Russian history was not destined to run smooth. In the middle of the eleventh century, the foundations of a durable barrier between Russia and Western Europe were laid. This was brought about by the schism of the Eastern and Western Churches. The schism arose out of the immemorial rivalry between the Greeks and the Latins, a rivalry which ever since then has continued to exist between Rome and Byzantium. The Slavs, whom the matter did not concern, and who were naturally tolerant, were the victims of a racial hatred and a rivalry wholly alien to them. It may seem unnecessary to dwell upon what some may regard as an ancient and trivial ecclesiastical dispute. But, in its effects and in its results, this “Querelle de Moine,” as Leo X said when he heard of Luther’s action, was as momentous for the East as the Reformation was for the West. Sir Charles Eliot says the schism of the Churches ranks in importance with the foundation of Constantinople and the Coronation of Charlemagne as one of the turning points in the relations of West and East. He says that for the East it was of doleful import, since it prevented the two great divisions from combining against the common enemy, the Turk. It was of still more doleful import for Russia, for the schism erected a barrier, which soon became formidable, between it and the civilizing influences of Western Europe.

But in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the existence of this growing barrier was not yet perceptible. The eleventh and twelfth centuries in Russia were an age of Sagas and “Byliny,” already clearly stamped with the democratic character and ideal that is at the root of all Russian literature, and which offer so sharp a contrast to Greek and Western ideals. In the Russian Sagas, the most popular hero is the peasant’s son, who is despised and rejected, but at the critical moment displays superhuman strength and saves his country from the enemy; and in return for his services is allowed to drink his fill for three years in a tavern.

But by far the most interesting remains of the literature of Kiev which have reached posterity are the *Chronicle of Kiev*, often called the *Chronicle of Nestor*, finished at the beginning of the twelfth century, and the *Story of the Raid of Prince Igor*. The *Chronicle of Kiev*, written in a cloister, rich in that epic detail and democratic quality that characterize the Sagas, is the basis of all later chronicles dealing with the early history of Russia. *The Story of the Raid of Prince Igor*, which also belongs to the twelfth century, a prose epic, is not only one of the most remarkable memorials of the ancient written language of Russia; but by virtue of its originality, its historical truth, its vividness, it holds a unique place in the literary history of Europe, and offers an interesting contrast to the *Chanson de Roland*.

The Story of the Raid of Igor tells of an expedition made in the year 1185 against the Polovtsy, a tribe of nomads, by Igor the son of Sviatoslav, Prince of Novgorod, together with other Princes. The story tells how the Princes set out and raid the enemy’s country; how, successful at first, they are attacked by overwhelming numbers and defeated; how Igor is taken prisoner; and how in the end he escapes and returns home. The story is written in rhythmical prose, with passages where the rhythm has a more strongly accentuated quality as of unrhymed verse. All the incidents recorded in the epic agree in every respect with the narrative of the same events which is to be found in the *Chronicle of Kiev*. It is only the manner of presenting them which is different. What gives the epic a unique interest is that the author must indubitably have belonged to the militia of Sviatoslav, Grand Duke of Kiev; and, if he was not an eye-witness of the events he describes with such wealth of detail, his knowledge was at any rate first-hand and intimate.

But the epic is as remarkable for the quality of its style as it is for the historical interest of its subject-matter. It plunges, after a short introduction, *in medias res*, and the narrative is concentrated on the dramatic moments which give rise to the expression of lyrical feeling, pathos and description – such as the battle, the defeat, the ominous dream of the Grand Duke, and the lament of the wife of Igor on the walls of Putivl —

“I will fly” – she says —
“Like the cuckoo down the Don;
I will wet my beaver sleeve
In the river Kayala;
I will wash the bleeding wounds of the Prince,
The wounds of his strong body.”

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“O Wind, little wind,
Why, Sir,
Why do you blow so fiercely?
Why, on your light wings
Do you blow the arrows of the robbers against my husband’s warriors?
Is it not enough for you to blow high beneath the clouds,
To rock the ships on the blue sea?
Why, Sir, have you scattered my joy on the grassy plain?”

Throughout the poem, Nature plays an active part in the events. When Igor is defeated, the grasses bend with pity and the trees are bowed to the earth with grief. When Igor escapes, he talks with the river Don as he fords it, and when the bandits follow him, the woodpeckers tell them the way with their tapping. The poem, which contains much lamentation over the quarrels of the Princes and the injury ensuing from them to the Russian people, ends in the major key. Igor is restored to his native soil, he goes to Kiev to give thanks in the Church, and the people acclaim the old Princes and then the young Princes with song.

A transcript of the poem, made probably at the end of the fourteenth century, was first discovered in 1795 by Count Musin-Pushkin, and first published in 1800, when it made the same kind of impression as the publication of the *Songs of Ossian*. It was not, however, open to Dr. Johnson’s objection – “Show me the originals” – for the fourteenth century transcript of the original then existed and was inspected and considered unmistakably genuine by Karamzin and others, but was unfortunately burnt in the fire of Moscow.¹ The poem has been translated into English, French and German, and has given rise to a whole literature of commentaries.

Up to the twelfth century, Russian life was concentrated in the splendid and prosperous centre of Kiev; but in the thirteenth century came a crushing blow which was destined to set back the clock of Russian culture for three hundred years, namely, the Tartar invasion. Kiev was destroyed in 1240. After this, the South was abandoned; Lithuania and Poland became entirely separated from the East; the Eastern principalities centred round Moscow; the Metropolitan of Kiev transferred his see to Moscow in 1328; and by the fourteenth century Moscow had taken the place of Kiev, and had become the kernel of Russian life and culture. Russia under the dominion of the Tartar yoke was intellectually stagnant. The Church alone retained its independence, and when Constantinople fell, Moscow declared itself to be the third and last Rome: but the independence of the Church, although it kept national feeling alive under the Tartar yoke, made for stagnation rather than progress, and the barrier between Russia and the culture of the West was now solid and visible.

From the fourteenth century until the beginning of the nineteenth century, Russian literature, instead of being a panorama of various and equally splendid periods of production, such as the

¹ Another copy of it was found in 1864 amongst the papers of Catherine I. Pushkin left a remarkable analysis of the epic.

Elizabethan epoch, the Jacobean epoch, and the Georgian epoch, or, as in France, the Renaissance, the *Grand Siècle*, and the philosophic era of the eighteenth century, has nothing to show at all to the outward world; for during all this time the soil from which it was to grow was merely being prepared, and gradually, with difficulty and delay, gaining access to such influences as would make any growth possible. All that is important, as far as literature is concerned, in this period, are those events and factors which had the effect of making breaches in the wall which shut Russia off from the rest of Europe; in letting in that light which was necessary for any literary plants to grow, and in removing those obstacles which prevented Russia from enjoying her rightful heritage among the rest of her sister European nations: a heritage which she had well employed in earlier days, and which she had lost for a time owing to the barbarian invasion.

The first event which made a breach in the wall was the marriage of Ivan III, Tsar of Moscow, to Sophia Palæologa, the niece of the last of the Byzantine Emperors. She brought with her Italian architects and other foreigners, and the work of Peter the Great, of opening a window in Russia on to Europe, was begun.

The first printing press was established in Moscow during the reign of Ivan the Terrible, and the first book was printed in 1564. But literature was still under the direct control of the Church, and the Church looked upon all innovations and all foreign learning with the deepest mistrust. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Peter the Great had a strange forerunner in the shape of that enigmatic historical personage, the false Demetrius, who claimed to be the murdered son of Ivan the Terrible, and who, in spite of his western ideas, Polish manners, and Latin culture, succeeded in occupying the throne of Moscow for a year. His ideal was one of progress; but he came too soon, and paid for his prematurity with his life.

But it was from Kiev and Poland that the fruitful winds of enlightenment were next to blow. Kiev, re-risen from its ruins and recovered from its long slumber, became a centre of learning, and possessed a college whose curriculum was modelled on the Jesuit schools; and although Moscow looked upon Kiev with mistrust, an imperative demand for schools arose in Moscow. In the meantime a religious question had arisen fraught with consequences for Russia: namely that of the revision of the Liturgical books, into the text of which, after continuous copying and recopying, errors had crept. The demand for revision met with great opposition, and ended ultimately in producing a great schism in the Russian Church, which has never been healed. But, with the exception of the Little Russians, there was no one at Moscow capable of preparing texts for printing or of conducting schools. The demand for schools and the decision to revise the texts were simultaneous. The revision was carried out between 1653-7, and a migration of Kiev scholars to Moscow came about at the same time. In 1665 Latin was taught in Moscow by Simeon Polotsky, who was the first Russian verse-maker. It is impossible to call him a poet; he wrote what was called syllabic verse: the number of syllables taking the place of rhythm. As a pioneer of culture, he deserves fame; but in the interest of literature, it was a misfortune that his tradition was followed until the middle of the eighteenth century.

In the latter half of the seventeenth century, another influence besides that of Kiev and Poland made itself felt. A fresh breach in the wall came from another quarter. The German suburb in Moscow in the seventeenth century, called the *Sloboda*, became a centre of European culture. Here dwelt the foreign officers and soldiers, capitalists and artisans, who brought with them the technical skill and the culture of Western Europe. It was here that the Russian stage was born. The Protestant pastor of the *Sloboda*, Gregory, was commanded to write a comedy by the Tsar Alexis, in 1672, on the occasion of the birth of the Tsarevitch. A theatre was built in the village of Preobrazhenskoe (Transfiguration), and a play on the subject of Esther and Ahasuerus was produced there. It was here also in 1674 that the ballet was introduced. A regular company was formed; several plays translated from the German were produced, and the first original play written in Russia was *The Prodigal Son*, by Simeon Polotsky.

Thus, at the end of the seventeenth century, Russia was ready for any one who should be able to give a decisive blow to the now crumbling wall between herself and the West. For, by the end of

the seventeenth century, Russia, after having been centralized in Moscow by Ivan III, and enlarged by Ivan IV, had thrown off the Tartar yoke. She had passed through a period of intestine strife, trouble, anarchy, and pretenders, not unlike the Wars of the Roses; she had fought Poland throughout the whole of the seventeenth century, from her darkest hour of anarchy, when the Poles occupied Moscow. It was then that Russia had arisen, expelled the invaders, reasserted her nationality and her independence, and finally emerged out of all these vicissitudes, the great Slavonic state; while Poland, Russia's superior in culture and civilization, had sunk into the position of a dependency.

The man whom the epoch needed was forthcoming. His name was Peter. He carried on the work which had been begun, but in quite an original manner, and gave it a different character. He not only made a breach in the wall, but he forced on his stubborn and conservative subjects the habits and customs of the West. He revolutionized the government and the Church, and turned the whole country upside down with his explosive genius. He abolished the Russian Patriarchate, and crushed the power of the Church once and for all, by making it entirely depend on the State, as it still does. He simplified the Russian script and the written language; he caused to be made innumerable translations of foreign works on history, geography, and jurisprudence. He founded the first Russian newspaper. But Peter the Great did not try to draw Russia into an alien path; he urged his country with whip, kick, and spur to regain its due place, which it had lost by lagging behind, on the path it was naturally following. Peter the Great's reforms, his manifold and superhuman activity, produced no immediate fruits in literature. How could it? To blame him for this would be like blaming a gardener for not producing new roses at a time when he was relaying the garden. He was completely successful in opening a window on to Europe, through which Western influence could stream into Russia. This was not slow in coming about; and the foreign influence from the end of the reign of Peter the Great onwards divided directly into two different currents: the French and the German. The chief representatives of the German influence in the eighteenth century were Tatishchev, the founder of Russian history, and Michael Lomonosov.

Michael Lomonosov (1714-1765), a man with an incredibly wide intellectual range, was a mathematician, a chemist, an astronomer, a political economist, a historian, an electrician, a geologist, a grammarian and a poet. The son of a peasant, after an education acquired painfully in the greatest privation, he studied at Marburg and Freiburg. He was the Peter the Great of the Russian language; he scratched off the crust of foreign barbarisms, and still more by his example than his precepts – which were pedantic – he displayed it in its native purity, and left it as an instrument ready tuned for a great player. He fought for knowledge, and did all he could to further the founding of the University of Moscow, which was done in 1755 by the Empress Elizabeth. This last event is one of the most important landmarks in the history of Russian culture.

The foremost representative of French influence was Prince Kantemir (1708-44), who wrote the first Russian literary verse – satires – in the pseudo-classic French manner, modelled on Boileau. But by far the most abundant source of French ideas in Russia during the eighteenth century was Catherine II, the German Princess. During Catherine's reign, French influence was predominant in Russia. The Empress was the friend of Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Diderot. Diderot came to St. Petersburg, and the Russian military schools were flooded with French teachers. Voltaire and Rousseau were the fashion, and cultured society was platonically enamoured of the *Rights of Man*. Catherine herself, besides being a great ruler and diplomatist, was a large-minded philosopher, an elegant and witty writer. But the French Revolution had a damping effect on all liberal enthusiasm, for the one thing an autocrat, however enlightened, finds difficulty in understanding, is a revolution.

This change of point of view proved disastrous for the writer of what is the most thoughtful book of the age: namely Radishchev, an official who wrote a book in twenty-five chapters called *A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*. Radishchev gave a simple and true account of the effects of serfdom, a series of pictures drawn without exaggeration, showing the appalling evils of the system, and appealing to the conscience of the slave-owners; the book contained also a condemnation of the

Censorship. It appeared in 1790, with the permission of the police. It was too late for the times; for in 1790 the events in France were making all the rulers of Europe pensive. Radishchev was accused of being a rebel, and was condemned to death. The sentence was commuted to one of banishment to Eastern Siberia. He was pardoned by the Emperor Paul, and reinstated by the Emperor Alexander; but he ultimately committed suicide on being threatened in jest with exile once more. Until 1905 it was very difficult to get a copy of this book. Thus Radishchev stands out as the martyr of Russian literature; the first writer to suffer for expressing opinions at the wrong moment: opinions which had they been stated in this case twenty years sooner would have coincided with those published by the Empress herself.

Catherine's reign, which left behind it many splendid results, and had the effect of bestowing European culture on Russia, produced hardly a single poet or prose-writer whose work can be read with pleasure to-day, although a great importance was attached to the writing of verse. There were poets in profusion, especially writers of Odes, the best known of whom was Derzhavin (1743-1816), a brilliant master of the pseudo-classical, in whose work, in spite of its antiquated convention, elements of real poetical beauty are to be found, which entitle him to be called the first Russian poet. But so far no national literature had been produced. French was the language of the cultured classes. Literature had become an artificial plaything, to be played with according to French rules; but the Russian language was waiting there, a language which possessed, as Lomonosov said, "the vivacity of French, the strength of German, the softness of Italian, the richness and powerful conciseness of Greek and Latin" – waiting for some one who should have the desire and the power to use it.

CHAPTER II

THE NEW AGE – PUSHKIN

The value of Russian literature, its peculiar and unique message to the world, would not be sensibly diminished, had everything it produced from the twelfth to the beginning of the nineteenth century perished, with the exception of *The Raid of Prince Igor*. With the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the accession of Alexander I, the New Age began, and the real dawn of Russian literature broke. It was soon to be followed by a glorious sunrise. The literature which sprang up now and later, was profoundly affected by public events; and public events during this epoch were intimately linked with the events which were happening in Western Europe. It was the epoch of the Napoleonic wars, and Russia played a vital part in that drama. Public opinion, after enthusiasm had been roused by the deeds of Suvorov, was exasperated and humiliated by Napoleon's subsequent victories over Russian arms. But when Napoleon invaded Russia in 1812, a wave of patriotism swept over the country, and the struggle resulted in an increased sense of unity and nationality. Russia emerged stronger and more solid from the struggle. As far as foreign affairs were concerned, the Emperor Alexander I – on whom everything depended – played his national part well, and he fitly embodied the patriotic movement of the day. At the beginning of his reign he raised great hopes of internal reform which were never fulfilled. He was a dreamer of dreams born out of his due time; a pupil of La Harpe, the Swiss Jacobin, who instilled into him aspirations towards liberty, truth and humanity, which throughout remained his ideals, but which were too vague to lead to anything practical or definite. His reign was thus a series of more or less undefined and fitful struggles to put the crooked straight. He desired to give Russia a constitution, but the attempts he made to do so proved fruitless; and towards the end of his life he is said to have been considerably influenced by Metternich. It is at any rate a fact that during these years reaction once more triumphed.

Nevertheless windows had been opened which could not be shut, and the light which had streamed in produced some remarkable fruits.

When Alexander I came to the throne, the immediate effect of his accession was the un gagging of literature, and the first writer of importance to take advantage of this new state of things was Karamzin (1726-1826). In 1802 he started a new review called the *Messenger of Europe*. This was not his *début*. In the reign of Catherine, Karamzin had been brought to Moscow from the provinces, and initiated into German and English literature. In 1789-90 he travelled abroad and visited Switzerland, London and Paris. On his return, he published his impressions in the shape of "Letters of a Russian Traveller" in the *Moscow Journal*, which he founded himself. His ideals were republican; he was an enthusiastic admirer of England and the Swiss, and the reforms of Peter the Great. But his importance in Russian literature lies in his being the first Russian to write unstudied, simple and natural prose, Russian as spoken. He published two sentimental stories in his *Journal*, but the reign of Catherine II which now came to an end (1796) was followed by a period of unmitigated censorship, which lasted throughout the reign of the Emperor Paul, until Alexander I came to the throne. The new review which Karamzin then started differed radically from all preceding Russian reviews in that it dealt with politics and made *belles lettres* and criticism a permanent feature. As soon as Karamzin had put this review on a firm basis, he devoted himself to historical research, and the fruit of his work in this field was his *History of the Russian Dominion*, in twelve volumes; eight published in 1816, the rest in 1821-1826. The Russian language was, as has been said, like an instrument waiting for a great player to play on it, and to make use of all its possibilities. Karamzin accomplished this, in the domain of prose. He spoke to the Russian heart by speaking Russian, pure and unmarred by stilted and alien conventionalisms.

The publication of Karamzin's history was epoch-making. In the first place, the success of the work was overwhelming. It was the first time in Russian history that a prose work had enjoyed so immense a success. Not only were the undreamed-of riches of the Russian language revealed to the Russians in the style, but the subject-matter came as a surprise. Karamzin, as Pushkin put it, revealed Russia to the Russians, just as Columbus discovered America. He made the dry bones of history live, he wrote a great and glowing prose epic. His influence on his contemporaries was enormous. His work received at once the consecration of a classic, and it inspired Pushkin with his most important if not his finest achievement in dramatic verse (*Boris Godunov*).

The first Russian poet of national importance belongs likewise to this epoch, namely Krylov (1769²-1844), although he had written a great deal for the stage in the preceding reigns, and continued to write for a long time after the death of Alexander I. Krylov is also a Russian classic, of quite a different kind. The son of an officer of the line, he started by being a clerk in the provincial magistrature. Many of his plays were produced with success, though none of them had any durable qualities. But it was not until 1805 that he found his vocation which was to write fables. The first of these were published in 1806 in the *Moscow Journal*; from that time onward he went on writing fables until he died in 1844.

His early fables were translations from La Fontaine. They imitate La Fontaine's free versification and they are written in iambs of varying length. They were at once successful, and he continued to translate fables from the French, or to adapt from Æsop or other sources. But as time went on, he began to invent fables of his own; and out of the two hundred fables which he left at his death, forty only are inspired by La Fontaine and seven suggested by Æsop: the remainder are original. Krylov's translations of La Fontaine are not so much translations as re-creations. He takes the same subject, and although often following the original in every single incident, he thinks out each *motif* for himself and re-creates it, so that his translations have the same personal stamp and the same originality as his own inventions.

This is true even when the original is a masterpiece of the highest order, such as La Fontaine's *Deux Pigeons*. You would think the opening lines —

“Deux pigeons s'amoient d'amour tendre,
L'un d'eux s'ennuyant au logis
Fut assez fou pour entreprendre
Un voyage en lointain pays” —

were untranslatable; that nothing could be subtracted from them, and that still less could anything be added; one ray the more, one shade the less, you would think, would certainly impair their nameless grace. But what does Krylov do? He re-creates the situation, expanding La Fontaine's first line into six lines, makes it his own, and stamps on it the impress of his personality and his nationality. Here is a literal translation of the Russian, in rhyme. (I am not ambitiously trying a third English version.)

“Two pigeons lived like sons born of one mother.
Neither would eat nor drink without the other;
Where you see one, the other's surely near,
And every joy they halved and every tear;
They never noticed how the time flew by,
They sighed, but it was not a weary sigh.”

² Not 1763, as generally stated in his biographies.

This gives the sense of Krylov's poem word for word, except for what is the most important touch of all in the last line. The trouble is that Krylov has written six lines which are as untranslatable as La Fontaine's four; and he has made them as profoundly Russian as La Fontaine's are French. Nothing could be more Russian than the last line, which it is impossible to translate; because it should run —

“They were sometimes sad, but they never felt *ennui*” —

literally, “it was never *boring* to them.” The difficulty is that the word for *boring* in Russian, *skuchno*, which occurs with the utmost felicity in contradistinction to *sad*, *grustno*, cannot be rendered in English in its poetical simplicity. There are no six lines more tender, musical, wistful, and subtly poetical in the whole of Russian literature.

Krylov's fables, like La Fontaine's, deal with animals, birds, fishes and men; the Russian peasant plays a large part in them; often they are satirical; nearly always they are bubbling with humour. A writer of fables is essentially a satirist, whose aim it is sometimes to convey pregnant sense, keen mockery or scathing criticism in a veiled manner, sometimes merely to laugh at human foibles, or to express wisdom in the form of wit, yet whose aim it always is to amuse. But Krylov, though a satirist, succeeded in remaining a poet. It has been said that his images are conventional and outworn – that is to say, he uses the machinery of Zephyrs, Nymphs, Gods and Demigods, – and that his conceptions are antiquated. But what splendid use he makes of this machinery! When he speaks of a Zephyr you feel it is a Zephyr blowing, for instance, as when the ailing cornflower whispers to the breeze. Sometimes by the mere sound of his verse he conveys a picture, and more than a picture, as in the Fable of the Eagle and the Mole, in the first lines of which he makes you see and hear the eagle and his mate sweeping to the dreaming wood, and swooping down on to the oak-tree. Or again, in another fable, the Eagle and the Spider, he gives in a few words the sense of height and space, as if you were looking down from a balloon, when the eagle, soaring over the mountains of the Caucasus, sees the end of the earth, the rivers meandering in the plains, the woods, the meadows in all their spring glory, and the angry Caspian Sea, darkling like the wing of a raven in the distance. But his greatest triumph, in this respect, is the fable of the Ass and the Nightingale, in which the verse echoes the very trills of the nightingale, and renders the stillness and the delighted awe of the listeners, – the lovers and the shepherd. Again a convention, if you like, but what a felicitous convention!

The fables are discursive like La Fontaine's, and not brief like Æsop's; but like La Fontaine, Krylov has the gift of summing up a situation, of scoring a sharp dramatic effect by the sudden evocation of a whole picture in a terse phrase: as, for instance, in the fable of the Peasants and the River: the peasants go to complain to the river of the conduct of the streams which are continually overflowing and destroying their goods, but when they reach the river, they see half their goods floating on it. “They looked at each other, and shaking their heads,” says Krylov, “went home.” The two words “went home” in Russian (*poshli domoi*) express their hopelessness more than pages of rhetoric. This is just one of those terse effects such as La Fontaine delights in.

Krylov in his youth lived much among the poor, and his language is peculiarly native, racy, nervous, and near to the soil. It is the language of the people and of the peasants, and it abounds in humorous turns. He is, moreover, always dramatic, and his fables are for this reason most effective when read aloud or recited. He is dramatic not only in that part of the fable which is narrative, but in the prologue, epilogue, or moral – the author's commentary; he adapts himself to the tone of every separate fable, and becomes himself one of the *dramatis personæ*. Sometimes his fables deal with political events – the French Revolution, Napoleon's invasion of Russia, the Congress of Vienna; the education of Alexander I by La Harpe, in the well-known fable of the Lion who sends his son to be educated by the Eagle, of whom he consequently learns how to make nests. Sometimes they deal with internal evils and abuses: the administration of justice, in fables such as that of the peasant who brings a case against the sheep and is found guilty by the fox; the censorship is aimed at in the fable

of the nightingale bidden to sing in the cat's claws; the futility of bureaucratic regulations in the fable of the sheep who are devoured by their superfluous watchdogs, or in that of the sheep who are told solemnly and pompously to drag any offending wolf before the nearest magistrate; or, again, in that of the high dignitary who is admitted immediately into paradise because on earth he left his work to be done by his secretaries – for being obviously a fool, had he done his work himself, the result would have been disastrous to all concerned. Sometimes they deal merely with human follies and affairs, and the idiosyncrasies of men.

Krylov's fables have that special quality which only permanent classics possess of appealing to different generations, to people of every age, kind and class, for different reasons; so that children can read them simply for the story, and grown-up people for their philosophy; their style pleases the unlettered by its simplicity, and is the envy and despair of the artist in its supreme art. Pushkin calls him "le plus national et le plus populaire de nos poètes" (this was true in Pushkin's day), and said his fables were read by men of letters, merchants, men of the world, servants and children. His work bears the stamp of ageless modernity just as *The Pilgrim's Progress* or Cicero's letters seem modern. It also has the peculiarly Russian quality of unexaggerated realism. He sees life as it is, and writes down what he sees. It is true that although his style is finished and polished, he only at times reaches the high-water mark of what can be done with the Russian language: his style, always idiomatic, pregnant and natural, is sometimes heavy, and even clumsy; but then he never sets out to be anything more than a fabulist. In this he is supremely successful, and since at the same time he gives us snatches of exquisite poetry, the greater the praise to him. But, when all is said and done, Krylov has the talisman which defies criticism, baffles analysis, and defeats time: namely, charm. His fables achieved an instantaneous popularity, which has never diminished until to-day.

Internal political events proved the next factor in Russian literature; a factor out of which the so-called romantic movement was to grow.

During the Napoleonic wars a great many Russian officers had lived abroad. They came back to Russia after the Congress of Vienna in 1815, teeming with new ideas and new ideals. They took life seriously, and were called by Pushkin the Puritans of the North. Their aim was culture and the public welfare. They were not revolutionaries; on the contrary, they were anxious to co-operate with the Government. They formed for their purpose a society, in imitation of the German *Tugendbund*, called *The Society of Welfare*: its aims were philanthropic, educational, and economic. It consisted chiefly of officers of the Guard, and its headquarters were at St. Petersburg. All this was known and approved of by the Emperor. But when the Government became reactionary, this peaceful progressive movement changed its character. The Society of Welfare was closed in 1821, and its place was taken by two new societies, which, instead of being political, were social and revolutionary. The success of the revolutionary movements in Spain and in Italy encouraged these societies to follow their example.

The death of Alexander I in 1825 forced them to immediate action. The shape it took was the "Decembrist" rising. Constantine, the Emperor's brother, renounced his claim to the throne, and was succeeded by his brother Nicholas. December 14 (O.S.) was fixed for the day on which the Emperor should receive the oath of allegiance of his troops. An organized insurrection took place, which was confined to certain regiments. The Emperor was supported by the majority of the Guards regiments, and the people showed no signs of supporting the rising, which was at once suppressed.

One hundred and twenty-five of the conspirators were condemned. Five of them were hanged, and among them the poet Ryleev (1795-1826). But although the political results of the movement were nil, the effect of the movement on literature was far-reaching. Philosophy took the place of politics, and liberalism was diverted into the channel of romanticism; but out of this romantic movement came the springtide of Russian poetry, in which, for the first time, the soul of the Russian people found adequate expression. And the very fact that politics were excluded from the movement proved, in one sense, a boon to literature: for it gave Russian men of genius the chance to be writers, artists and poets, and prevented them from exhausting their whole energy in being inefficient

politicians or unsuccessful revolutionaries. I will dwell on the drawbacks, on the dark side of the medal, presently.

As far as the actual Decembrist movement is concerned, its concrete and direct legacy to literature consists in the work of Ryleev, and its indirect legacy in the most famous comedy of the Russian stage, *Gore ot Uma*, “The Misfortune of being Clever,” by Griboyedov (1795-1829).

Ryleev’s life was cut short before his poetical powers had come to maturity. It is idle to speculate what he might have achieved had he lived longer. The work which he left is notable for its pessimism, but still suffers from the old rhetorical conventions of the eighteenth century and the imitation of French models; moreover he looked on literature as a matter of secondary importance. “I am not a poet,” he said, “I am a citizen.” In spite of this, every now and then there are flashes of intense poetical inspiration in his work; and he struck one or two powerful chords – for instance, in his stanzas on the vision of enslaved Russia, which have a tense strength and fire that remind one of Emily Brontë. He was a poet as well as a citizen, but even had he lived to a prosperous old age and achieved artistic perfection in his work, he could never have won a brighter aureole than that which his death gained him. The poems of his last days in prison breathe a spirit of religious humility, and he died forgiving and praying for his enemies. His name shines in Russian history and Russian literature, as that of a martyr to a high ideal.

Griboyedov, the author of *Gore ot Uma*, a writer of a very different order, although not a Decembrist himself, is a product of that period. His comedy still remains the unsurpassed masterpiece of Russian comedy, and can be compared with Beaumarchais’ *Figaro* and Sheridan’s *School for Scandal*.

Griboyedov was a Foreign Office official, and he was murdered when Minister Plenipotentiary at Teheran, on January 30, 1829. He conceived the plot of his play in 1816, and read aloud some scenes in St. Petersburg in 1823-24. They caused a sensation in literary circles, and the play began to circulate rapidly in MSS. Two fragments of the drama were published in one of the almanacs, which then took the place of literary reviews. But beyond this, Griboyedov could neither get his play printed nor acted. Thousands of copies circulated in MSS., but the play was not produced on the stage until 1831, and then much mutilated; and it was not printed until 1833.

Gore ot Uma is written in verse, in iambs of varying length, like Krylov’s fables. The unities are preserved. The action takes place in one day and in the same house – that of Famusov, an elderly gentleman of the Moscow upper class holding a Government appointment. He is a widower and has one daughter, Sophia, whose sensibility is greater than her sense; and the play opens on a scene where the father discovers her talking to his secretary, Molchalin, and says he will stand no nonsense. Presently, the friend of Sophia’s childhood, Chatsky, arrives after a three years’ absence abroad; Chatsky is a young man of independent ideas whose misfortune it is to be clever. He notices that Sophia receives him coldly, and later on he perceives that she is in love with Molchalin, – a wonderfully drawn type, the perfect climber, time-server and place-seeker, and the incarnation of convention, – who does not care a rap for Sophia. Chatsky declaims to Famusov his contempt for modern Moscow, for the slavish worship by society of all that is foreign, for its idolatry of fashion and official rank, its hollowness and its convention. Famusov, the incarnation of respectable conventionality, does not understand one word of what he is saying.

At an evening party given at Famusov’s house, Chatsky is determined to find out whom Sophia loves. He decides it is Molchalin, and lets fall a few biting sarcasms about him to Sophia; and Sophia, to pay him back for his sarcasm, lets it be understood by one of the guests that he is mad. The half-spoken hint spreads like lightning; and the spreading of the news is depicted in a series of inimitable scenes. Chatsky enters while the subject is being discussed, and delivers a long tirade on the folly of Moscow society, which only confirms the suspicions of the guests; and he finds when he gets to the end of his speech that he is speaking to an empty room.

In the fourth act we see the guests leaving the house after the party. Chatsky is waiting for his carriage. Sophia appears on the staircase and calls Molchalin. Chatsky, hearing her voice, hides behind a pillar. Liza, Sophia's maid, comes to fetch Molchalin, and knocks at his door. Molchalin comes out, and not knowing that Sophia or Chatsky are within hearing, makes love to Liza and tells her that he only loves Sophia out of duty. Then Sophia appears, having heard everything. Molchalin falls on his knees to her: she is quite inexorable. Chatsky comes forward and begins to speak his mind – when all is interrupted by the arrival of Famusov, who speaks his. Chatsky shakes the dust of the house and of Moscow off his feet, and Sophia is left without Chatsky and without Molchalin.

The *Gore ot Uma* is a masterpiece of satire rather than a masterpiece of dramatic comedy. That is to say that, as a satire of the Moscow society of the day and of the society of yesterday, and of to-morrow, it is immortal, and forms a complete work: but as a comedy it does not. Almost every scene separately is perfect in itself, but dramatically it does not group itself round one central idea or one mainspring of action. Judged from the point of view of dramatic propriety, the behaviour of the hero is wildly improbable throughout; there is no reason for the spectator to think he should be in love with Sophia; if he is, there is no reason for him to behave as he does; if a man behaved like that, declaiming at an evening party long speeches on the decay of the times, the most frivolous of societies would be justified in thinking him mad.

Pushkin hit on the weak point of the play as a play when he wrote: “In *The Misfortune of being Clever* the question arises, Who is clever? and the answer is Griboyedov. Chatsky is an honourable young man who has lived for a long time with a clever man (that is to say with Griboyedov), and learnt his clever sarcasms; but to whom does he say them? To Famusov, to the old ladies at the party. This is unforgivable, because the first sign of a clever man is to know at once whom he is dealing with.”

But what makes the work a masterpiece is the naturalness of the characters, the dialogue, the comedy of the scenes which represent Moscow society. It is extraordinary that on so small a scale, in four short acts, Griboyedov should have succeeded in giving so complete a picture of Moscow society, and should have given the dialogue, in spite of its being in verse, the stamp of conversational familiarity. The portraits are all full-length portraits, and when the play is produced now, the rendering of each part raises as much discussion in Russia as a revival of one of Sheridan's comedies in England.

As for the style, nearly three-quarters of the play has passed into the Russian language. It is forcible, concise, bitingly sarcastic, it is as neat and dry as W. S. Gilbert, as elegant as La Fontaine, as clear as an icicle, and as clean as the thrust of a sword. But perhaps the crowning merit of this immortal satire is its originality. It is a product of Russian life and Russian genius, and as yet it is without a rival.

Outside the current of politics and political aspirations, there appeared during this same epoch a poet who exercised a considerable influence over Russian literature, and who devoted himself exclusively to poetry. This was Basil Zhukovsky (1783-1852). He opened the door of Russian literature on the fields of German and English poetry. The first poem he published in 1802 was a translation of Gray's *Elegy*; this, and an imitation of Bürger's *Leonore*, which affected all Slav literatures, brought him fame. Later, he translated Schiller's *Maid of Orleans*, his ballads, some of the lyrics of Uhland, Goethe, Hebbel, and a great quantity of other foreign poems. His translations were faithful, but in spite of this he gave them the stamp of his own dreamy personality. He was made tutor to the Tsarevitch Alexander – afterwards Alexander II, – and for a time his production ceased; but when this task was finished, he braced himself in his old age to translate *The Odyssey*, and this translation appeared in 1848-50. In this work he obeyed the first great law of translation, “Thou shalt not turn a good poem into a bad one.” He produced a beautiful work; but he also did what all other translators of Homer have done; he took the Homer out and left the Zhukovsky, and with it something sentimental, elegiac, and didactic.

Zhukovsky's greatest service to Russian literature consisted in his exploding the superstition that the literature of France was the only literature that counted, and introducing literary Russia to

the poets of England and Germany rather than of France. But apart from this, he is the first and best translator in European literature, for what Krylov did with some of La Fontaine's fables, he did for all the literature he touched – he re-created it in Russian, and made it his own. In his translation of Gray's *Elegy*, for instance, he not only translates the poet's meaning into musical verse, but he conveys the intangible atmosphere of dreamy landscape, and the poignant accent which makes that poem the natural language of grief. It is characteristic of him that, thirty-seven years after he translated the poem, he visited Stoke Poges, re-read Gray's *Elegy* there, and made another translation, which is still more faithful than the first.

The Russian language was by this time purified from all outward excrescences, released from the bondage of convention and the pseudo-classical, open to all outside influences, and only waiting, like a ready-tuned instrument, on which Krylov and Zhukovsky had already sounded sweet notes and deep tones, and which Karamzin had proved to be a magnificent vehicle for musical and perspicuous prose, for a poet of genius to come and sound it from its lowest note to the top of its compass, for there was indeed much music and excellent voice to be plucked from it. At the appointed hour the man came. It was Pushkin. He arrived at a time when a battle of words was raging between the so-called classical and romantic schools. The pseudo-classical, with all its mythological machinery and conventional apparatus, was totally alien to Russia, and a direct and slavish imitation of the French. On the other hand, the utmost confusion reigned as to what constituted romanticism. To each single writer it meant a different thing: "Enfoncez Racine," and the unities, in one case; or ghosts, ballads, legends, local colour in another; or the defiance of morality and society in another. Zhukovsky, in introducing German romanticism into Russia, paved the way for its death, and for the death of all exotic fashions and models; for he paved the way for Pushkin to render the whole quarrel obsolete by creating models of his own and by founding a national literature.

Pushkin was born on May 26, 1799, at Moscow. He was of ancient lineage, and inherited African negro blood on his mother's side, his mother's grandmother being the daughter of Peter the Great's negro, Hannibal. Until he was nine years old, he did not show signs of any unusual precocity; but from then onwards he was seized with a passion for reading which lasted all his life. He read Plutarch's *Lives*, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in a translation. He then devoured all the French books he found in his father's library. Pushkin was gifted with a photographic memory, which retained what he read immediately and permanently. His first efforts at writing were in French, – comedies, which he performed himself to an audience of his sisters. He went to school in 1812 at the Lyceum of Tsarskoe Selo, a suburb of St. Petersburg. His school career was not brilliant, and his leaving certificate qualifies his achievements as mediocre, even in Russian. But during the six years he spent at the Lyceum, he continued to read voraciously. His favourite poet at this time was Voltaire. He began to write verse, first in French and then in Russian; some of it was printed in 1814 and 1815 in reviews, and in 1815 he declaimed his *Recollections of Tsarskoe Selo* in public at the Lyceum examination, in the presence of Derzhavin the poet.

The poems which he wrote at school afterwards formed part of his collected works. In these poems, consisting for the greater part of anacreontics and epistles, although they are immature, and imitative, partly of contemporary authors such as Derzhavin and Zhukovsky, and partly of the French anacreontic school of poets, such as Voltaire, Gresset and Parny, the sound of a new voice was unmistakable. Indeed, not only his contemporaries, but the foremost representatives of the Russian literature of that day, Derzhavin, Karamzin and Zhukovsky, made no mistake about it. They greeted the first notes of this new lyre with enthusiasm. Zhukovsky used to visit the boy poet at school and read out his verse to him. Derzhavin was enthusiastic over the recitation of his *Recollections of Tsarskoe Selo*. Thus fame came to Pushkin as easily as the gift of writing verse. He had lisped in numbers, and as soon as he began to speak in them, his contemporaries immediately recognized and hailed the new voice. He did not wake up and find himself famous like Byron, but he walked into the Hall of Fame as naturally as a young heir steps into his lawful inheritance. If we compare Pushkin's school-

boy poetry with Byron's *Hours of Idleness*, it is easy to understand how this came about. In the *Hours of Idleness* there is, perhaps, only one poem which would hold out hopes of serious promise; and the most discerning critics would have been justified in being careful before venturing to stake any great hopes on so slender a hint. But in Pushkin's early verse, although the subject-matter is borrowed, and the style is still irregular and careless, it is none the less obvious that it flows from the pen of the author without effort or strain; and besides this, certain coins of genuine poetry ring out, bearing the image and superscription of a new mint, the mint of Pushkin.

When the first of his poems to attract the attention of a larger audience, *Ruslan and Ludmila*, was published, in 1820, it was greeted with enthusiasm by the public; but it had already won the suffrages of that circle which counted most, that is to say, the leading men of letters of the day, who had heard it read out in MSS. For as soon as Pushkin left school and stepped into the world, he was received into the literary circle of the day on equal terms. After he had read aloud the first cantos of *Ruslan and Ludmila* at Zhukovsky's literary evenings, Zhukovsky gave him his portrait with this inscription: "To the pupil, from his defeated master"; and Batyushkov, a poet who, after having been influenced, like Pushkin, by Voltaire and Parny, had gone back to the classics, Horace and Tibullus, and had introduced the classic anacreontic school of poetry into Russia, was astonished to find a young man of the world outplaying him without any trouble on the same lyre, and exclaimed, "Oh! how well the rascal has started writing!"

The publication of *Ruslan and Ludmila* sealed Pushkin's reputation definitely, as far as the general public was concerned, although some of the professional critics treated the poem with severity. The subject of the poem was a Russian fairy-tale, and the critics blamed the poet for having recourse to what they called Russian folk-lore, which they considered to be unworthy of the poetic muse. One review complained that Pushkin's choice of subject was like introducing a bearded unkempt peasant into a drawing-room, while others blamed him for dealing with national stuff in a flippant spirit. But the curious thing is that, while the critics blamed him for his choice of subject, and his friends and the public defended him for it, quoting all sorts of precedents, the poem has absolutely nothing in common, either in its spirit, style or characterization, with native Russian folk-lore and fairy-tales. Much later on in his career, Pushkin was to show what he could do with Russian folk-lore. But *Ruslan and Ludmila*, which, as far as its form is concerned, has a certain superficial resemblance to Ariosto, is in reality the result of the French influence, under which Pushkin had been ever since his cradle, and which in this poem blazes into the sky like a rocket, and bursts into a shower of sparks, never to return again.

There is no passion in the poem and no irony, but it is young, fresh, full of sensuous, not to say sensual images, interruptions, digressions, and flippant epigrams. Pushkin wondered afterwards that nobody noticed the coldness of the poem; the truth was that the eyes of the public were dazzled by the fresh sensuous images, and their ears were taken captive by the new voice: for the importance of the poem lies in this – that the new voice which the literary pundits had already recognized in the Lyceum of Tsarskoe Selo was now speaking to the whole world, and all Russia became aware that a young man was among them "with mouth of gold and morning in his eyes." *Ruslan and Ludmila* has just the same sensuous richness, fresh music and fundamental coldness as Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*. After finishing the poem, Pushkin added a magnificent and moving Epilogue, written from the Caucasus in the year of its publication (1820); and when the second edition was published in 1828, he added a Prologue in his finest manner which tells of Russian fairy-land.

After leaving school in 1817, until 1820, Pushkin plunged into the gay life of St. Petersburg. He wanted to be a Hussar, but his father could not afford it. In default he became a Foreign Office official; but he did not take this profession seriously. He consorted with the political youth and young Liberals of the day; he scattered stinging epigrams and satirical epistles broadcast. He sympathized with the Decembrists, but took no part in their conspiracy. He would probably have ended by doing so; but, luckily for Russian literature, he was transferred in 1820 from the Foreign Office to the

Chancery of General Inzov in the South of Russia; and from 1820 to 1826 he lived first at Kishinev, then at Odessa, and finally in his own home at Pskov. This enforced banishment was of the greatest possible service to the poet; it took him away from the whirl and distractions of St. Petersburg; it prevented him from being compromised in the drama of the Decembrists; it ripened and matured his poetical genius; it provided him, since it was now that he visited the Caucasus and the Crimea for the first time, with new subject-matter.

During this period he learnt Italian and English, and came under the influence of André Chénier and Byron. André Chénier's influence is strongly felt in a series of lyrics in imitation of the classics; but these lyrics were altogether different from the anacreontics of his boyhood. Byron's influence is first manifested in a long poem *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*. It is Byronic in the temperament of the hero, who talks in the strain of the earlier Childe Harold; he is young, but feels old; tired of life, he seeks for consolation in the loneliness of nature in the Caucasus. He is taken prisoner by mountain tribesmen, and set free by a girl who drowns herself on account of her unrequited love. Pushkin said later that the poem was immature, but that there were verses in it that came from his heart. There is one element in the poem which is by no means immature, and that is the picture of the Caucasus, which is executed with much reality and simplicity. Pushkin annexed the Caucasus to Russian poetry. The Crimea inspired him with another tale, also Byronic in some respects, *The Fountain of Baghchi-Sarai*, which tells of a Tartar Khan and his Christian slave, who is murdered out of jealousy by a former favourite, herself drowned by the orders of the Khan. Here again the descriptions are amazing, and Pushkin draws out a new stop of rich and voluptuous music.

In speaking of the influence of Byron over Pushkin it is necessary to discriminate. Byron helped Pushkin to discover himself; Byron revealed to him his own powers, showed him the way out of the French garden where he had been dwelling, and acted as a guide to fresh woods and pastures new. But what Pushkin took from the new provinces to which the example of Byron led him was entirely different from what Byron sought there. Again, the methods and workmanship of the two poets were radically different. Pushkin is never imitative of Byron; but Byron opened his eyes to a new world, and indeed did for him what Chapman's *Homer* did for Keats. It frequently happens that when a poet is deeply struck by the work of another poet he feels a desire to write something himself, but something different. Thus Pushkin's mental intercourse with Byron had the effect of bracing the talent of the Russian poet and spurring him on to the conquest of new worlds.

Pushkin's six years' banishment to his own country had the effect of revealing to him the reality and seriousness of his vocation as a poet, and the range and strength of his gifts. It was during this period that besides the works already mentioned he wrote some of his finest lyrics, *The Conversation between the Bookseller and the Poet*—perhaps the most perfect of his shorter poems—it contains four lines to have written which Turgenev said he would have burnt the whole of his works—a larger poem called *The Gypsies*; his dramatic chronicle *Boris Godunov*, and the beginning of his masterpiece *Onegin*; several ballads, including *The Sage Oleg*, and an unfinished romance, the *Robber Brothers*.

Not only is the richness of his output during this period remarkable, but the variety and the high level of art maintained in all the different styles which he attempted and mastered. *The Gypsies* (1827), which was received with greater favour by the public than any of his poems, either earlier or later, is the story of a disappointed man, Aleko, who leaves the world and takes refuge with gypsies. A tragically ironical situation is the result. The anarchic nature of the Byronic misanthrope brings tragedy into the peaceful life of the people, who are lawless because they need no laws. Aleko loves and marries the gypsy Zemfira, but after a time she tires of him, and loves a young gypsy. Aleko surprises them and kills them both. Then Zemfira's father banishes him from the gypsies' camp. He, too, had been deceived. When his wife Mariula had been untrue and had left him, he had attempted no vengeance, but had brought up her daughter.

"Leave us, proud man," he says to Aleko. "We are a wild people; we have no laws, we torture not, neither do we punish; we have no use for blood or groans; we will not live with a man of blood.

Thou wast not made for the wild life. For thyself alone thou claimest licence; we are shy and good-natured; thou art evil-minded and presumptuous. Farewell, and peace be with thee!”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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