

## Russian Spiritual Poetry

### Philip Nikolayev

The tradition of Russian spiritual poetry has a living freshness and a ring to it which can be felt and heard across all its historical periods. It has not been well served by English translation, however. Present-day English-language poetry has mostly lost the basic verse techniques that are necessary for translating traditional Russian verse. The translations that are offered here aim at correcting this deficiency in a small way, and conveying, insofar as it is possible transculturally, a true flavor of some of the best in Russian Christian verse. These translations strive not only to be true to the meaning and spirit of the works, but to recreate holistically in English a total sense of the Russian originals. The translator hopes that as translated here, the poems will reveal a kinship and an intuitive continuity with the English tradition of Christian lyric from John Donne and George Herbert through William Wordsworth and Gerard Manley Hopkins. What obvious differences there are do not affect the affinity in the power or purity of spiritual sentiment expressed. The names of the six poets included in this selection are known to all poetry-loving Russians.

Mikhail (or Mikhailo) Lomonosov (1711–84) was a polymath and writer who made outstanding contributions to literature, several of the natural sciences, and education. He

was born into a peasant family and early on showed a passion for learning. At age nineteen, he walked from his village of Mishaninskaya, in Russia's far north, all the way to Moscow, where he wanted to study the sciences. He was admitted to a top academy by falsely claiming to be of a noble family and he lived on three kopecks a day, eating black bread and drinking kvass while making exemplary academic progress. He received a cutting-edge education, including a four-year stint at universities in Germany. Lomonosov discovered the atmosphere of Venus and the law of conservation of mass in chemical reactions. Russia's first great poet, he worked out the metrical system best suited to Russian verse, which remains prevalent to this day.

Gavriil (or Gavriila) Derzhavin (1743–1816), widely regarded as Russia's greatest poet before Pushkin, was a prominent statesman in the service of Catherine II. On January 8, 1815, not long before his death, Derzhavin heard Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), then aged sixteen, recite a newly composed poem at the Russian Imperial Lyceum in Tsarskoe Selo (today's town of Pushkin). The old master rose to embrace the younger poet, who, however, felt so shy and overwhelmed with emotion that he ran away. Pushkin went on to become the greatest poet who has

ever written in the Russian language. His poetry would undoubtedly have reached even greater heights, but he was killed in a duel of honor at age thirty-seven by a Frenchman who had tried to seduce his wife.

Nikolai Gumilev (1886–1921) was a poet, a traveler, a military officer, a cofounder of the Acmeist poetry movement, and for several years the husband of the poet Anna Akhmatova. After the communist revolution of 1917, Gumilev took an openly religious and anti-communist stance. In the face of the Marxist dictatorship, he crossed himself in public and openly spoke out against the regime. He was arrested by the Soviet secret police on false charges of participating in an armed monarchist conspiracy and was executed by firing squad on August 26, 1921, along with sixty other participants in the case.

Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938), Russia's and possibly the world's greatest poet of the twentieth century, was a Jew who converted to Christianity. In 1933, he wrote the so-called "Stalin Epigram," a poem protesting the dictator and his policies, which he recited privately to some of his friends. In 1934, Mandelstam was arrested and interrogated about the poem. He was exiled from Moscow and settled in Voronezh. Since it was unsafe to keep copies of his poems, his wife Nadezhda Mandelstam memorized his entire corpus and also hid some of the manuscripts in order to save them from destruction. It is thanks to her that many of the texts have been preserved. The poet was arrested again in May 1938 on trumped-up charges of counterrevolutionary activity. He was sentenced to five years in the correction camps and died of cold and hunger in Russia's Far East.

## Ode Selected from Job: Chapters 38, 39, 40, and 41

### Mikhail Lomonosov

You, man, who in your sorrow make  
Your complaints, repining against God,  
Now hearken to His wrath that spake  
To Job out of the whirlwind cloud;  
He, in whose voice the thunders drowned,  
Flashed bright in the rain, hail, and wind,  
His words rattling the firmament,  
Summoning Job to argument:

Come, muster all your strength, stand bold  
There where you are, and answer me.  
Where were you when this splendid world  
I built with laws of harmony?  
When I installed this Planet Earth  
And hosts of angels sang in chorus  
My greatness, my authority,  
Did they hail your wizardry too?

Where were you when, by my sole grace,  
stars in unnumbered myriads  
filled the enormity of space,  
seeming as tiny blinking dots,  
to eulogize my majesty;  
when the first sunrays lit the sky;  
or when the silvery, less bright  
first beams of moonlight filled the night?

Who set a limit to the ocean,  
locking its body in its shores,  
barring the waves from further motion  
whenever they reached one of those?  
Who grasped the night-engulfed abyss,  
Wiped its wet face to clear the mists?  
Wait, was it not my potent hand  
That drained the ocean from dry land?

Have you, if only once, been able  
To set the hour for dawn to burst;  
Or let rainclouds out of their stable  
When sun-parched wheat fields swooned with thirst;  
Or send a fair wind to a sail,  
That it may reach without travail?  
Or make the earth's crust heave and quake,  
The godless tribes from it to shake?

Have you, through flowing passageways,  
Traversed the depths of the blue sea,  
Numbering all the various  
Beings surpassing fantasy?  
Was it before your face the gate  
Of death, hid in a haze by fate,  
Unlocked its locks and open fell?  
Did your word seal the lips of Hell?

Do you know, mortal, how to spin  
A whirlwind raincloud round about  
To veil the sun, thicken the thin  
Transparent air, hammering out  
A bolt of lightning's fulgent flash,  
With a mountainheart-shaking crash,  
Rock by its ends the universe,  
Announcing unto man your wrath?

Is it thanks to your ken and wit  
The eagle flies to yonder heights  
That spreads his wings upon the wind  
Spying precisely from the skies  
What food hides in the crystal flow  
Of all the seas and brooks below,  
Eyeing his prey from up on high:  
Did you equip him with that quick eye?

Behold the woodland Behemoth,  
Whom I made, as I did you, too:  
It is his pleasure to tread blackthorns,  
Unharmèd, with his hefty foot.  
He's musclebound along his length,  
Go test your strength against his strength,  
But better weigh your pros and cons:  
His ribs are awesome, solid bronze!

Go pull ashore Leviathan  
With your familiar fishing rod!  
He in the middle of the ocean  
Runs swiftly, but of whose accord?  
Lavishly tiled with whale-sized scales  
As if with shields the size of whales,  
Your spear, your sword, your mallet — weeds  
Considers he, or rotten reeds.

His thudding heart a monster millstone,  
His sharp teeth set sickle to sickle,  
Care to dare go and stick your arms in?  
He, ever willing to do battle,  
Resting on rocks of pointy sharpness,  
Contemptuous of their harsh hardness,  
Considers them the softest silt  
Next to how he himself is built.

When he is charging into battle,  
The waters simmer like a soup pan,  
His throat a furnace, his scales rattle,  
His flames reflecting off the ocean,  
His eyes two ample swimming pools  
Filled to the brim with flaming coals;  
If he can scare the strong, who can  
Arise and stand against me, man?

When I was out upon my mission  
To build the world the way I would,  
Did I, dear sir, beg your permission  
For doings of such magnitude?  
When I upon the week's sixth day  
Fashioned you from a piece of clay,  
Why did you not at the time say:  
"Give me different shape, I pray"?

Reflecting on this, mortal soul,  
Imagine your creator's might,  
And, honoring His sacred will,  
In patience learn to find respite.  
He plans everything for our best,  
Who'er is slain or laid to rest.  
Pray you may. You may not demand.  
When praying, dare not reprimand.

(Between 1743 and 1751)

# God

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## Gavriil Derzhavin

You, mystic source of endless space,  
In matter's motion dwell aglow,  
Eternal through time's ceaseless flow,  
Three-faced, yet one without a face!  
You, Spirit, ever omnipresent,  
Who have no cause that might be reasoned,  
Whose unintelligible will  
Fills to the brim this life and world,  
Envelops them, preserves, and builds:  
You, whom we call the Lord our God!

To fathom the fathomless sea,  
To sum the sands with planets' rays  
Wise men can manage, yet not to see  
Nor quantify your state or grace.  
Enlightened minds with all their might,  
Though born of your transcendent light,  
Can't know the ways of destiny:  
When thinking dares assess your grandeur,  
It vanishes into your splendor,  
Small jiffy in eternity.

Having eternity installed  
In the expanse of your own self  
And on primeval chaos called  
To swell from the eternal gulf,  
You—self-composed of your prime presence,  
Effulgent of your own fine essence,  
First dawn from whence all light was born,  
Creating with a single word  
And putting breath in your new world,  
Were, are, and will be evermore.

You, who comprise the chain of being,  
Keep it alive in all the earth,  
Who put an end to each beginning,  
Matching the gifts of death and birth,  
From whom a swarm of radiant stars  
Rises like swirls of bonfire sparks;  
Below your throne, far and away,  
In cosmic chasms almost lost,  
Suns glint like shiny motes of frost  
Upon a clear cold winter day.

Myriad heavenly bodies floating  
In immensurability,  
Pouring life-giving rays according  
To laws of your divinity,  
Those endless rows of flaming candles,  
Those lustrous domes of ruby crystals  
That perched on golden waves come borne,  
Entire luminous universes  
With hosts of incandescent ethers  
Are all to you like night to morn.

If all this mass of earth and sky,  
This universe that we can see,  
Is but a drop dropped in a sea,  
Then what, compared to you, am I?  
And if I saw not just this one  
But five score times a million  
Worlds, and if then I dared compare  
Them to you, they would seem a dot  
Tossed on an ample sea of air.  
I, too, next to you, am but naught.

Nothing!—and yet you shine within me  
With magnanimity of virtue,  
Your holy image etched upon me,  
Like the sun on a drop of water.  
Nothing!—yet, filled with breath of life,  
Moved by a spiritual strife  
And thirst, my soul flies up to you  
And, in a state of high elation  
And concentrated meditation,  
It knows: if I am, you are too!

You are!—declares the code of nature.  
Therewith my heart and mind concur  
In unison, and reassure:  
You are!—and I am naught no more.  
I, particle of your creation,  
Assigned, methinks, a noble station  
Right here, where, in this middle domain,  
You finished your corporeal creatures  
And, starting spirits with heavenly features,  
Made me a link in your great chain.

I, extreme form of matter, nexus  
Of manifest infinity,  
Am of all living things the axis,  
Sparkle of your divinity.  
Though my flesh must return to dust,  
My mind tells thunders where to blast.  
A king, a slave, a worm, a god  
Made by a wondrous artistry,  
Whence have I come? Oh mystery!  
But self-created I am not.

Life-giving source, heavenly maker,  
Soul of my soul, king of my heart!  
I'm your creation, grand creator,  
The crowning creature of your art.  
Though I'm immortal, your truth requires  
That I in mortal flesh traverse

This vale of tears, creating me  
A finite thing that must return  
And by its very death rejoin,  
Father, your immortality.

You baffle human explanation,  
Inscrutable, mysterious!  
It is beyond imagination  
Even to glimpse your shadow's course.  
If it be true that every mortal  
Must sing your praise before your portal,  
There is no keener adoration  
To honor your beatitude  
Than to stand, lost in your creation,  
Shedding tears of gratitude.

(1784)

## The Prophet

### Alexander Pushkin

When, pained with spiritual thirst,  
I trudged across a gloomy desert,  
I came upon a six-winged seraph  
Who stood before me on my path.  
With digits light as sleep he touched  
My eye pupils, and those enlarged,  
Like a she-eagle's in a fright,  
Filling up with prophetic sight.  
He touched my ears: a din rushed in  
Mixed with a ringing, a chiming din.  
I heard a heavenly vibration,  
And angels' gentle flights above us,  
And sea fish gliding in the gulfs,  
And yon far grapevine's maturation.  
And from my mouth he tore and flung

My sinful, idle, crafty tongue,  
Useless verbose appendage, and  
Inserting with a bloodstained hand  
Implanted there a wise snake's kiss—  
A venom sting—behind numb lips.  
His sword opened my chest, from whence  
My tremulous heart he plucked out,  
placing a slab of coal in flames  
within its hollow past all doubt.  
And when like carrion silently  
I lay, God's voice called out to me:  
"Prophet, arise! Behold and hear,  
And roam—for no mundane rewards—  
By land and sea, but everywhere  
Sting people in their hearts with words."



# Prayer

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## Alexander Pushkin

Monastic eremites and immaculate sisters,  
For to uplift the heart above the starry spheres,  
Strengthening it thereby for daily storm and strife,  
Have left us holy prayers enough to last the life;  
But none among them moves me to the quick quite so,  
None other sets my weary spirit so aglow  
As that the priest repeats on the sad days of Lent;  
Most on my lips, it heals my downcast sentiment:  
Lord of my days, I pray that you in mercy may  
Beleaguered slothfulness keep from my soul away,  
And vile servility's insidious furtive snake,  
And idle chatter's sad perpetual mistake.  
Lead me not, Lord my God, into temptation; rather,  
Pray make me see my sins so I don't judge my brother,  
Rekindle in my heart the blessed spirit of  
Chasteness, humility, endurance, and true love.

Vault mosaic, Ba-  
silica of San Vitale,  
Ravenna, sixth  
century.



# The Knight

## Alexander Pushkin

In the golden olden bold age  
Lived a poor and silent knight,  
Of a pale and sullen visage,  
But in spirit brave and bright.

Once he had an awesome vision  
His mind could not comprehend,  
Which impressed a deep incision  
On his heart until the end.

On a progress to Geneva  
By a roadside he espied  
By a cross the Virgin Mother  
Of our sweet Lord Jesus Christ.

As of then he lost his passion  
For the ladies of the world,  
Never with another woman  
Even spoke another word.

From then on the cold steel visor  
Never lifted from his face,  
On his neck a wooden rosary  
Of his woolen scarf took place.

Prayed to neither Son nor Father,  
Nowise to the Holy Ghost,  
Never once in all time ever,  
The odd thinker that he was.

He instead spent nights entire  
As by legend it appears  
By the effigy of Maria  
Shedding streams of silent tears.

Faith and love for Mother Mary  
So his heart supremely filled  
He wrote Ave, Mater Dei  
In his blood upon his shield.

While, to strike their foes outrageous  
In Palestine's sun-scorched planes,  
Gallant paladins courageous  
Galoped naming all their dames,

"Lumen coelum, sancta Rosa!"  
Ringing loudest came his screams;  
Mindful of the Dolorosa  
As he chased the Saracens.

On retiring to his castle,  
There he saw his final day  
When, a lone and pining vassal,  
Unconfessed he passed away;

And the moment he expired  
There a beast his soul to claim  
For the brimstone and the fire  
From the chasms of darkness came.

Quoth: this knight neglected prayer,  
Lived as if there were no Lent,  
To the Holy Mother Mary  
His romantic thoughts were bent.

Yet the most kind Blessed Mother  
Interceded for Her knight,  
And permitted him to enter  
The eternal realm of light.

## Cain's Descendants

Nikolai Gumilev

He didn't deceive us, that sad, somber spirit  
Who wears the morning star as pseudonym  
And said: "Shun not the highest gain, nor fear it:  
Taste of the fruit and you will equal Him."  
Instantly, for the youth, all roads lay open,  
And for old men, all mysteries to know,  
And to the maids, amber fruits came bespoken  
And gallant unicorns as white as snow.  
Then why do we stoop low, drained of all strength,  
Sensing that Someone has forgotten us,  
And feel the terror of that ancient loss  
When by some chance a hand picks up and joins  
Two staffs, two flagpoles, or two blades of grass  
Distinctly in the manner of a cross?

## The Eucharist

Osip Mandelstam

Lo, the ciborium, like the sun's golden sphere,  
Is soaring on the air, resplendent, ample.  
Only the Grecian tongue is fit for sounding here.  
The world between two palms: an ordinary apple.

The Liturgy's zenith moment lets July  
Sunbeams under the tall rotunda's dome,  
So we may sigh freely, outside of time,  
Of that far meadow from whence time is gone.

On goes the Eucharist like an eternal noon,  
All folk partaking, playing, singing, glowing.  
In their plain sight, the vessel of communion,  
That fount of mirth, towers, is overflowing. ✱



*Philip Nikolayev* is a poet and translator. His work has been published in *Poetry*, the *Paris Review*, and *Grand Street*. Nikolayev's collections include *Dusk Raga* (1998), *Letters from Aldenderry* (2006), and *Monkey Time* (2003), which won a Verse prize. His translations of poetry by Alexander Pushkin will be published by Littera Publishing this year. He co-edits *Fulcrum*, a serial anthology of poetry and critical writing.