

## Russia's Poetry

The Penguin Book of Russian Poetry (2015, £12.99) seeks to open up 'the world of Russian poetry to English readers for the first time'. Yet, in his insightful introduction, editor Robert Chandler acknowledges important guides, including his two Russian-American co-editors, Boris Dralyuk and Irina Mashinski, as well as Dimitri Obolensky's bilingual Penguin Book of Russian Verse, to which Chandler has turned 'many times since I first started learning Russian forty-five years ago'. Perhaps Penguin should consider a new edition of Obolensky's pioneering work, first published in the 1960s?

Meanwhile, The Penguin Book of Russian Poetry, structured around Pushkin's towering achievement, stretches back to Derzhavin and Krylov in the Eighteenth Century, features a dozen poets of the Nineteenth Century, including Tyutchev and Fet, and fifty or so from the Twentieth Century, including Tsvetaeva and Tarkovsky. Andy Croft contributes a Byronic salute to the Moscow Metro, by way of extra-Russian perspective.

Good translations grow all the more precious in the age of Google Translate. 'Translation is an art,' says Chandler, 'and there is more than one way to go about it'. His inclination is to favour translations that use metre and rhyme – or at least hint at them – when the original uses metre and rhyme. 'Form,' he believes, 'matters.'

This is a lively collection complete with informative pen portraits such as that for Maximilian Voloshin, from which we reprint excerpts. It embraces the sweep of modern Russian history, including the now somewhat neglected Soviet period, imparting something of the profundity, humanity and suffering of that experience, whilst remaining upbeat and amusing, in the best traditions of Russian art.

Tony Simpson

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### Agitating in the Library

Maximilian Voloshin (1877-1932)

Born in Kiev, Maximilian Alexandrovich Voloshin spent much of his childhood in the Crimea. He studied at Moscow University but was expelled for subversive political activities – or as he put it, 'agitating in the library'. In the early 1900s, already known as a Symbolist poet and art critic, he moved between Paris, Moscow and St Petersburg. From 1907 he spent much of his time in the Crimea, settling there in 1916. For over a

decade his large house in Koktebel, where he both wrote and painted, was a refuge for writers and artists of all political and artistic persuasions. Among his hundreds of guests were Gorky, Gumilyov, Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam and Marina Tsvetaeva. In 1924 the house became a ‘House of Creativity’ for Soviet writers, the first of the many such closed-access hotels that became a central part of the Soviet cultural world ...

... After an account of Voloshin saving a woman poet from execution, Teffi ends: ‘In Novorossiisk, in Yekaterinodar, in Rostov-on-Don I would again encounter the light cloak, the gaiters and the round beret crowning the tight curls. On each occasion I heard sonorous verse being declaimed to the accompaniment of little squeals from women with flushed, excited faces. Wherever he went, Voloshin was using the hum – or boom – of his verse to rescue someone whose life was endangered.’

During the Red Terror following the evacuation of the White Army from the Crimea, Voloshin showed still greater courage. His belief in the power of his words – what Marianna Landa refers to as ‘his Dostoevskian faith in the divine spark in the soul of the abominable criminal, and his Symbolist belief in the magic of the poetic word’ – seems to have been unshakeable; his personal appeals to Red and White officials and commanders, on behalf of individuals, and his verse-prayers addressed to God, on behalf of his country, have much in common. Voloshin believed he could affect the course of events – and sometimes he did. That he escaped arrest and execution is astonishing.

### *From Civil War*

And from the ranks of both armies –  
the same voice, the same refrain:  
‘He who is not with us is against us.  
You must take sides. Justice is ours.’

And I stand alone in the midst of them,  
amidst the roar of fire and smoke,  
and pray with all my strength for those  
who fight on this side, and on that side.

(1919)

*Translated by Robert Chandler*

## Terror

The working day started at night.  
Denunciations, papers, certificates.  
Death sentences signed in a hurry.  
Yawning, drinking of wine

Vodka, all day, for the soldiers.  
Come evening, by candlelight,  
time to read out lists, herd  
men and women into a dark yard,

remove shoes, clothes, underwear,  
tie the stuff in bundles, pile  
it up in carts, take the carts away,  
share out rings and watches.

Nightfall, men and women forced  
barefoot, naked, over ice-covered stones,  
into waste ground outside town,  
in wind from the north east.

Rifle-butted to the edge of a gully.  
The lantern light wavering.  
Machine-gunned for half a minute;  
finished off with bayonets.

Into a pit, some not quite dead.  
A covering of soil, in a hurry.  
And, with a broad-flowing Russian song –  
back into town, back home.

At dawn wives; mothers; dogs  
made their way to the same gullies;  
dug the ground; fought over bones;  
kissed the flesh they held dear.

(26 April 1921, Simferopol)  
*Translated by Robert Chandler*