

Introduction

Asked to name a Russian poet, most non-Russian speakers able to do so would probably think first of Pushkin. Other names too might spring to mind: Lermontov, Pasternak, Yevtushenko, Brodsky, perhaps even Blok, Mandelstam or Akhmatova. Few if any are likely even to have heard of Tyutchev. This is perhaps surprising, given that Russians themselves have long recognised him to be one of their foremost lyric poets.

For testimonials to Tyutchev's stature we have only to turn to his fellow-writers. Pushkin admired his poems and was the first to publish them in any quantity in his journal *Sovremennik* (*The Contemporary*). Turgenev, who later saw Tyutchev's first volume of verse into print, thought him 'one of our most remarkable poets'. For Dostoyevsky too he was 'our great poet'. Leo Tolstoy acknowledged him to be his favourite poet, and declared: 'One cannot live without him'. For Afanasy Fet he was quite simply 'one of the greatest lyric poets ever to have existed on this earth'.¹

What was it about Tyutchev's verse that so impressed these literary heavyweights? According to the philosopher and guru of the Romantic movement Friedrich Schelling, all great art affords unconscious intimations or glimpses of the ultimately unknowable reality (Kant's 'thing in itself', or noumenon) behind the world of appearances. 'The artist seems,' writes Schelling, 'quite apart from what he has put into his work with obvious intent, to have instinctively portrayed in it as it were an infinity which no finite intellect is capable of developing fully.' And as a direct consequence of this connection with the absolute and infinite, any great work of art is in Schelling's view susceptible to 'infinite interpretation': indeed, that is for him one of the hallmarks of its greatness.²

The best of Tyutchev's verse certainly displays this quality. Like Blake, he shows us 'a world in a grain of sand'. His poems have the sense of a mysterious hinterland, an opening onto limitless depths; they take us on a journey into distant reaches of the world soul. The poet Afanasy Fet likened reading Tyutchev's short lyrics to viewing a section of the night sky through a narrow window aperture. At first only a few of the brighter

stars are visible; then gradually, as our eyes adjust, ever fainter stars and nebulae swim into view; until at length, despite the restricted view, the heavens reveal themselves in all their eternal and infinite majesty.³ The themes of Tyutchev's poetry are nature, man's place in the universe, love, the tyranny of time, death: in a word, the joy, terror and mystery of our being in the world.

In view of the 'infinite interpretation' of which Tyutchev's verse is indeed capable, it may be helpful to narrow our focus to just three possible approaches to it. Those new to the verse will inevitably begin by reading it as 'pure' poetry, appreciating each item as a text in its own right. This approach is not without its drawbacks, not least of course when, as here, the poems are being read in translation. The versions offered in this selection may perhaps be regarded as analogous to piano reductions of great orchestral works, giving at best no more than a reflection of the original creative vision. But there are in any case other, more serious limitations to a strictly textual approach as far as Tyutchev is concerned. Quite soon the reader will become uneasily aware that what he or she is dealing with is not 'just' poetry, but the preferred mode of expression of a deeply original thinker.

One critic has characterised Tyutchev's lyric verse as 'the reflection of a profound life, of a long interior journey: the discovery of self in the quest for being', comparing this 'ontological quest' to those undertaken in their different ways by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard.⁴ To regard Tyutchev's poetry as 'art for art's sake' is, the same critic points out, hopelessly reductive: it is if anything art for the sake of being (*'l'art pour l'être'*).⁵ Yet art — and art of the highest order — it never ceases to be, the thought expressed vividly and concretely through metaphor and imagery, never as mere versified abstract disquisition.

Our second approach, then, must be to consider the philosophical world view informing Tyutchev's lyric verse. But even this is not enough. That world view, as embodied in the verse, is in turn firmly rooted in the life, both outward and inner, lived out by the poet. The poems can equally be read as an intimate diary ('the mirror of his soul', as a contemporary once described them), and are often only fully to be

appreciated in the context of that life. And for this a third, biographical approach is indicated.

The following brief accounts of Tyutchev's life and of the world view of his poetry may help to provide the necessary context and background to the poems.⁶ Numerical references in brackets are in each case to the poem on that page.

TYUTCHEV'S LIFE

Fyodor Ivanovich Tyutchev was born on his family's country estate at Ovstug on 23 November 1803 by the Julian calendar (5 December New Style). His parents were well-to-do members of the landowning gentry. At about the time of his first birthday the family moved to Moscow, and it was here that Fyodor, his older brother Nikolay and younger sister Darya spent most of their childhood and youth. The one major exception was a period of nearly two years at Ovstug following the devastation caused by Napoleon's occupation of Moscow in 1812. Apart from that upheaval, Tyutchev could later look back on a happy childhood marked by parental affection and harmonious family life.

A sensitive and precociously gifted child, at the age of nine he was assigned a private tutor in the person of Semyon Raich, the son of a village priest who would go on to study at Moscow University and gain a modest reputation as a minor poet and translator of Latin and Italian verse. Teacher and pupil soon developed a close bond, and young Fyodor made rapid progress in his studies. It was under Raich's guidance that he took his first poetic steps, composing competent juvenile pieces marked by the neoclassical style and archaic poetic diction of Raich's literary hero Gavriil Derzhavin.

Just before his sixteenth birthday Tyutchev was enrolled as a full-time student in the Philological Faculty of Moscow University. During his time there he took the opportunity to read widely outside the official syllabus, much of which he appears to have found irksome. Fluent in French from an early age, he now also discovered a taste for German literature. Already before entering university he had attended lectures on an

informal basis with Raich, by then himself a full-time student. During this time Tyutchev frequented literary groups run by Raich and one of the professors, Aleksey Merzlyakov, an established poet in his own right. He was also admitted to the prestigious Society of Lovers of Russian Literature.

At the end of his first year of full-time studies a lengthy ode by him, 'Urania', was read out as part of the university's formal end-of-year ceremony. While in a public piece such as this Tyutchev still draws on the grandiloquent and archaic diction of Derzhavin, in his more private verse he was coming increasingly under the influence of Pushkin's freer, more colloquial poetic style. Like most of his generation he also shared the latter's commitment to political freedom. A poem written at this time, unpublishable in view of its subject, welcomed the general ideals expressed in Pushkin's banned ode 'Liberty' but at the same time sounded a note of caution against what was felt to be its immoderately seditious tone. Tyutchev's position was to remain on the whole that of a liberal monarchist and supporter of enlightened absolutism.

Influential connections helped to ease his way into the wider world. After two years at university he was quite unusually permitted to graduate early, his earlier informal studies being cited as grounds. This appears to have been thanks to a powerful relative, Count Aleksandr Osterman-Tolstoy, who had the ear of Tsar Alexander I. Osterman-Tolstoy also facilitated Tyutchev's entry into the Foreign Service and arranged a first posting. In the summer of 1822 the young graduate, still only eighteen years old, set off to take up his not too onerous duties as an unpaid trainee diplomat attached to the Russian legation in Munich. He would live abroad for the next twenty-two years, apart from visits home on leave.

Tyutchev later remembered his early years in Germany as 'a golden time' (3), a 'great festival' of 'wondrous youth' (103), claiming in one of his letters that for him life had only truly begun then. He later recalled having arrived 'to the strains of *Der Freischütz*', and indeed found himself at once immersed in the heady intellectual atmosphere of German Romanticism. It was in Germany that he developed the lyric verse form and found his individual voice as a poet.

Very soon after arriving in Munich he made friends with the young Bavarian Count Maximilian von Lerchenfeld, who like himself was training for a career in his country's diplomatic service. He was also introduced to Max's four-teen-year-old half-sister Amalie, or Amélie as she was more usually known. The offspring of an extramarital affair between Max's late father and Princess Therese von Thurn und Taxis, she had been taken into the care of the older Count's widow after his death. By the following year Tyutchev found himself increasingly attracted to the beautiful young Amélie, and one day late in 1823 she too confessed her feelings for him (2). In the spring of 1824 their young love blossomed during Tyutchev's stay at the Lerchenfelds' country estate of Köfering near Regensburg. One never to be forgotten idyllic episode, a visit with Amélie to the ruins of Donaustauf Castle overlooking the Danube, was later recalled by him in poignant verse (3).

Now sixteen, Amélie was eligible for marriage, and for the two young lovers the way ahead seemed clear. However, through her mother Amélie was related both to the Queen of Prussia and the consort of Grand Duke, later Tsar, Nicholas, and it seems to have been felt in high places that a twenty-year-old trainee diplomat was no suitable match. Instead preparations were made to marry her off to a senior colleague of Tyutchev at the Russian legation, the Baltic-German Baron Alexander von Krüdener, who was twenty-two years older than she. At the end of 1824 Tyutchev came of age, and on or around his twenty-first birthday appears to have made a formal proposal himself, to be rejected by Amélie's elders against her wishes in favour of Krüdener (4). The engagement was announced in January 1825. In an evidently related incident, Tyutchev closely avoided having to fight a duel (probably with Krüdener, although this is not known for sure). Following this scandal the ambassador arranged for him to take extended leave, and in June, a couple of months before Amélie's wedding, he left for Russia. He and Amélie were to remain lifelong friends, she later using her influence at the Russian court to further his career.

On leave in Russia, Tyutchev found himself in St Petersburg on the day of the Decembrist revolt. Staged by idealistic young army officers during the power vacuum between the death of Tsar Alexander I and the

accession of his younger brother Nicholas, the revolt aimed to replace the autocracy with a more liberal system of government. Although just a bystander and in no way involved, Tyutchev knew a dozen or so of the plotters personally, some of whom were relatives of his. He and his brother Nikolay were among the hundreds of suspected sympathisers investigated by the security services, but were subsequently cleared. A poem written the following year 'for the drawer' makes clear his condemnation of the Decembrists' violent action, while at the same time regretting the 'iron winter' of reaction inaugurated by Nicholas (48).

Back in Munich in 1826, Tyutchev met and within a few months had married (secretly to begin with) Eleonore Peterson (née Countess von Bothmer), an aristocratic German widow three years older than himself with four young sons. Clearly on the rebound from Amélie, he seems to have encountered in Eleonore the kind of maternal attention to which he had been accustomed since childhood. An overriding need to be loved was central to all his relationships with women, and marriage was no bar to a string of infidelities, as the long-suffering Eleonore would find to her cost. For these early years there are strong indications that he continued to enjoy a liaison with Amélie (5), while Eleonore's younger sister Clotilde also appears to have become the object of his attentions (8, 11).

Meanwhile, Tyutchev's diplomatic career progressed painfully slowly. He was deprived of patronage at court when Osterman-Tolstoy, disenchanted with the new Tsar Nicholas, left Russia to settle abroad. Only in 1828 was he finally appointed to a salaried post as second secretary at the Munich legation, after which he and Eleonore felt able to start a family of their own. They also took the opportunity to travel. In 1827 and 1828 they spent lengthy periods in Paris, where Tyutchev made the acquaintance of leading figures of the liberal opposition. Other trips followed: to the Tyrolean Alps, and in 1829 to Italy, where he and his brother Nikolay toured extensively, visiting among other places Rome and the island of Ischia. In 1830 he, Eleonore and Clotilde were united with his parents on home leave in St Petersburg. Three years later he was sent on a courier mission to newly independent Greece, entrusted with delivering without the knowledge of that country's Regency Council an important letter from Ludwig I of Bavaria to his son King Otto of Greece,

who was not yet of age. Journeys always inspired Tyutchev to write poems, and these were no exception (14, 18, 19, 27, 31, 56).

[The rest of the Introduction is omitted from this extract, which concludes with examples of the poem translations.]

Silentium!

Be silent, guard your tongue, and keep
All inmost thoughts and feelings deep
Within your heart concealed. There let
Them in their courses rise and set,
Like stars in jewelled night, unheard:
Admire them, and say not a word.

How can the soul its flame impart?
How can another know your heart,
The truths by which you live and die?
A thought, once uttered, is a lie,
The limpid spring defiled, once stirred:
Drink of it, and say not a word.

Make but the inward life your goal —
Seek out that world within your soul:
Mysterious, magic thoughts are there,
Which, if the outer din and glare
Intrude, will fade and be not heard:
Drink in their song — and not a word!

(Second half of 1820s)

Sea Stallion

Hot-blooded stallion of the sea
With mane of lucent green —
Now wild, capricious, running free,
Now placidly serene!
Raised by a tempest far from here
Amidst unending seas,
You learnt from it to shy, to rear,
To canter as you please!

I love to see you charge, unchecked
In your imperious force,
When — steaming, tousle-maned and flecked
With foam — you set your course
For land, careering headlong o'er
The brine with joyful neigh,
To dash hooves on the sounding shore
And — vanish into spray!

(Naples/Ischia, July—August 1829)

Who would grasp Russia with the mind?
For her no yardstick was created;
Her soul is of a special kind,
By faith alone appreciated.

28 November 1866