

## Five Memorable Russian Poems Translated by Basil Lvoff

Today's feature of Russian poetry is an outstanding selection of poems that not only endured through the centuries, but successfully capture and reflect their time, providing a glimpse into the Russian psyche. We're very excited to share these new translations by Basil Lvoff who also provides context for each text in his notes on the translation process. From Rozhdestvensky's famous minuscule man who goes to war to Balmont's symbolism to Turgenev's famous prose poem in praise of language to Tyutchev's quatrain in praise of Russia and Fet's revolutionary melodism, these are examples of poetry that, in Lvoff's own words, "emerged when people wanted to make their innermost beliefs memorable and all-binding." Not to be missed.

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

### 1. Robert Rozhdestvensky

*Translated from the Russian by Basil Lvoff*



На Земле  
безжалостно маленькой  
жил да был человек маленький.  
У него была служба маленькая.  
И маленький очень портфель.  
Получал он зарплату маленькую...  
И однажды —

прекрасным утром —  
постучалась к нему в окошко  
небольшая,  
казалось,  
война...  
Автомат ему выдали маленький.  
Сапоги ему выдали маленькие.  
Каску выдали маленькую  
и маленькую —  
по размерам —  
шинель.

...А когда он упал —  
                  некрасиво, неправильно,  
в атакующем крике вывернув рот,  
то на всей земле  
                  не хватило мрамора,  
чтобы вырубить парня  
в полный рост!

On the earth  
                  cruelly minuscule  
there once lived a man  
                  who was minuscule.  
The work that he had  
                  was minuscule.  
And his briefcase was of minuscule size.  
The pay he received  
                  was minuscule...  
And one day,  
on a lovely morning,  
on his windowsill knocked a little—  
she then seemed  
very little—  
war...  
The rifle they gave him  
                  was minuscule.  
The boots that they gave him  
                  were minuscule.  
The helmet they gave  
                  was minuscule,  
and minuscule  
also was  
his coat.  
...And the moment he fell—  
                  unsightly,

improperly—  
in the cry of attack  
his mouth bent—  
of the whole earth  
were the sculptors in quandary  
how to carve out a lad  
so grand!

**Robert Rozhdestvensky (1932 – 1994)** belonged to the new wave of Soviet poets of the Khrushchev Thaw. Along with poets like Yevtushenko, he transitioned from page poetry to *stage poetry*, when hundreds of people listened to his recital of his own poems. His poetry continues the tradition of Russian futurism.

**A note on the process of translation:** Robert Rozhdestvensky is still well remembered and read in Russia, but, like many, I was touched by this particular war poem of his when I heard it—mature in meaning and stylistically advanced with its futuristic rhythms and slanted rhymes in the end—recited by an unusually little boy:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xf7obbVxXEY>. This footage with an audition from the Soviet time turned into a virus video some years ago on the Russian Internet. The poem develops the theme of the little man, deprived of dignity and degraded to the state of a mere object. This major theme of Russian literature since the nineteenth century can be found in Gogol's "Overcoat," for instance, and note that the same word, *shinel'*, translated here as "coat," reappears in Rozhdestvensky's poem. What I find striking in the boy's recital is that he is little himself, telling about another little man, and yet, just as that man, he spiritually grows at the end. This makes the poem even more trenchant than it was originally.

## 2. Konstantin Balmont

*Translated from the Russian by Basil Lvoff*



### Зовы звуков

Звук арфы — серебристо-голубой.  
Всклик скрипки — блеск алмаза хрусталистый.  
Виолончели — мёд густой и мглистый.  
Рой красных струй, исторгнутый трубой.  
Свирель — лазурь, разъятая борьбой,  
Кристалл разбитый, утра ход росистый.  
Колоколец ужалы — сон сквозистый.  
Рояль — волна с волною в перебой.  
Но как среди плодов душисто манго,  
Струя истомно-пряный аромат,  
Мне хочется всегда уйти назад, —  
Туда, где был, — где сини воды Ганга, —  
И дальше, до лиан, в Яванский сад,  
К тоске ручьиистой звуков гамеланга.

## Sounds' Summons

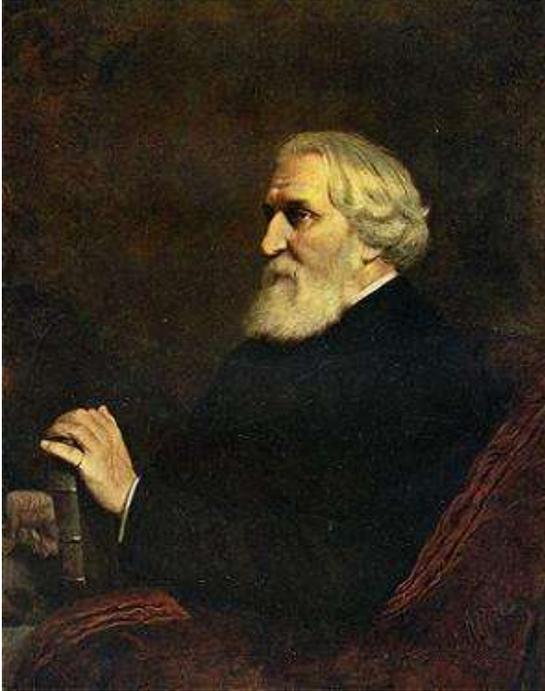
The sound of harp is silvery and blue,  
Violin's cries are crystal, glittering diamonds,  
Cello's, molasses sweet and viscous glue.  
Trumpet's red streams swarm, stirring nature's silence.  
Reed pipe is azure split by fighting  
And shattered crystal, flight of morn through dew,  
Bells' stings are slumber pierced by lightning,  
Grand piano, racing waves that dash askew.  
But as the odorous fruit of balmy mangoes,  
Exhaling fragrant languor of the spice,  
I ever yearn to leave and to surrender  
Myself to where I was, where Ganges lies,  
To the lianas of a garden Javen,  
Where melancholy streams resound with gamelan.

**Konstantin Balmont (1867 – 1942)** was a Russian Symbolist, famous for his original work and translations. The musicality of his verse is evidenced by Rachmaninoff's compositions based on his texts. Like predecessors such as Baudelaire and contemporaries such as Scriabin, Balmont reveled in the idea of synesthesia and exploited it.

**A note on the process of translation:** It is not hard to see, upon reading this poem, why Balmont was considered such a sophisticated, at times mannered, poet, even for the famed Russian Silver Age, i.e., Russian modernism. Russian poetry developed its range thanks to his supple rhythms, which revived the seemingly exhausted meters, and thanks to the lush orchestration of his verse. I chose this particular poem because it expresses some fundamental principles of the Russian Silver Age (of Russian Symbolism, to be exact): musicality, dreamlike nuance and mystery, exoticism and strangeness, and, of course, synesthesia, originating from Baudelaire's "Correspondances." It is important that these principles be not simply declared but also displayed in the text—the reason why I undertook this translation.

### 3. Ivan Turgenev

*Translated from the Russian by Basil Lvoff*



#### РУССКИЙ ЯЗЫК

Во дни сомнений, во дни тягостных раздумий о судьбах моей родины, — ты один мне поддержка и опора, о великий, могучий, правдивый и свободный русский язык! Не будь тебя — как не впасть в отчаяние при виде всего, что совершается дома? Но нельзя верить, чтобы такой язык не был дан великому народу!

#### The Russian Language

In days of doubt, in the dismal days of brooding over the fate of my country, you alone guide and support me, o great, mighty, truthful and free Russian speech! Without you, how would we escape despair at the sight of all the things taking place at home? But it is impossible to believe that such a language was not given to a great nation!

**Ivan Turgenev (1818 – 1883)** is among the most famous Russian nineteenth century writers, a competitor of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. Primarily known for such works as *A Sportsman's Sketches* (lyrical, precise, and sensitive prose) as well as epoch-making novels about Russian mores, he also wrote many poems, also in prose.

**A note on the process of translation:** This is probably Turgenev's most famous prose poem. Every Russian schoolboy and schoolgirl has heard the words about the "great, mighty, truthful and free Russian speech," ever quoted, in earnest and as a joke. Yet the rest of the poem, with Turgenev's "dismal days of brooding over the fate" of Russia is not remembered as often. Turgenev wrote this text while abroad, and now that I am also away from my home country, which is still endangered by its corrupt and authoritarian government, already in the twenty-first century, I can relate to this poem even more so. As far as the translation is concerned, it was important for me to have the poem sound majestic as in the original yet not as unnecessarily archaic as many English translations of it are. Moreover, I wanted to convey, albeit with some alterations, the rhythm of Turgenev's prose poem so that while translating I even broke it into separate lines, as if a free verse. In fact, I would argue, it is a free verse.

#### 4. Fedor Tyutchev

*Translated from the Russian by Basil Lvoff*



УМОМ РОССИЮ НЕ ПОНЯТЬ,  
АРШИНОМ ОБЩИМ НЕ ИЗМЕРИТЬ:  
У НЕЙ ОСОБЕННАЯ СТАТЬЯ –  
В РОССИЮ МОЖНО ТОЛЬКО ВЕРИТЬ.

Russia's not grasped by piercing minds;  
She can't be by a bushel measured;  
She stands alone, one of a kind—  
Like faith, to be upheld and treasured.

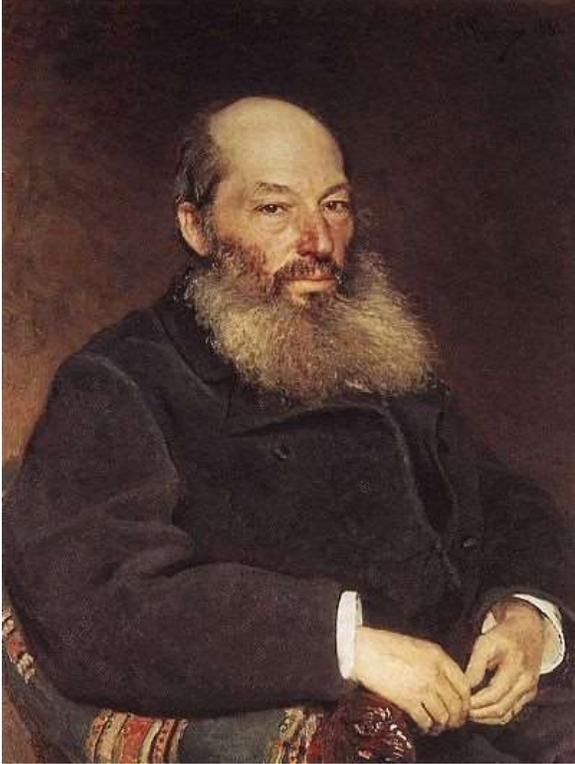
**Fedor Tyutchev (1803 – 1873)**, who seemed to pay more attention to his work as a diplomat, is considered one of the greatest and most philosophical Russian poets. He was first recognized by Pushkin, but real fame came later when he was declared a precursor of the nascent Russian modernism.

**A note on the process of translation:** Tyutchev's quatrain is one of the most famous ones in all Russian literature, but I was much surprised not to find an English translation that would be both close to the original yet also rhyme. Often, rhyme can be omitted in translation, but not in

the case of poems like this, I would argue. It is when the words *poniat* (understand) and *stat* (essence and, interestingly, the cognate of the English “to stand”) rhyme that the reader believes the poet. Having been made a poetic truth, these words are taken as an objective one. No wonder some theoreticians say that poetry as such emerged when people wanted to make their innermost beliefs memorable and all-binding.

## 5. Afanasy Fet

*Translated from the Russian by Basil Lvoff*



Целый мир от красоты,  
От велика и до мала,  
И напрасно ищешь ты  
Отыскать ее начало.  
Что такое день иль век  
Перед тем, что бесконечно?  
Хоть не вечен человек,  
То, чтоечно, – человечно.

World is whole out of beauty,  
Great and little things throughout,  
And the place where it is rooted  
You can never ferret out.  
What's a day's or century's span  
As against the boundless reign?  
Though eternal is no man,  
What's eternal is humane.

**Afanasy Fet (1820 – 1892)**, famous for the then-revolutionary melodism, impressionism, and experimental suppleness of his nevertheless harmonious verse, is considered one of the precursors of Russian modernism, along with Tyutchev. But he managed to enrapture his contemporaries already, when prose triumphed in Russia while poetry was looked down upon.

**A note on the process of translation:** This poem may be seen as Fet’s artistic credo, echoing with his article “On the Poems of F. Tyutchev,” in which the same romantic principles of the eternal beauty, inexhaustibility, and spirituality of this world were declared. The message seems to be straightforward, yet the Russian text is not that easy, grammatically speaking. The first line verbatim reads: “Whole the world is from beauty,” but this from [*ot*] can be translated as either “from” or “because of,” so that it can be read as “the whole world” or “the world is whole.” The former meaning, though secondary, is emphasized by the use of the same preposition *ot* in the second line, which literally says: “From the big to the small.” To keep this, I decided to translate *ot* as “out of” and then have it reverberate with “throughout.” A more telling play on words is in the second part of the poem. Fet puns on the word *vek* (century) in the word *chelovek* (person, man), including the derivatives *chelovechnyi* (humane), *vechnyi* (eternal). English would not allow me to translate it in full, but I tried to compensate for it by singling out the “man” in “humane.” This play on words is imbued with the same holistic intentions that Fet describes in the poem.

### **About the translator:**



**Basil Lvoff** defended a dissertation on the Russian Formalists' Literary Criticism at Moscow State University and is currently writing another dissertation as a Ph.D. Candidate in Comparative Literature at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His current research is on the concept of literary evolution in the works of the Russian Formalists and today's Digital Humanists. His other interests include Russian twentieth-century literature and theory, the genre of the essay, theories of humor, and literary translation. He has taught courses at Columbia University, Hunter College, Baruch College, and some others.

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