

**5 Poems by Mikhail Eremin**  
**Translated and with an essay by Alex Cigale**



Today's guest post comes from the poet and translator Alex Cigale who shares with us five new translations of Mikhail Eremin's poems and an insightful essay offering details about the author and his work. You can also watch a [video](#) of Mikhail Eremin reading one of his poems. Enjoy!

And remember, in September and beyond: read and share the translated poems you love using #NTM2017. Open your heart to new experiences and the beauty of the world, and celebrate its cultures and new voices. We hope our picks will become your new favorites. Let us know how you like them #NTM2017 #TranslationMonth @TranslateMonth.

—*Claudia Serea & Loren Kleinman*

**Mikhail Eremin, 5 Poems from *Poems 5***  
*Translated from Russian by Alex Cigale*

To Iraida

When coming winter extinguishes light after light,  
 To accept, becoming at peace with, Nature's inevitable  
 Bleaching? To wrap the withering plants with care  
 And thus protect their vestments from fading?  
 To gamely tangle with simulated beauty  
 Preceding craft and culture (Quartz sand,  
 Potash and the oxidants of heavy  
 Metals.), fenced off with lead?

2009

Not the cracked by a gale trunk but a resonator  
 Of the Aeolian splintering –  
 Engulfed by gusts and breezes  
 The combed-through willow strings  
 Sound (Neither realization of plan nor improvisation.)  
 Not for the one who bechanced  
 To hear them,  
 For no one.

2010

Is not the Achilles spiral  
 Of the mercenary alert, just as was David's  
 Patriot spring, so that,  
 (Let my target remain constant, being noble.) someone,  
 having been somebody, vulnerable  
 (What for armor?! What flak jackets?!) from heel?  
 To (Sniper? Self-inflicted wound?) temple  
 Become somebody's body.

2010

They shall, it is said, the sheep and the wolf,  
The lion and the ox, feed upon the grassy green  
Beneath the olive trees, that had  
Survived the deluge, unsheltered, flank on flank  
Wait out the midday heat,  
But does not parity and brotherhood lead  
To the dearth of sacrificial offerings  
And, as it has come to be, the reinstatement of fear?

2010

Isaiah 11.6,7  
Genesis 1.30  
Genesis 8.11

He who has not beheld the dark will not be touched by light –  
Here I come, someone blurted out at crack of dawn  
(It's not at night to search out for a sheep  
Separated from the fold.) This exclamation  
Was interpreted (It may well be, precisely so arose  
One of the consensual truths.) by wise men:  
Without principal paid in suffering and tribulation  
That which is sought for may never be obtained.

2010

**The Museum of the Real: On translating the “philological” poetry of Mikhail Eremin  
By Alex Cigale**

*The tactful cactus by your window  
Surveys the prairie of your room  
The mobile spins to its collision  
Clara puts her head between her paws  
They've opened shops down West side  
Will all the cacti find a home  
But the key to the city  
Is in the sun that pins the branches to the sky*

"Eight Line Poem" by David Bowie (from *Hunky Dory*)

*Eremin is an unreconstructed minimalist. Poetry in essence consists precisely in the concentration of language: a small quantity of lines surrounded by a mass of empty space. Eremin elevates this concentration to a principle: as though it is not simply language but poetry itself that crystallizes into verse.... Most remarkable is that all of it has been written for one self, out of one's own conception of the mother tongue. Eremin's poetry may rightfully be called Futurist, in the sense that to this type of poetry the future belongs. (Joseph Brodsky)*

*His whole life writing eight line poems, the ones that constitute his sole book, "Poems." He was composing it for some forty years, and this truly an act of heroic self-discipline. The heroism consists in writing only that which is most essential, precisely as much as necessary and no more. Sadly, there are poets who suffer from an incontinency of verse, a terrible illness. The authentic drowns in a sea of the superfluous, of the unsatisfactory.... Eremin did not suffer from such verse mania.... constructing his intimate-most. Reading these eight-line poems, it often seems to me that I am looking out from a green shoot of grass, infinitely magnified. Latin and Greek words and Egyptian hieroglyphs coalesce on the page into a universal inscription, a portrait of nature herself. Typewritten pages of his poems circulated among many of my friends, but his name never sounded loudly. Such a quiet and, what's more, truly significant poet. He has now published two books: in New York and in Moscow, essentially a single book. The one he has been writing his entire life. (Genrikh Sapgir)*

Mikhail Eremin, (born in 1936, in the Caucasus) was a "member" of one of the first unofficial literary groupings of post-war Russian poets, the so-called “philological school” of the late 1950s (Lev Losev, Vladimir Uflyand, Sergey Kulle; so named by Konstantin K. Kuzminsky in his historic *Blue Lagoon* anthology). As with any school worth its salt, its "members" always referred to themselves as “a group of friends ... drinking buddies.” Eremin has called his school “friends and the library,” yet to me, the philological designation seems an apt reflection of Eremin's own guiding aesthetic. Himself a translator of English poetry (Yeats, Eliot, Hart Crane,) to the best of my knowledge, the first English translations of his poems (by David Macfayden) did not appear until the fall of 2000, in an issue of *The Antigone Review*. Eremin has lived in

St. Petersburg since before WW II, writing but rarely publishing, now for well over a half-century, in a peculiar kind of highly respected anonymity, his work having the reputation of being among the most hermetically difficult in all of Russian poetry (he was awarded the prestigious Andrei Bely Prize for poetry in 1998.)

After an exploratory period, composing in slightly longer forms, by 1957 Eremin had settled upon the eight-line free verse that has characterized his work ever since. When asked why, he responded: "They structure themselves precisely so." Regarding the free verse label: "In fact, these are absolutely iambs, [the stress] shifting between the second and fourth *paeion*" (a measure of duration in classic Greek verse, that manifests itself accentually in the Russian.) That is, there is a strong patterning of duration and sound, as for each poem as a whole so for each line (there is even rhyme). Regarding his early influences: "Pasternak and the Oberiu" (Russian Absurdists). His work seems to me to exhibit a clear and logical development, exploring progressively greater possibilities of syntactic and lexical complexity, each poem marked by cross-referential and pluripotentially modifying digression, often contained parenthetically within anchoring observations or commentary. The work incorporates an ever-expanding linguistic register ranging from scientific to primarily anachronistic culturological terminology and slang (such as thief's cant), etc. It is also at times macaronic (polylinguistic), a particularly unsolvable impedance to translation into English when the original itself contains English words, for example. I must admit the following caveat.

As Joseph Brodsky emphasized in his review critical of Paul Schmidt's translations of Velimir Khlebnikov, translation offers but a single reading and so constitutes an interpretation that severely narrows and often alters or even distorts the possibilities of the original when mapped onto the target language. The semantic qualities of Khlebnikov's (and Eremin's) work are such that any reading in Russian is constrained by so high a degree of uncertainty that it may only be multiplied (or reduced) in translation. The common and perhaps unavoidable result is the "smoothing out" of a text, in the cause of readability or simply out of inability to represent the full extent of the word play, and the necessity of foreclosing ambiguity by settling on a single (or two) fixed meaning(s). I would add that the act of selection itself, the choice of what part of the body of work to represent, further narrows the semantic field. My primary purpose then is to introduce to Aglophone readers a neglected master, the reception of whose work, I believe, may find even more fertile ground in the English than in his own language.

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*... Each eight-line poem seems simultaneously a fragment of some epic, and an autonomous lyrical episode .... In this sense Eremin's verses constitute an epic composed by the earth about itself. (Anatoly Naiman)*

*In addition to direct referentiality, his words acquire a supplementary expressiveness. In Eremin, this emerges out of the collision of a variegated, heterogeneous lexicon with the leitmotiv of his art – the unity of essence of the world. Furthermore, within the minimal space of Eremin's texts ... words are granted the autonomous, as it were sacramental, significance of hieroglyphs. (Lev Losev)*

In the Brodsky quote I had used as part of my initial inscription, some confusion arises regarding the designation of Eremin as a "Minimalist," minimalism being not a measure of quantity but rather an issue of quality and texture. To the contrary; Eremin is a maximalist to the hilt, the dense texture of his work striving to represent, one might even say incorporate, the world entire. Though I had reached my conclusions prior to consulting his work, and wish to extend my analysis into the semiotic dimension, I must acknowledge here my debt to Ilya Kukulín whose essay (in *New Literary Map of Russia*) represents one the most substantial commentaries on Eremin's work to date. The thrust of Kukulín's essay is that Eremin's poems give "metaphorical expression to the transformation of the soul." In this respect, he connects Eremin to Osip Mandelstam, another consistent practitioner of the eight-line verse, and finds a common source in Mandelstam's writings on Dante's "search for the spiritual foundations of the world." (While a fuller discussion is outside our scope, it is worth noting on its centennial, that Acmeism was less a secession than a corrective intended to merge Symbolism's ethereal, spiritual focus with some more earthbound concerns.)

The eight-line verse form has been characterized as a post-modern, curtailed sonnet, requiring greater concision while allowing sufficient space for the complete development of an idea, the sonnet's thesis and antithesis conflated and its synthesis reduced. The number 8 itself, in the Judeo-Christian and in Chinese traditions, in its "squareness" and "cubeness" symbolizes perfection. Following upon the "completion" of 7, it is connected to super-abundance and infinity and thus represents a transcendent perfection. I don't mean to suggest here that the eight-line verse reveals some sort of numerological, or mystical fascination, or that it is even in any sense a conscious form, but rather that a great deal of confirmation exists to justify why it might "feel right" to us. Both in Mandelstam's and in Eremin's octaves, the objects of the physical world are constantly transformed and equated, undergoing an alchemical transubstantiation and sanctification.

In this, Eremin extends a tradition belonging to the very origins of literature, harking back to the Gilgamesh epic and the Egyptian Book of the Dead. As Kukulín concludes, the external transformations have an invisible counterpart in the internal "soul work, the discovery of one's own 'I' – for the apprehension of all these treasures. Each time this apprehension may only be partial [provisional] and so it requires a choice [decision]." "Eremin's art offers one possibility for how such poetry may endure in the post-modern era.... Even with all its philosophic qualities, it remains a personal [private] and faith-filled [trusting] lyric." In my own reception of his work, I have found that each individual poem is ideally treated as a sort of koan, above all a sound object for performance and meditation, but which extends understanding only gradually and without ever depleting its possibilities.

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Eremin likely could not have had access to Osip Mandelstam's work at the outset and so arrived on his path independently. Because he has cited the influence of the Oberiu (Russian Absurdists,) it is worth exploring a possible affinity with the work of Alexander Vvedensky, the most proto-existentialist of the Oberiu, who in his "He Who Sweats" (referring to "death's dew") declared: "the main thing is God." Another parallel between them is the centrality to both of folk narrative

and of a panentheistic conception of the natural world as the locus of divine immanence. I had previously translated Vvedensky's powerful prison prose from his "Grey Notebook" (which I believe bares comparison to that of Kafka and Camus.) He writes: "I broke with understanding, with premised generalizations, something no one had done before me. With this I, so to speak, conducted a poetic critique of reason – a more fundamental one than that other, abstract one [Kierkegaard's]. I became skeptical that, for example, house, villa, and tower are connected and unified by our understanding of 'building'. Perhaps 'shoulder' should be connected to 'four'? I carried this out in practice, in poetry, so as to prove it." Vvedensky's conclusion, regarding the shifting, arbitrary nature of signifiers, is key to approaching the associative compositional methods of both of these poets. And it is precisely this element that is nearly impossible to fully represent in translation, the manner in which composition is guided by sound clustering, the generative property of language itself.

Again, it is outside our scope to contextualize here the reconstitution of the decimated Russian poetic avant-garde that re-emerged post-World War, post-revolution, post-Stalinism, the crisis of Modernism that yielded post-modernity, or even to communicate the heady sense of liberation of "Krushchev's Thaw," with its flooding in of foreign influences. Eremin has spoken of that brief period of Soviet history as a nearly absolute sense of freedom and possibility, a sort of tabula rasa. In his work, the familiar Russian landscape becomes a screen for the exploration of this interior territory, to put a twist on the old expression, a Terra Cognita. It is my strongly held believe that, through the "primitive" human psychic mechanisms of projection and introjection, the poet strives to reassemble the dismembered body politic within his or her own psyche, so that the notion of personhood itself may thus be resurrected and expanded. [In my own writing on the American post-industrial landscape, I have referred to this "expansion" of the personal as The Distributed Self].

In closing, I understand Eremin's work in light of Lacan's tripartite model of the unconscious – the Self that is the discourse of the Other structured by the "orders" of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real – to be the mapping and grounding of consciousness itself, in the sense that he succeeds in establishing an interconnectivity that unites these orders into a sensibly coherent if not always clearly comprehended whole. My own experience as a poet tells me that such a semantic field (mental space) and the underlying neurological basis of language itself is what provides the architectural matrix of consciousness, making a more unconstrained composition possible. Eremin thus is a poet's poet par excellence; my experience of his poems is a bodily one, the lingering aftereffect being a sense of oneness and well-being, of expansiveness.

A video of Mikhail Eremin reading a poem is available on Colta.Ru.

For the Russian originals, see Vavilon.Ru, Ruthenia.Ru, and Magazines. Russ.Ru.

For photographs of the poet, see gallery on Vavilon's Litkarta.Ru.

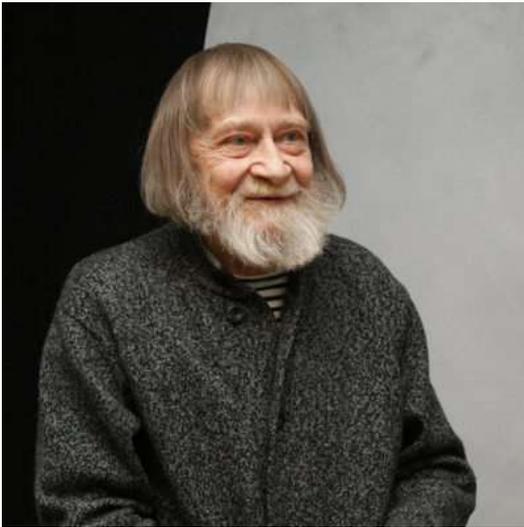
For critical analysis of Eremin work, see Ilya Kukulín, Danila Danilov, R. Leibov/R.

Voitehovich, Oleg Rogov.

*Mikhail Yeryomin, Selected Poems* (phonetic speling,) in the translation of J. Kates, won the Cliff Becker Prize in 2014 and is available from White Pine Press.

For Alexander Vvedensky's poem "He Who Sweats," see MovingPoems.com.

Alexander Vvedensky's "The Grey Notebook" was published in my translation in *Lana Turner 6*.

*About the author*

**Mikhail Eremin** (b. 1936, in the Caucasus) participated in one of the first unofficial post-war poetry groups, the so-called “philological school” of the late 1950s. His books, *Poems (1–6)*, were published by Pushkinskii Fond. Joseph Brodsky wrote this of him: “Eremin is an unreconstructed minimalist. Poetry in essence consists precisely in the concentration of language: a small quantity of lines surrounded by a mass of empty space. Eremin elevates this concentration to a principle: as though it is not simply language but poetry itself that crystallizes into verse . . . Most remarkable is that all of it has been written for oneself, out of one’s own conception of the mother tongue. Eremin’s poetry may rightfully be called Futurist in the sense that, to this type of poetry, the future belongs.”

*About the translator*

**Alex Cigale** is a poet and translator. His own poems in English appear in *Colorado Review*, *The Common Online*, and *The Literary Review*, and his translations in *Kenyon Review Online*, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, *New England Review*, *PEN America*, *TriQuarterly*, *World Literature in Translation*, and in NTM 2013, 2014, and 2015. In 2015, he was awarded an NEA Literary Translation Fellowship for his work on Mikhail Eremin, and guest-edited the Spring 2015 Russia Issue of the *Atlanta Review*, writing about it in *Best American Poetry*. His other translations of Eremin’s work are in *Asymptote*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Plume*, *Two Lines*, and *Words Without Borders*. His first book, *Russian Absurd: Daniil Kharmis, Selected Writings*, came out in February 2017 in the Northwestern University Press World Classics series.