Contents

Preface

Why do we want to draw your attention to the poetry of the Russian Silver Age? For us, it is the most fascinating period in Russian culture: an era of brilliant poets, vivid personalities who had important intellectual as well as aesthetic gifts, and who plunged into creative life with all their energy—to produce what is simply some of the sexiest, most gripping *writing* to come from any time or place in the world. Poetry is only one of the era's many cultural achievements, but it is one of the most exciting—and the Silver Age produced the first body of poetry that grabbed and kept the attention of readers, not just scholars and specialists, outside Russia. This attention points to its quality, its high status in both the East and the West during the Soviet period, and its provocative dialogues with various non-Russian literatures and cultures. Russian Silver Age poetry engages with Classical Antiquity and Western European writings, of course, but also with Africa, the Far East, and the Americas. The Silver Age witnessed an unprecedented degree of collaboration of writers with visual artists, musicians, dancers, and other creative individuals. Many of the poets included here also wrote plays, memoirs, fiction, literary criticism, and publicistic articles. The personal idiosyncrasies, friendships, and entanglements of the poets themselves can be quite interesting, and they offer some insight into the poems—as well, perhaps, as some warning about the possible side effects of such an all-consuming artistic program on the lives of real human beings.

How To Use This Book

This collection is intended for readers of many kinds: for undergraduate and graduate students who are still learning the Russian language and starting to explore Russia's poetry, or who want to add a sense of Russian poetry to their more specialized knowledge of other literatures; for comparativists who work with literary texts in translation, at least in some stages of their research; for general readers who are curious about Russian poetry, who have seen some of the names mentioned, or who just love good poetry; for poets who learn by reading about the vibrant cultures of other times and places; for people of Russian heritage who find it easier to read in English, or who want to introduce Anglophone friends to some of the riches of the Russian Silver Age. This collection contains some rudiments of a reference book, and it may point the interested reader to other materials, though it concentrates on the poetry of the time, supplemented with indicative prose writing by contemporaries about these poets and poems.

Because we are aiming for broad usability, the introductory material is not written in steep scholarly language; the suggested additional sources for each poet and for the era in general point readers to serious academic publications. We are also convinced that some of the best, most exciting scholarship on Russian literature deals with the Silver Age, reflecting the period's special features.

After this preface, an introduction (which includes some lists of recommended reading), and a short discussion of the issues raised by translations of Russian poetry, this book falls into two main parts. Section I gives the poetry, with some information about the poets' biographies and other published resources, and Section II provides various supporting materials. The book closes with three indices: an abbreviated thematic index (for readers looking for poets belonging to particular groups or engaging with certain issues), an index of first lines in Russian (for readers who want to compare a translation to the original poem or to use these materials in comparative translation studies), and an index of first lines in English (meant to help find a poem whose author has temporarily been forgotten).

The poets in Section I appear in alphabetical order, rather than chronologically or (as is often the case for presentations of the Silver Age) according to their poetic affiliation. This makes it easier to find a particular poet, and the poets' brief biographies open each selection for readers who need to know their dates, group affiliations, or theoretical positions. The list is in English alphabetical order, since readers may not know Russian, and because in North American libraries even Russian books are catalogued as they happen to fall in the Latin alphabet. (Once you are searching online, of course, it doesn't matter what order the poets are in, and their names may be spelled in a variety of ways in English.) We have tried to use the most common spellings of the poets' names and those that make the pronunciation more evident ("Bely" rather than "Belyi," "Gumilyov" rather than "Gumilëv"), to help the reader who does not know the Russian pronunciation.

The poetic translations themselves include some of the best existing versions we could find and, in places, our own translations (along with some work by talented and generous friends). We consider fidelity to the original meaning of the poems extremely important: the reader should be able to get an accurate sense of what the poet is writing about—especially considering the importance of specific themes and key terms to the Silver Age. Beyond that, though, the most essential thing for translations is to be persuasive signs of poetic value. In other words, we strive to provide translations that are *adequate* from every aspect of the reader's experience, and that make clear why this or that poet is a big deal in Russian culture. For each poet, we offer a list (sometimes much abbreviated) of available translations into English, for

readers who want to explore further. The brief bibliographies that follow each selection of poems likewise offer a selection of scholarly or biographical sources available in English (some translated from Russian); we suggest those that we have found most informative and enjoyable.

Section II includes a variety of texts from and about the Silver Age: criticism and memoirs by the poets themselves or by others, and stories or essays meant to convey the atmosphere of the time, such as Nadezhda Tèffi's humorous story "The Demonic Woman." As a self-respecting demonic woman in the Russian Silver Age, the title character writes poetry, of course. Other texts in Section II are deeply serious: the Silver Age poets were in it for real, profoundly concerned with philosophy, religion, and spirituality as well as with the nonverbal arts and various amusements. The reader will notice that the works in different prose sections often do similar things: they cite copiously from the work of a poet or a school, and they often make important programmatic assertions. In some cases the prose works blur generic boundaries, as in Maximilian Voloshin's critical article on the poetry of Cherubina de Gabriak—a poet who never existed, or rather the *nom de mystification* of Elizaveta Dmitrieva, whose poetic career more or less ended after her cover was blown. Within the four generic parts of the prose section (essays, criticism, memoirs, and other texts), the texts are arranged alphabetically by author; dates of composition or first publication are given in the table of contents for those who prefer to read chronologically.

This coursebook is primarily intended for learning about Russian poetry, but it may be adapted to many kinds of courses as well as to self-directed study. It can serve as a beginning reference work for the poetry of the period, and (we hope!) for pleasure reading.

The huge body of poetry written in the Silver Age means that we can offer only a taste of what is there. Most of the poets are represented in many versions, and the reader should head to the library to explore further.

Many of these poems have been recorded, sometimes by the authors themselves. For audio versions, along with more information of all kinds, we recommend Northwestern University's website From the Ends to the Beginning: A Bilingual Anthology of Russian Verse, at http://max.mmlc.northwestern.edu/~mdenner/Demo/.

We have included a few notes on the prose pieces. Like readers and scholars of Russian literature in general, we owe a debt of gratitude to Ardis Publishing and all who were involved in the endeavors of that visionary press. Ardis, founded in Ann Arbor, Michigan by Carl and Ellendea Proffer in 1971, was for nearly two decades a central place to publish Russian literature that could not be published in the Soviet Union. It was through Ardis that the first relatively complete publications of poets like Osip Mandelstam and Marina Tsvetaeva saw the light of day. And for many years Ardis served as a major venue for English translations of key Russian texts—poetry and prose alike—as well as for literary and critical anthologies that helped shape the English-language canon of Russian literature. We have included relatively few poem translations from Ardis publications, but a number of our prose pieces are taken from Ardis anthologies, with the permission of Overlook Press, who currently holds the rights to Ardis volumes.

Some of the prose translations we selected contained a rich array of footnotes in their original editions. While we have not added informational footnotes to any of the prose pieces, we did decide to include a few of the footnotes provided by other translators. The footnotes we reproduce include basic information that we thought might be helpful for readers, especially those less familiar with the Russian literary tradition. We chose not to include many footnotes that contained more specialist knowledge, but we encourage more knowledgeable readers to consult the original publications in which the translations appeared. (This information can be found in the "Sources and Permissions" section at the front of the book.) We also excerpted some footnotes so as to present only what seemed to us the most essential information for our readers. To distinguish notes by original authors from translators' notes, we have placed the translator's initials before footnotes the translator composed. Footnotes without initials were composed by the original author.

Some Issues in Translating Russian Poetry Into English

Over time there have been many marvelous translations of Russian poetry into English. At the same time, translating poetry from or into any language is never a simple thing, and there is no single correct way to do it, though individual translators may have strong feelings (and that is all to the good). Russian and English poetry offer a special case for the study of translation: they are similar in many ways—much more so than many possible translational pairs—but their different historical development and the different prosodic structures of the two languages (naturally reflected in the poetry) complicate a translator's choices interestingly. It is no surprise that various translations of the same poem can look quite dissimilar.

Different Literary Histories

The different histories of Russian literature and English literature (meaning literature written in those languages, whether or not by authors who were themselves ethnically Russian or English) have led to different results. The tradition of English poetry is today generally traced back to Geoffrey Chaucer, and so has been developing along that path since the fourteenth century (very roughly speaking), with occasional important influences from earlier works, such as *Beowulf*. By the twentieth century, when Modernism made a decisive break with traditional rhyme, meter, and poetic genres, English poetry had been chugging along for six centuries. Modern Russian poetry (as opposed to the earlier,

unrhymed epics such as the twelth-century *Lay of Igor's Campaign* or the first appearance of rhyme in Simeon Polotsky's seventeenth-century *virshy*) got going in the eighteenth century, and by the Silver Age (when, we would argue, it was brought completely up to date with the rest of Europe) it had been going for about two centuries. The poems people still really *read*, though, dated from a mere 120 or 130 years before the Silver Age (Derzhavin, Batyushkov, Zhukovsky). Both English and Russian poetry were decisively shaped by other literary traditions, though Russian readers, writers, and scholars generally do a better job of remembering this. Most of Chaucer's works were translations, and Elizabethan poets kept busy adapting poetic genres from Italian or French to their own language. (Indeed, French literature, as Russians came to know it, was decisively formed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: Ronsard looks very different from Corneille and Racine.) Modern Russian poetry stuttered to life by imitating the form of Polish *wierszy*, then got on track with Lomonosov's recommendation of syllabo-tonic verse (that is, verse with both regular stress patterns and a regular number of feet per line), with various rhyme schemes. Like French poetry, which incorporated many of the lessons of Neoclassicism, Russian poetry used terms from Classical Antiquity, reformulated by Boileau (Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux) in *L'Art poétique* (1674), a treatise on verse that was itself written in verse. No doubt like Boileau and his peers, Russian poets of the Silver Age deplored the bad verse their predecessors had written, considered it their duty to clean up Russian poetry—and succeeded magnificently.

If the situations in English and Russian poetry in the early twentieth century had grown (at last) largely similar, the same cannot be said of the next several decades. As this volume's introduction mentions, the Soviet period was not an easy time for literature. The impact of government literary bureaucracy and censorship, obligatory Socialist Realism, and all kinds of self-preserving moves by writers sent most poets back to more traditional genres and metrical forms; those who had experimented with unrhymed or slant-rhymed verse tended to leave those experiments in their past, perhaps retaining Mayakovskian "stair-step" format as a gesture toward the revolutionary avant-garde. (Some Russian poets, of course, did not self-preserve in these ways; look up the OBERIU, if you have not read them yet. Poetry was a surprisingly high-stakes game in the Soviet period.) Some of the more traditional-looking poetry of the Soviet era was still great—the late Akhmatova, the late Pasternak, not to

mention the work of younger poets—but it was no longer in step with prosodic and generic developments in England, France, or the countries of Central and Eastern Europe that were geographically nearer to Russia. The "freeze" imposed on the many Silver Age poets who were politically unacceptable meant that both their works and the innovations they embodied could not be part of public discourse; few Soviet readers had access to their work, and it was risky to be caught with a forbidden book while trying to enjoy that access, never mind to bring innovations into one's own poetry. In the late Soviet period, the cost of writing in different forms was not so high, but it still meant writing for an underground and self-publishing in *samizdat*. Russian poets write and publish today in all kinds of forms, but forms other than syllabo-tonic verse still feel innovative against that recent background; many significant poets continue to write in the forms that shaped the tastes and aesthetic responses of Soviet readers. Therefore, we would argue, many of the issues that translators of Russian poetry into English now face were shaped by the decades *after* the Silver Age, not by the Silver Age itself.

Besides the different political situations and the historical timing, two big additional reasons help explain why Russian and English poetry are different now: one is the arsenal of rhymes and perception of rhyme, and another is the different word length and stress patterns of the languages themselves, with their consequences for poetry written in those languages.

Rhyme in Russian and English Poetry

Neither Old Russian (Rusian) poetry nor Old English (Anglo-Saxon) poetry used rhyme; in both traditions rhyme came in "from outside," borrowed from other literary traditions and generally described with terms taken from Classical Greek via Latin in the Renaissance and beyond. The possibilities for rhyming became evident once poets (be they Chaucer or Lomonosov) began writing rhymed poetry and others followed them. It is certainly true that some Russian rhymes were already "tired" by the Golden Age; Pushkin made fun of the rhyme "*morozy/rozy*"—literally "frosts/roses," but translatable as "moon/June"—in 1824-25, in the fourth chapter of his novel in verse *Eugene Onegin*. Nevertheless, Russian grammar and word forms still offer more possibilities for rhymes in Russian, with not only feminine rhymes (where the stressed, rhyming syllable is followed by another syllable that also fits the rhyme) but

even dactylic and hyperdactylic rhymes (where the stressed syllable is followed by two or more syllables that also fit the rhyme). English poetry had shifted to using predominantly masculine rhymes by the seventeenth century, neglecting the longer rhymes. Due to shorter word length (about which more below), many exact rhymes in English are now hackneyed (though they live on in popular songs, rap music, and spoken word poetry, where moreover feminine rhyme sounds incisive and clever rather than merely amusing). It is telling that Mayakovsky's play with rhyme and meter closely resembles the work of Ogden Nash, a well-known comic poet writing in English. Both stretched the rules for verse composition to humorous effect for readers who were accustomed to versification that was essentially syllabo-tonic.

Word length and stress patterns conditioned the shift of English-language poetry away from strict metrical forms. The average length (in syllables) of a word in an ordinary prose text in English is a bit over one syllable, while the average length of a Russian word in an analogous text is over two syllables. English does have plenty of long words, but words of more than three syllables tend to have secondary stresses, and very long words will have more than one secondary stress. (Most of these long words are "twenty-five-cent words," which will also affect the stylistic level of a poem where they might be used.) Any Russian word—even a very long one (unless it compounds two words)—has only one stress, and the many unstressed syllables in these words (which, again, are already longer on the average than English words) allow a skillful poet to write regular metrical verse (especially trimeter verse, fully represented in the Russian tradition by all three variants: dactyl, amphibrach, and anapest) more easily without becoming rhythmically monotonous. For more discussion of the differences in rhyme and word stress between English and Russian, see Vladimir Nabokov's famous article "Problems of Translation: *Onegin* in English."[1] Nabokov took these difficulties as sufficient reason not to make a rhyming and scanning translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*.

An additional factor impacting all of this is the fondness of most English-language literary traditions for "domesticated" translations, discussed

1 Vladimir Nabokov, "Problems of Translation: *Onegin* in English," in *The Translation Studies Reader*, 3rd edition, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 113-125.

in detail by Lawrence Venuti in his book *The Translator's Invisibility*.[2] People who read poetry in English are often very fond of the rhymed, metered work of earlier generations, but those who read contemporary poets are used to poetry that signifies its aesthetic value in different ways. A translation that rhymes and scans can sound like bad Tennyson, and that might fit a late nineteenth-century Russian poet like Nadson but most assuredly does not suit the best writers of the Silver Age. Readers accustomed to English-language poetry are likely to prefer verse that feels more like what most English-language poets are writing today—which is for the most part not rhyming, scanning poetry.

Some translations in this collection scrupulously reproduce the meter and (as much as possible) the rhyme scheme of the original poems. We have also included some very free translations, and then a number that shift between the two positions, drawn away from reproduction of meter and rhyme when those exigencies force too much padding, require too many syllables, or make it impossible to convey the meaning of the original. (Because we don't read a Russian poem just to enjoy it, right? We also want to see what these certified great poets are writing ABOUT.) More than one approach to formal equivalence can result in a meaningful translation, and we would argue that there is no "right way" to do it: different approaches to translation will get different results, each with its particular values. To close this brief discussion we offer several versions of a poem for the reader to compare. Reading multiple translations is the richest and most informative way to approach a poem from a foreign literature, and if you are drawn to any of the poems in this anthology we strongly recommend looking at multiple versions. Each will offer a particular angle or window on what the original does. This is one reason why we list the collections where you might find more translations of a particular poet, under each poet's individual selection of poems.

As you read the following versions of the same poem by Anna Akhmatova, you will notice that some are stricter in reproducing the rhyme and meter, while others are less strict. If you know Russian, you will see where the translators have kept unusual turns of phrase, or added new turns of meaning in pursuit of similar effects.

2 Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, 2nd edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

Several Different Versions of the Same Russian Poem

A much-translated early poem by Anna Akhmatova:

Все мы бражники здесь, блудницы,
Как невесело вместе нам!
На стенах цветы и птицы
Томятся по облакам.

Ты куришь черную трубку,
Так странен дымок над ней.
Я надела узкую юбку
Чтоб казаться еще стройней.

Навсегда забиты окошки:
Что там, изморозь или гроза?
На глаза осторожной кошки
Похожи твои глаза.

О, как сердце мое тоскует!
Не смертного ль часа жду?
А та, что сейчас танцует
Непременно будет в аду.

1 января 1913 г.

Translations:

We are all carousers and loose women here;
How unhappy we are together!
The flowers and birds on the wall
Yearn for the clouds.

You are smoking a black pipe,
The puff of smoke has a funny shape.
I've put on my tight skirt
To make myself look still more svelte.

The windows are boarded up forever.
What's out there—hoarfrost or a storm?
Your eyes resemble
The eyes of a cautious cat.

Oh, I am sick at heart!
Isn't it the hour of death I await?
But that woman dancing now
Will be in hell, no doubt.

January 1, 1913

Judith Hemschemeyer, *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova: Expanded Edition*, ed. Roberta Reeder (Boston: Zephyr Press, 1992), 135-136.

We are heavy-drinkers and whores,
What a joyless, miserable crowd!
There are flowers and birds on the walls
And the birds all grieve for a cloud.

You are smoking your old black pipe,
And the smoke looks strange over it.
The skirt that I'm wearing feels tight,
But I hope that it makes me look fit.

What's the weather—thunder or ice?
Here, the windows are all boarded shut.
I examine your face and your eyes
Have the look of a sly cautious cat.

Ah, what sadness I'm feeling inside!
Am I waiting for death's solemn bell?
And that girl, who's been dancing all night,—
She will surely end up in hell.

January 1, 1913

Andrey Kneller, *Final Meeting* (Boston: Kneller, 2008), 31.