
THE OLD SCHOOL PRESS

Notes on our new publication *Tiutchev*



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THE POET: FEDOR TIUTCHEV 1803-1873

FEDOR TIUTCHEV published poems off and on from 1829, notably between 1836 and 1840 in Pushkin's journal *The Contemporary*, but he belonged to no poetic group and, in an age of prose, attached little value to his own verses and none to their publication. He worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1839 to 1858, except for his enforced retirement between 1841 and 1845 for having taken a second wife of distinguished German origin without the necessary permission of his superiors – and these years he spent in Germany. Only two books of lyric poetry appeared during his lifetime and these, it seems, owing entirely to the good offices of his friends (the first in 1854 was edited by the novelist Turgenev). Tiutchev's fabled indifference to his own reputation as a poet may have been in part because he lived much of his life abroad, mainly in Italy and Germany. Though educated privately on his father's estate in Ovs-tug near Briansk until the age of seventeen, this cosmopolitan country gentlemen preferred French to Russian for correspondence and polite conversation and – typically – published pan-Slav political articles in that language. He was influenced in youth by the Latin poets, especially Horace, by Pascal and Lamartine, but later – and as far as his poetry went more profoundly – by Goethe, Schiller, Heine and Friedrich Schelling. The last two he knew personally and he apparently argued spiritedly against Schelling's Natur-Philosophie which impregnates so much of his own poetry. Yet it is perhaps to Tiutchev's years of semi-retirement on his Russian estate of Muranovo near Moscow, which no doubt activated childhood memories of Ovstug, and to his 'last love' (which he also described as a 'fatal duel') for the youthful Elena Deniseva who braved social ostracism to bear him three illegitimate children in the course of a liaison lasting fourteen years until her death from consumption in 1864, that we owe many of the most inspired poems.

Tiutchev's desultory inspiration was not didactic and did not express a settled philosophy. Religious impulse alternates with nihilism, veneration for ensouled nature with awful glimpses of the void, a sensual love of cosmic order with intense, self-destructive attunement to the fascination of 'ancient chaos', benign sociability with nightmare solipsism, and tender compassion with the 'dull and gloomy flame of desire'. The form of his poetry too, though outwardly conventional, is far from rigid and is well adapted to express the unexpected eddies of thought and emotion through formal device. Always sonorous, the language is never artificial or pompous. Onomatopoeia and rhythm support the sense, indeed almost *are* the sense of the poet's fleeting but profound existential insights.

THE ARTIST: KIRILL SOKOLOV

KIRILL SOKOLOV was born in Moscow in 1930 and was educated at a special art school and at the Surikov Institute, from which he graduated *cum laude* for his diploma work, a series of linocuts to Elsa Triolet's *L'Inconnu*. He worked and exhibited primarily as an illustrator, engraver and lithographer until he left Russia to settle in England with his English wife Avril Pyman in 1974. In the privacy of his studio he also painted in oil and tempera, occasionally using spray and experimenting with various texture-enhancing passive materials: fantasy, landscapes, portraits and still-life, many of which are now in Russian museums or private collections. In England, he illustrated two Russian classics for Oxford University Press and several books of poetry (David Burnett, John Silkin, and a translation of Evtushenko's *A Dove in Santiago*), made a series of cover designs for the poetry magazine *Stand*, and exhibited with the Society of Graphic Artists and Society of Miniaturists, but painting, collage and later sculpture became his principal occupation and developed into an essentially lonely search for the archetypal. Obsessive themes, then as now, recur in abstract and figurative works: three-figure compositions, ladders, war-time windows pasted over against blast. He says of himself that, like Kay in the Snow Queen, he was spelling out the word Eternity with icicles – but he also in the 1980s found new friends in the Charlotte Press (later Northern Print), where he experimented with various techniques: silk-screen, sugar aquatint, dry point, various forms of flat-bed printing and engraving on plastic blocks. To this last he returned, after a serious operation in 1998 curtailed his physical stamina, to make a series of engravings for Akhmatova's *Requiem* (printed by Alan Anderson for the Black Cygnet Press, Durham, 2002) and for the Tjutchev poems in this book from The Old School Press.

THE TRANSLATOR: AVRIL PYMAN

AVRIL PYMAN was born in Hartlepool in 1930 and studied Russian at Cambridge University where she completed a PhD thesis on the origins of Russian Symbolism in 1958. The following year she took up a British Council scholarship to Leningrad to work on a biography of the poet Aleksandr Blok. In 1960 she was introduced to Kirill Sokolov, a relative of the poet. His first gift to her was a set of pastels to Blok's lyrical play *The Puppet-Booth* and after their marriage in 1963 he illustrated her editions of Blok's *Selected Verse*, *Three Plays* by Evgeny Shvarts, and the *Selected Prose* of Mikhail Bulgakov for Pergamon Press – work which earned a *Bookseller* award in 1973. After this their careers took separate, though often contingent paths. Avril translated prose and poetry from Russian into English until they left Moscow for England with their then eight-year-old daughter Irina. Here, she wrote *A Life of Alexander Blok* (Oxford University Press, 1979 and 1980) and a *History of Russian Symbolism* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), taught at the University of Durham, and became a Reader Emeritus on her retirement in 1996, in which year she was also elected a Fellow of the British Academy. It was on the basis of translations begun in Russia that she and Kirill decided to renew their cooperation with limited fine print editions of Russian poems in English.

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