

METAMORPHOSES

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REVIEW: YEVGENY BARATYNSKY, *A SCIENCE NOT FOR THE EARTH: SELECTED POEMS AND LETTERS*, translated from the Russian by RAWLEY GRAU, edited by RAWLEY GRAU and ILYA BERNSTEIN. Ugly Duckling Press, Eastern European Poets Series. New York, 2015.

In bringing Yevgeny Baratynsky's poetry to an English-language audience, Rawley Grau renders a considerable service to students of Russian literature, European Romanticism, and the lyric tradition broadly. Like other poets of the "Pushkin Pléiade," Baratynsky's legacy may have suffered by his close association with Alexander Pushkin, who is commonly regarded as the progenitor of modern Russian literature, to the extent of overshadowing his peers. Baratynsky was undeniably central to the early nineteenth-century "Golden Age" of Russian literature: he advanced the formal and conceptual sophistication of the elegy, pioneering methods of psychological analysis that anticipated the Russian novel, and a balance between thought and technique that would influence Modernist poets. In his programmatic essay "On the Addressee" (1913), Osip Mandelstam considers Baratynsky's "My gift is meager and my voice not loud" (1828, p. 85), emphasizing the lyrical subject's desire to locate "a reader in posterity": the poet speaks across time, beyond his immediate context, reaching the appropriate "addressee" in an intimate manner. With the publication of Grau's excellent translations, presented beside the original Russian verse, Baratynsky's poems will hopefully reach a wider audience "in posterity," just as it reached a young Mandelstam.

Born in 1800, Baratynsky came of age in Russia's post-Napoleonic epoch, as the fervor of national pride and individual heroism transitioned to an atmosphere of political repression. In preparation for an officer's career, Baratynsky was enrolled in the Corps des Pages military academy, but was expelled in 1816 when he and several friends established a "Society of Avengers," (allegedly inspired by Friedrich Schiller's *The Robbers*), and stole 500 rubles and a snuffbox from a classmate's father. Tsar Alexander I refused to pardon the crime for nearly a decade; the young Baratynsky was reduced in rank, and essentially deprived of his nobility status. Attempting to restore his position, in 1818 he enlisted as a soldier and was deployed to Finland, which had been annexed by Russia in 1809. In his early verse of this period, Baratynsky cultivates an image of poetic exile, though his post was in fact not far

from St. Petersburg, enabling frequent trips to the capital and an ongoing engagement with literary society. When he finally secured his promotion to officer in 1825, in part through the intercession of Vasily Zhukovsky, he resigned from the military, married in 1826, and moved to his estate at Muranova, near Moscow. In subsequent years, Baratynsky balanced writing with family and estate management, though he remained active in literature through regular publishing and correspondence. In 1843, his family traveled abroad to Europe; after spending the winter in Paris, they proceeded to Naples, where Baratynsky was suddenly taken ill, and died in 1844 of undetermined causes.

Whereas Pushkin wrote successfully in multiple literary genres, Baratynsky is best remembered for his work in the elegy form. Zhukovsky and Konstantin Batiushkov, poets of the preceding generation, expanded the Russian elegy's scope by bringing attention to man's inner world, framing conventional elegiac emotions (melancholy, sorrow, longing) with stylistic precision. By comparison, Baratynsky's lyrics explore similar topics with a shift toward self-analysis, penetrating feeling and reason alike. In early poems such as "Complaint" (1820, p. 3) and "Disillusionment" (1821, p. 21), romantic longing is replaced by nostalgia for an emotional absorption that no longer seems possible. While such Byronic disillusionment is common in late-Romantic literature, for Baratynsky it is a starting point for a project increasingly directed inward, as the elegy is refined as a tool for psychological self-reflection, and a meditation on the bifurcated, alienated nature of being.

The problem of dualism is a consistent feature of Baratynsky's verse, as self-consciousness prevents an unmediated experience of the world. Remarkably, the concern is already evident in a letter from Baratynsky, aged 16, to his mother: "Might not happiness, by chance, be a certain combination of ideas that render us incapable of thinking of anything but that which fills our hearth, which is filled in a way that does not allow us to reflect on what it feels?" (p. 283). This youthful inquiry evolves into a recurrent lyric theme, and a problem of increasing urgency, that spans Baratynsky's career:

Thought, always, thought! Unfortunate word-artist!
 Thought's priest! For you there's no oblivion.
 Again and again, always the world and man
 and death and life and truth without a cover.
 Brush, organ, chisel — happy the man inclined
 To these sensate things, who stays within their border!

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Drunkenness awaits him at the world's feast!
But before you, as before a sword unsheathed —
O though, sharp ray! — this earthly life turns pallid.
(1840, p. 211)

As is often the case in Baratynsky's work, a fundamental epistemological crisis is correlated with the problem of representation, and specifically linguistic signification, as the sign recapitulates the metaphysical relationship between mind and world. In this, Baratynsky's self-analysis functions to reflect on the poetic vocation, as we find frequently in his late poetry. As Grau observes in his insightful and wide-ranging critical introduction, this explicitly semiotic concern varies across individual poems, which at times invest language with the power to express the elusive nature of experience. In the example above, as elsewhere, Grau's precise translations accurately render the clarity of Baratynsky's language, as well as his innovative use of punctuation and enjambment, designed to imitate the rhythms (and interruptions) of thought. Grau notes that meter was a priority in his translations, which do preserve Baratynsky's metrical structures; in this, as in his semantic precision, he closely approximates the meditative and analytical features of the original Russian verse.

In striking ways, Baratynsky's verse reflects concerns similar to those of German metaphysical thought of the period, and his work is often described as philosophical in nature. Yet, his poetry never gives way to abstraction; it remains grounded in human experience, presenting the material world in vivid, palpable terms, even as the poet struggles to overcome an ontological distance from nature. While Baratynsky often employs conventional iambic meters and alternating rhyme schemes, particularly in his early lyrics, these binary structures give subtle rhythmic expression to the theme of epistemological dualism, to the vacillation of the mind in doubt. Grau's selection, which includes 87 poems from across Baratynsky's career, charts the chronological development of his work. Among these, the 1842 collection *Dusk* is included in its entirety, and is notable in aesthetic and historical terms for its common designation as the first publication of Russian verse presented as an autonomous literary cycle. *Dusk* merits consideration as a composite work, as topics consistent to Baratynsky's poetry (skepticism, ambivalence, alienation) intersect with themes of artistic creation and interpretation to construct a complex lyric identity.

While Baratynsky's poetry is of primary interest in *A Science*

Not for the Earth, the volume also includes many of the poet's personal letters, translated from Russian and French, including correspondence with Pushkin, Zhukovsky, Petr Viazemsky, Anton Delvig, and Ivan Kireevsky. Like the verse selections, the letters are paired with excellent annotations, and categorized by period and general topic, which aid in situating Baratynsky in his historical and social context. In addition to illuminating biographical information, the letters have immense historical value as documents of his relationship to other writers, publishing institutions, and ideological currents, including the debate between Slavophiles and Westernizers, which coalesced among some of Baratynsky's close acquaintances in the 1830s. The letters also enhance understanding of Baratynsky's aesthetics — both in terms of his personal poetics, and in statements that situate this project in relation to historical poetics and the shifting of literary paradigms. Notably, the letters also include a developing theory of the novel, often paired with Baratynsky's claims of an emerging interest in prose in his own writing. While his statements on the novel merit attention in relation to Baratynsky's poetry of the late 1830s and early 1840s, they are also fascinating to consider in correlation with his influence on the Realist movement taking shape in the same period. Apart from Ivan Turgenev, who was himself a poet, and certainly the most "elegiac" novelist of his generation, Baratynsky's influence on the Realist novel was less stylistic than psychological; it is evident in Tolstoy's obsession with similar epistemological issues, and the conflict between thought and action, as well as Dostoevsky's approach to problems of self-reflection and consciousness. While Baratynsky's influence across twentieth-century Russian poetry is more readily acknowledged, it is hoped that this superb volume, in bringing greater attention to the breadth of Baratynsky's art, will in turn stimulate research on his position in nineteenth-century Russian literary history.