
POETRY

E V G E N Y R E I N

Selected and Introduced by Joseph Brodsky

A quarter century ago, during a chance kitchen-table conversation in what used to be called Leningrad, someone—perhaps it was even me—christened Evgeny Rein an “elegiac urbanist.” This characterization now strikes me as rather inadequate, perhaps because it was more a quick sketch of the poet’s personality than a definition that actually corresponded to the metaphorical radius or the metaphysical vector of his work.

Nevertheless, by genre and by the dominant tone of most of his verse, Rein is unquestionably an elegiac poet. His main theme is the end of things, the end, to put it more broadly, of a world order that is dear—or at least acceptable—to him. The incarnation of this order in his poetry is the city in which he grew up, the city of Leningrad. It is the heroine of the love lyrics he wrote in the 1960s and ’70s. It is the circle of friends from the same period, which formed, in the expression of the renowned Russian poetess Anna Akhmatova, a “magical chorus” and which lost its cupola when she died in 1966.

But in contrast to the dramatic effect accompanying the collapse of a world or a myth usually found in elegiac poets, in contrast to Eliot’s “This is the way the world ends” (“This is the way the world ends/ Not with a bang but a whimper”), the death of the world order in Rein is accompanied by a vulgar ditty from the ’30s or ’40s. Indeed, for Rein’s work—and in my view he is metrically the most gifted Russian poet of the second half of the 20th century—the cadences of Soviet popular music from that era probably had a greater influence than the technical achievements of the best among the Russian futurists and constructivists.

Moreover, the death of the world order for Rein is not a singular event but a gradual process. Rein is a poet of erosion, of disintegration—of human relationships, moral categories, historical connections, and dependencies of any nature binomial or multipolar. And his verse, like a spinning black record, is the only form of mutation accessible to him, a fact testified to above all by his assonant rhymes. To top it all, this poet is extraordinarily concrete, substantive. Eighty percent of a Rein poem commonly consists of nouns and proper names. The remaining 20 percent is verbs, adverbs, and, least, adjectives. As a result, the reader often has the impression that the subject of the elegy is language itself, parts of speech illuminated by the sunset of the past tense, which casts its long shadow into the present and even touches the future.

But what might seem to the reader a conscious artifice, or at the very least a product of retrospection, is not. For the surplus materiality, the oversaturation with nouns, was present in Rein’s poetry from the beginning. In his earliest poems, at the end of the 1950s—in particular in his first poem, “Arthur Rimbaud”—one notes a kind of “Adamism,” a tendency to name things, to

enumerate the objects of this world, an almost infantlike thirst for words. For this poet, the discovery of the world accompanied the development of diction. Ahead of him there was, if not life, then at least a huge dictionary.

Rein not only radically extended the poetic vocabulary and sound palette of Russian poetry; he also broadened and shook up the psychological sweep of Russian lyrics. He is an elegist, but of a tragic stripe. Few among his compatriots would dispute the depth of the despair and exhaustion that darkens these poems. Throughout a quarter of a century Rein's lyrical hero, that "restless inhabitant of two capitals" who is "his own commander," has accomplished a rather horrifying evolution, resulting in his appeal to the Creator: "Either return my soul,/ or appoint it to no one." And then—since we're talking about evolution—the hero dwindles further to "I am a gray, boulevard bird." The singing of this boulevard bird is truly heartbreaking, not so much for its timbre as for the fact that in it one hears not complaint but utter indifference to its own twitter.

At present Rein has published three collections of poems; the first of them appeared when he was 50 years old, in 1988. The publication of the two following books, at intervals of about two years, should apparently be seen as the triumph of justice. The problem with triumphs of justice is that by definition they always come late: in this case 25 years late. And even these three collections do not adequately convey the scope and significance of this poet for Russian literature.

Every important poet has his or her own beloved, idiosyncratic landscape. Rein has two. One is a city view disappearing into aniline, most likely Kamenostrovsky Prospect in Leningrad, with its fin de siècle vinaigrette of art nouveau flavored with Muscovite constructivism, with the obligatory bridge and wrinkled sheet of leaden water. The other is a blend of the Baltics and the Black Sea, "a gulf with the Kronstadt at its side,/ with the maneuvers of silent navies," with palms, balustrades, a passenger boat entering the bay, new battleships broadcasting the foxtrot as they sail in formation, people strolling on the promenade. If the first represents a lost, or at least strongly compromised, paradise, the second is a possible, acquired paradise.

I would like, above all, to sit Evgeny Rein down at a table on some veranda of this paradise, place a pen and piece of paper before him, and leave him for a time—the longer the better—in peace. For inspiration, I would give him Virgil—better the *Bucolics* or *Georgics* than the *Aeneid*, and even better, a volume of Propertius. Something, in other words, devoid of ambitions and created without apparent haste. After a month or so I'd drop in to see what had happened. Russian poetry has never had enough time (or space, for that matter). This explains its intensity and wrenching quality—not to say hysteria. What has been created in the existent parameters over the last hundred years—under Damocles' sword—is extraordinary, but too often colored by a sense of "now or never!"

The deformation of poetic fate is as much the norm for us as its truncation, and the poet—even a beginning poet—sees himself and is received by his audience in a dramatic key. What is expected of him is not restraint but falsetto, not wisdom but irony or, in the best case, sincerity. This is not much, and one

wants to hope that this state of affairs will change—and that the change will begin immediately, with Rein. That's why one wants to give him Virgil or Propertius. He has already been Ovid, and Catullus as well. After all, a man living in an empire, especially a collapsing one, loses little when he identifies himself with those who in similar circumstances, 2,000 years ago, did not allow themselves to fall into dependence on surrounding events, and whose speech remained firm. It must be said that during the era of imperial petrification Rein has done as much.

Vologda

In an unfamiliar, provincial town,
while sitting for a smoke above the river,
prick up your ears and take a look around
—you'll be repaid for all your grief twice over.

There you'll catch voices, automobile
horns, barking dogs, and scraps of dance-band music.
Don't die: the heavens are attainable
without that happening. And you're lucid.

Onto the Road

As though a weather vane, your angel gyred
a wing full-face, askance—you did not linger
within that room; as though a coal that's fired,
your own concerns now scintillate and clinker.
You pour the tea, a sweet and muddled brew
with caramel and a wine that you concocted.
A month of Sundays since we met—adieu,
this aging hangover cannot be doctored;
half-practicable dreams, attempts that missed—
the only chance whose countenance was special.
Whatever your occasion for our tryst—
we split, as divorcés upon the threshold.
Inside the shared apartment, there's no sound,
a drafty postern at the manor kitchen.
Existence has already been unwound,
spoiled rotten by the cryptographic pidgin
of millions from Asia, tops that spun
by clockwork as the earth itself would pivot.
To flee their onslaught, where would you have run,
in which translation is their truth delivered?
A ringing comes from deep within time's pail,

the tropic zones have long since matched the tundras.
To die before Attila's Sten gun hail
in flight with Alexander would be wondrous.
The time has come, we brim with lack of sound
that's leveled by the eye of some colossus.
And these transitions? Purely outward-bound,
the track a footfall nevermore recrosses.

On Fontanka

On Fontanka there's ruin and ravage,
And the building on Troitsky Street's razed,
Crawling out of a hatch comes some savage—
He's unshaven and bare to the waist.
On his chest azure lines interblended—
Hammer, sickle, an eagle's two heads,
Years of hooch left his eyebags distended,
'Round his brow a gold halo was spread.
The cathedral's his goal this close evening.
And he spits on the worn-away bronze
Then he sings hateful songs on perceiving
He is close to the place he belongs.
There is major renewal and ravage,
All the prewar years' nonsense and trash,
G.P.U.*, agitprop, people scavenged—
All placed under the bricks that lay smashed.
Then my people took up their existence
On the ruins, as dust they'd alight—
So a squadron flies into the distance
Before dawn in the blood of the fight.
So then come crashing down, multistoried
House of arrogance, theft, all that's false,
Because fearless and dank on your flooring,
The Neva's gray of eventide crawls.
Go back home, bird of passage and urchin,
To where cisterns decay, beneath gates.
On this night you're well known to what's urgent—
To stoutheartedness and to the fates.
Where the building on Troitsky is ruined,
Pitch-dark standards both flutter and swell,
At the bottom of gates, winds are strewing
Paper sheets, your next book of black spells.

*G.P.U.—State Political Directorate. Secret police force that replaced the Cheka in 1922.

The Music of Life

*Resplendency and gloom—a cleft domain
and equally we strive to read the twain.
When from a tree an apple has descended,
a man has seized the firmament's design!
The prophet's savage import is extended
uncommonly to us in such a sign.*
—E. A. Baratynsky (1800–1844)

Music of life—petroleum waters,
rollers at Yalta, stacked high on the shoreline.
Music of life—another man's quarters. . .
Give me your promise then, tell me for sure I'm

not to be left here, alone at my mooring,
lips weighted down with a word that's conclusive.
Over my shoulders may cables keep calling—
imports are taken, you'll not be exclusive.

Trumpets and flutes sound above the dark reason
of the Black Sea and the fall of the curtain—
clearly, the time to begin has arisen
for these last twenty-four hours, fraught with hurting.

White beams from searchlights illumine expressions;
those who will die today under the water,
music of life, every bird knows your essence,
you're unsubdued in the midnight of Yalta.

Ladders are falling and sniffers in shatters,
from "Oreanda" come timbres of tangos,
music of life, give me air apparatus,
oxygen tanks, hold me firm in your tangles.

What's the "Titanic" to us or "Nakhimov"?
Once we have jettisoned both life preservers,
heading for shallows, together we'll swim off,
someone's en route, and we'll come to his service.

Filling his mouth with a stream of pure liquor,
flooding his soul with "The Slav Maiden's Parting,"
music of life—the offended, the victor,
make me forget at the funeral party.

Beethoven's heard as he rolls me a hogshead,
Scriabin is uptown and pounding the keyboard,

out floats a life raft, constructed of logs and
old-fashioned organs, destroyed on the seaboard.

Time and again you'll be mourning your liners,
under full orchestras, mainsails come crashing,
now, as then, send me your song through malignest
seawaters, just as before, come with passion.

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The nighttime abettor of ruin
Spears falsehood and truth in the black,
Akin to a hunting knife, hewing
A path through a stationary pack.

Exhausted by secretive essays,
With wing tips obliquely upraised,
You fall towards towns of excesses
By way of their ordurous blaze.

Correctives exist for your purges,
Regardless of flight having passed.
You're fifty percent female virtues—
And this is your soul's saving cast.

Reclining across the chance bedstead,
There's movement within your eye's green,
And now, who is truly suggested,
A mermaid or infant? Machine?

I would have become your own peon,
Beforehand, whenever I'd known
I'll die in your red empyrean,
Resembling the first to have flown.

You'll always escape being pinioned,
You have to be cherished at least
Till vanishing in your dominion
Of night-clouds, an impious beast.

"Vologda" was translated by Paul Graves. All other
poems were translated by David MacFadyen.