STALIN, PUTIN AND THE POETS

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The propriety of a poet celebrating a tyrant seems to be a matter of relativity, and time the main coordinate. No critic of Ovid lambastes him for appeals to Augustus in *Tristia*. The cult of Elizabeth I in Sir Philip Sidney, or of all the Tudors in Shakespeare does not invalidate our appreciation of their genius. We won’t condemn Hungarian poets for the cult of Attila, or Mongolians rehabilitating Genghis-Khan. But within two centuries of a tyrant’s death, sensitivity increases Celebrations of Napoleon written only by non-Frenchmen (Lermontov) can be read purely as poetry. Poems to Hitler are effectively banned, and Odes to Stalin usually excluded from the collected works of Russian and Soviet poets, or apologized for and relegated to an appendix. The consensus is that, if the poem was written voluntarily, its moral turpitude outweighs literary value; if written under duress, it cannot ipso facto be poetry. There is a limbo, in which a poem implicitly approving tyranny can enter the canon, as long as the tyrant is unnamed. For instance, Gottfried Benn’s brief adulation of Hitler (which never resulted in any specific tribute) could be inferred, especially in the early 1930s, from such poems as ‘Dennoch die Schwerter halten’, where among ‘ein paar grosse Männer/und die litten tief’ Hitler may have seen himself.

But there are other factors: a Zoroastrian belief that the forces of evil are as much to be acknowledged as those of good. In western poetry that is clear in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, where Satan is treated with respect due to a democrat revolting against divine tyranny. But apart from acknowledging Satan, a poet may recognize in a tyrant his alter ego. In many cultures of Europe and Asia, one qualification of a tyrant has been to write poetry: Nero, Henry VIII of England, King James of Scotland and England, most Bagratid kings of Georgia, Catherine the Great and, of course, Stalin. Even among secret policemen, the tyrant’s most indispensable aids, a talent for versifica-
tion was a desirable qualification, and an interest in it an essential one. Dzerzynski wrote Polish lyrics, Menzhinsky Russian erotic blasphemous verse, the last of the old-style KGB men, Iuri Andropov was a poet of modest Augustan ability:

Yes, we’re all mortal, although I dislike
This truth, the most frightful of all.
But at the appointed hour I too, like everyone, shall die
And even memories of me will be erased by the holy Lethe.

We are ephemeral in this sublunary world:
Life is just a moment (and a semicolon);
Life is just a moment; non-existence is for ever.
The earthly globe spins in the universe,
Human beings live and vanish.

But phenomena, born in a haze,
Are ineradicable on their path to a dawn.
Other generations on Earth
Are carrying life’s baton further and further.

Да, все мы смертны, хоть не по нутру
Мне эта истина, страшней которой нету.
Но в час положенный и я, как все, умру,
И память обо мне сотрет святая Лета.

Мы бренны в этом мире под луной:
Жизнь—только миг (и точка с запятой);
Жизнь—только миг; небытие—навеки.
Крутится во вселенной шар земной,
Живут и исчезают люди.

Но сущее, рожденное во мгле,
Неистребимо на пути к рассвету.
Иные поколенья на Земле
Несут все дальше жизни эстафету.

or:
Some clown blurted out the idea
That power corrupts people.
All the highbrows have been repeating that
Since then for years on end,
Without noticing (that’s the trouble!)
That more often than not people corrupt power

Сбрехнул какой-то лиходей,
Как будто портит власть людей.
О том все умники твердят
С тех пор уж много лет подряд,