Esenin would have been 100 years old last October had he lived — a contradiction in terms since one always thinks of him as perpetually young and smiling, but as for his work several generations on, has the image of it changed much? V. Markov wrote in Grani¹ more than forty years ago: “Литературу нужно постоянно переоценивать, а для этого по-новому перечитывать; если не вычитывается ничего нового, возможно, что это плохая литература.” Earlier in the article he exclaims: “Чем объясняется чудовищная популярность Есенина? Ведь Пушкина так не любят... объяснение нужно искать не столько в творчестве Есенина, сколько в мемуарах и статьях о нем.”

I hope to demonstrate that Esenin’s poetry is not poor literature and that the fascination it exerts does not stem from memoirs and articles about the poet but from the work itself.

Esenin remarked to the critic Rozanov in 1923:

“Вот почему я счиаю неправильным, если кто-нибудь станет делить мое творчество по периодам — периодов не было, если брать по существу мое основное Я всегда оставался самым собой.”²

An exhaustive analysis of the themes of Esenin’s work through the 15 years of his creative life will demonstrate that he spoke here the simple truth. From start to finish his basic themes were those of his first village period — for his lyric: nature, love, the village, religion, reflections on life and death, folk songs and for his epics and dramas: the folk hero. Of course these themes developed and new ones were added as the pattern of his life changed. In his first Moscow period (1912-15) human love crystallized into a love of Rus’ and rodina and the religious content of his work increased. War too became an important new theme in 1914. He wrote fifty lyrics and five long poems at this

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¹ A version of this essay was given to Mansfield College, Oxford 1985 and was further developed in the author’s monograph commemorating the 100th anniversary of the poet’s birth (Jessie Davies, The Poetic Soul of Russia — Sergei Esenin (1895-1925) Formby: Lincoln Davies, 1995).

time, but in his first Petrograd period (1915-16) when he was no longer holding a regular job, he wrote as many poems in one year as in the previous two and a half.

In Petrograd he joined a society with the exotic title of Obshchestvo dlia Vozrozhdeniia Khudozhestvennoi Rusi, founded by the ubiquitous Colonel Loman. No doubt influenced by the requirements of this society, he wrote a series of poems portraying village byt in which Christian and pagan rites figure. Some of the themes are reminiscent of Stravinsky’s 1912 Rite of Spring where there is the same emphasis on earth worship (mat’ zemlia syraia), ring dancing and fertility. He wrote too a graphic hundred and forty page prose tale Yar also devoted to village life in all its charm and sordidness. It has not so far received the attention it deserves but there will be several correspondences between it and Esenin’s later lyrical, epic “Anna Snegina” of 1924. I saw it shown as a film on Moscow TV last October during the centenary celebrations, giving it at last the striking performance it deserves. An important trait in Esenin’s work is his extreme tenderness for animals and birds and some of his most moving poems are about them: “Pesn’ o sobake” (Song of a Dog) (which made Gorkii weep!), “Korova” (The Cow), the enchanting “Tabun” (Herd of Horses), “Lisitsa” (The Vixen), “Lebedushka” (The Swan) and later “Kobyli korabli” (Mare Ships), “Sorokoust” (Requiem), “Volch’ia gibel’” (Death of a Wolf), “Sukin syn” (Son of a Bitch) and “Sobake Kachalova” (To Kachalov’s Dog). Doubtless they became an important theme in his work at this time as a reaction to the senseless slaughter of the First World War.

Esenin made no distinction between human, animal and plant life and it is necessary to make a short digression here to stress a fundamental characteristic of the poet, without which his work will not be fully understood – namely his identification of himself with trees. He wrote in his art treatise: “Vse ot dreva – my est’ chada dreva.” He drew his conception of the nebesnoe drevo mentioned in “Otchar” (Father of the Russian land) from an 1868 book by Afanas’ev which he bought in hungry Moscow for five poods of flour: Poeticheskie vozreniia slavian na prirodu (The Slavs’ views on nature) which together with the “Slovo o polku Igoreve” (The Lay of Igor’s Campaign) and the Bible, furnished him with much of his folklore material. Chapter 17 v. 2, entitled Drevo zhizni i lesnye dukhi (The Tree of Life and the Wood Sprites), runs:

...древний человек почти не знал неодушевленных предметов, всюду находил он и разум, и чувство и волю. В шуме лесов, в