During the past decade, practically every year was blessed by a rich crop of scholarly publications marking the centennary anniversaries of celebrated 20th century Russian poets: Khlebnikov, Gumilev, Khodasevich, and Livshits, Akhmatova, Pasternak, Mandel'shtam, Tsvetaeva, and Maiakovskii. The Esenin centennial, the final event in this sequence, has demonstrated that this poet still attracts scholarly attention as a paradigmatic socio-biographical figure rather than an artist. There are biographies of Esenin, there are memoirs and anti-memoirs, legends and counterlegends, but there is no study of Esenin's poetics as a whole.

It has been said that a scholarly, rather than a lyrical, critic needs not answer the question of what the poet intended to say, but is duty-bound to answer the question where the poet has come from.

To identify the actual sources of Esenin's poetics is, in my opinion, a necessary preliminary for any comprehensive description of his verbal art and the universe of poetic discourse which is manifest in it, with its two extremes, the toad and the rose, Nezدورове, хилое, низкое and Несказанное, синее, неzhnoe.

The theoretical premise of this short introduction to the problem at hand is the biological analogy proposed by Viach. Vs. Ivanov to elucidate the mechanism of literary heredity. Certain texts of earlier poets, often quite untypical, subordinate, "incidental" in the context of their poetics, may serve as the genotype in relation to the eventual phenotypical realization of their traits and latent potentialities in the art of later poets, in which such uncharacteristic and previously unnoticed features as, for example, the symbolism of Gogol, disregarded by the authors of the natural school, would become fully manifest and assume a dominant role.

Essentially, this model generalizes and defines in terms of cultural synchrony the pattern of inheritance which the early formalists called "canonization of the junior line," or "transmission from uncle to nephew," or the "chess knight's move," and at the same time shows how the principle operates in individual instances, for example, in the case of Tsvetaeva's poetics of the 20's.

To give an example closer to our subject, Fet’s quite untypical poem “Avaddon” clearly prefigures Kliuev’s poetic manner:

Ангел, и лев, и телец, и орел —
Все шестикрылые — держат престол,
А над престолом, над тем, кто сидит,
Радуга ярким смарагдом горит.
Молнии с громом по небу летят,
И раздаётся из них: „Свят, свят, свят!“

Similarly, Fet’s

Ель рукавом мне тропинку завесила.

to a greater degree than any folklore source has contributed to the semantic make-up of Esenin’s characteristic metaphors:

Как метель, черемуха
Машет рукавом.

It may be noted parenthetically that Fet provided the inspiration of the two mutually complementary elegiac moods among the representatives of the organic natural ideal in Russian poetry, associated respectively with Bunin’s theme of the decline of gentlefolk and Esenin’s theme of the decline of peasantry, the manor and the cabin.

However, the similarity between the last poets of the manor and the last poets of the village ends here. While Bunin continued a living tradition, it is a fallacy, albeit a common one, to assert that the peasant poets were born into the milieu of Russian folk poetry. Just as Gorodetskii reconstructed elements of Slavic mythologies from books, just as Diagilev and Stravinskii borrowed the idea of Vesna sviaschennaiia from the Viennese post-secessionist group Ver Sacrum (hence the change of the title in French, for the Western public), so Kliuev and Esenin consciously built their folk image,² using literary rather than oral sources, but did it so successfully that, in the instance of Esenin, at least, the so-called “peasant poetry,” although it did not grow from any living folk roots, became truly the folk poetry of modern Russia.

Let us consider the cardinal thematic components of Esenin’s poetry and the respective “genotypes” which Esenin adopted for their embodiment and unfolding. One should distinguish here between the higher structures, the lyric plots and motifs, composition, rhythmic and intonational, grammatical and phonosemantic patterns, and other salient features of the individual