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Nikolai Klyuev – Prophet and Loss

Nikolai Klyuev (1884-1937) was born and brought up near Vytegra, at the south-eastern end of Lake Onega. It was while still living in villages in this region that he began his literary career, writing his first poems and initiating his correspondence with Aleksandr Blok. That correspondence, *inter alia*, led him to the literary world of St Petersburg, where he was prominent in Modernist circles in the 1910s. But from late 1917 until 1923 he lived almost exclusively in Vytegra, the small town at the centre of his home region (a region intriguingly caught between Finno-Ugric, if increasingly russified, Karelia, and the “true” Russian north). Klyuev was a very active participant in local affairs, including local journalism, in these years, wrote a large number of lyric poems, and wrote what most readers would see as the first of his *poemy*. In 1918 he wrote a lyric addressed to Anna Kirillova, wife of the poet Vladimir Kirillov (himself the addressee of an intriguing two-poem cycle of 1918/19). The poem to Anna Kirillova begins:

Эта девушка умрет в родах...
Невдогад болезной повитухе,
Что он был давяще-яр в плечах
И с пушком на отроческом брюхе,

Что тяжел и сочен был приплод –
Бурелом средь яблонь белоцветных... (380).

Characteristically, the poem turns away from this startling opening to predict a bright afterlife for the heroine, and concludes:

Эту девушку, душистую, как соты,
Приголубит радужный Христос. (381).

In 1919 the local paper, *Zvezda Vytegry*, published selections from the verse of Esenin, Shiryayevs, Kirillov, and Klyuev himself, accompanied by brief, anonymous, introductory notes. Klyuev was characterized as follows:

A clairvoyant poet of the people, fixing upon himself the astonished attention of all of his great contemporaries.

The son of Olonian forests, who has struck Russian literature with verbal thunder. Workers' and peasants' power did not fail to honour the Red Bard, publishing his writings alongside the immortal works of Lev Tolstoy, Gogol', etcetera.¹

Recent scholarship has demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that the author of this brief editorial commentary was none other than the poet Klyuev himself (who published a number of short pieces of journalism anonymously in the local paper).

As both poem and anonymous self-characterization indicate, Klyuev was much preoccupied with the association between prophecy (and such related phenomena as omens, foresight, visions, and so on) and poetry, often in a context of expressively national identity. The prophetic note in his poetry is heard especially clearly in the years from approximately 1916 to the early 1920s, but may be found both before and, with especial force, although more rarely, later. Often it is in an expressly apocalyptic context, although by no means infrequently the content is utopian (and the utopias are diverse). And several of his very last known poems are especially notable for their powerful visionary, apocalyptic, and apparent prophetic quality. The cycle "Razrukha", apparently compiled (and in part written) in 1934, consists of three lyrics, "Pesnya Gamayuna", "Ot Lache-ozera do Vyga", and "Est' demony chumy, prokazy i kholery". The first of these poems also forms a small but significant part of Klyuev's longest work, his massive, almost four-thousand-line *Pesn' o Velikoi Materi*, written between 1929 and 1934, and extant only in an incomplete version (a characteristic textual instability for the late Klyuev). "Pesnya Gamayuna" introduces the major themes of the cycle: the arrival of ill-omened news; the loss of traditional Russia, and destruction of traditional hearth and home; the present as plague; a catalogue of disasters tied to places expressive of the physical and cultural geography of the Russian empire; the destruction of the Russian north. "Ot Lache-ozera do Vyga", the most complex and elusive of the three poems, charts a metaphorical journey across that physical and cultural geography, encountering

¹ S. I. Subbotin, "Proza Nikolaya Klyueva v gazetakh 'Zvezda Vytegry' i 'Trudovoe slovo' (1919-1921 gody). Voprosy stilya i atributsii", *Russkaya literatura*, no 4 (1984), 145.

past and present, documented and visionary horrors. “Est’ demony chumy, prokazy i kholery” links its catalogue of plagues to a lament for Russian towns and rivers afflicted by the present, and concludes with an elaborate description of Stalinist Moscow. The pronouncements of “Pesnya Gamayuna” (the entire poem is sung by the prophetic, mythological bird Gamayun) set the tone for the entire cycle:

«К нам Вести горькие пришли,
Что зыбь Арала в мертвой тине,
Что редки аисты на Украине,
Моздокские не звонки ковыли,
И в светлой Саровской пустыне
Скрипят подземные рули!

К нам тучи вести занесли,
Что Волга синяя мелеет,
И жгут по Керженцу злодеи
Зеленохвойные кремли,
Что нивы суздальские, тлея,
Родят лишайник да комли!

Нас окликают журавли
Прилетной тягою впоследки,
И сгибли зябликов насадки
От колтуна и жадной тли,
Лишь сыроежкам многолетки!
Хрипят косматые шмели!

К нам вести черные пришли,
Что больше нет родной земли,
Как нет черемух в октябре,
Когда потемки на дворе
Считают сердце колуном,
Чтобы согреть продрогший дом,
Но не послушны колуну,
Поленья воют на луну.
И больно сердцу замирать,
А в доме друг, седая мать!
Ах, страшно песню распинать.

Нам вести душу обожгли,
Что больше нет родной земли,
Что зыбь Арала в мертвой тине,

Замолк Грицько на Украине,
И Север -- лебедь ледяной –
Истек бездомною волной,
Оповещающая корабли,
что больше нет родной земли!» (764-5)

While these late works paint an apocalyptic vision of Russia in general, with especial reference to the Russian north, Klyuev's very last known lyric, written in Tomsk in 1937 (the place and year of his final arrests and of his execution), "Est' dve strany: odna – Bol'nitsa" is principally a self-portrait in anticipation of death:

Есть две страны: одна — Больница,
Другая — Кладбище, меж них
Печальных сосен вереница,
Угрюмых пихт и верб седых!

Блуждая пасмурной опушкой,
Я обронил свою клюку,
И заунывною кукушкой
Стучусь в окно к гробовщику:

«Ку-ку! Откройте двери, люди!»
«Будь проклят, полунощный пес!
Куда ты в глиняном сосуде
Несешь зарю апрельских роз?!

Весна погибла, в космы сосен
Вплетает вьюга седину...»
Но слыша скрежет ткацких кросен,
Тянусь к зловещему окну.

И вижу: тетушка Могила
Ткет желтый саван, и челнок,
Мелькая птицей чернокрылой,
Рождает ткань, как мерность строк.

В вершинах пляска ветродуев,
Под хрип волчицыной трубы
Читаю нити: «Н. А. Клюев, —
Певец Олонецкой избы!»

Я умер! Господи, ужели?!
Но где же койка добрый врач?
И слышу: «В розовом апреле
Оборван твой предсмертный плач!

Вот почему в кувшине розы,
И сам ты — мальчик в синем льне!...
Скрипят житейские обозы
В далекой брэнной стороне.

К ним нет возвратного проселка,
Там мрак, изгнание, Нарым.
Не бойся савана и волка, —
За ними с лютней серафим!»

«Приди, дитя мое, приди!» —
Запела лютня неземная,
И сердце птичкой из груди
Перепорхнуло в кущи рая.

И первой песенкой моей,
Где брачной чашею лилея,
Была: «Люблю тебя, Рассея,
Страна грачиных озимей!»

И ангел вторил: «Буди, буди!
Благословен родной овсень!
Его, как розаны в сосуде,
Блюдет Христос на Оный День!» (632)

These are but few of the abundant examples in Klyuev's work of themes, language, narrative, and other forms which may be explicitly or implicitly associated with the ideas of prophecy and the prophet. While examples may be found in the poet's lyric verse from the first decade or so of his career (approximately 1904-1916), prophetic elements are especially notable in the poetry written in the last years of the First World War, in the early years of Bolshevism, and in the last years of the poet's life, which coincide with the Stalinist repressions of the mid- and late-1930s (repressions which, of course, took the poet's life, among many, many others). Prophetic and related elements are encountered in a very diverse range of forms, and with very diverse thematic referents: as the anonymous publication illustrates, sometimes the poet is presented explicitly as "seer" or prophet; at other times specific and individual prophetic remarks are made in verse (see the poem to Anna Kirillova); at times these two elements are combined, as so strikingly in his very last poem, anticipating his death (which was in October, however, not April); frequently the poetry of the last two decades of his life predicts millenarian events which will lead, albeit sometimes through bloodshed and

destruction, to the utopian rebirth of society; often both lyric and narrative poetry describe apocalyptic scenes, combining the realities of the present with apparent future disasters; on occasions, the coming apocalypse is anticipated by signs of danger or ill health, while such omens and similar are often important episodes in his extensive narrative poetry (written between the early 1920s and the beginning of his Siberian exile); prophetic visions, seen either by the poet himself or by his mother, are also significant episodes in autobiographical verse and prose, while some letters describe visionary episodes anticipating the future; last, but by no means least, a dozen or so of the poet's dreams were recorded by companions and friends during the 1920s, and these are mostly quite clearly prophetic in language, imagery, and content.

To this list should be added the testimony of the poet's contemporaries – for example, Roman Mensky, writing about the composition of Klyuev's famous polemical lyric "Kto za chto, a ya za dvoperst'e" (541; written 1928), says that the poet, in words of farewell after a 1929 meeting, "pochti shepotom neskol'ko raz skazal: 'Budet gar'... Okh, budet gar'" (945).

The only more or less authoritative edition of Klyuev's verse to date includes five-hundred-and-ten poems it classifies as lyrics. Of these, according to a cursory survey, sixty-three are "prophetic" in whole or part, using the very broad categories enumerated above. That same edition classifies nine works as *poemy* (a tenth has been published in fragmentary form, and an eleventh is known to exist, but remains unpublished). It should also be noted that the distinction between *poema* and lyric is by no means clear in Klyuev's work, and editors disagree on designations. Of the ten *poemy* in *Serditse edinoroga*, six contain "prophetic" elements – as does the fragmentary *poema* not included in this edition. Of course, the categories applied are broad, and "prophecy" exists within a continuum where not only divination, omens, apocalyptic and millenarian visions are to be found, but also phenomena related to religion, established and popular, orthodox and sectarian, and, in a number of cases even broader issues of sexual, national, and even supranational identity.

Klyuev's sources of prophetic discourse and models for it are predictable: the prophets, major and minor, of the Old Testament (several are quoted, others are mentioned in his work); that favourite text for Russian culture, the Revelation of St John the Divine, which concludes the New Testament, and which has encouraged so much apocalyptic speculation and imagery among Russian writers, old and new; popular omens and divination (although not in the most familiar form of "x is for y" (*k chemu*), but rather as self-evident signs of ill-omen). Also proximate to these models are favourite referents such as St Serfim of Sarov, who figures quite often in the later verse, although there is no explicit mention of his extensive prophetic commentaries. Entirely absent, however, are the models of ancient prophecy encountered throughout Greek and Roman literature (to which Klyuev, despite his eclecticism and evidently wide reading, makes very little reference of any kind). On the other hand, the tradition of Russian *belles lettres* is most certainly present in Klyuev's widespread and diverse employment of prophetic and similar discourse. Not only is the general culture of Modernism evident as background (in a combination, typical of the mature Klyuev, with Old Russian literature, popular tradition, with a rather generalized Orientalism (muslim seers and divines appear in his poetry, for example,) and with a wide range of exemplars of the Russian religious world, from established orthodoxy to sectarianism and "neo-pagan" practices), but the models drawn from the classics of golden-age Russian *belles lettres* are also encountered.

A few examples of this diversity should suffice. An early lyric opens with a quotation from the Book of Revelation:

Я был в духе в день воскресный,
Осененный высотой,
Просветленно-бестелесный
И младенчески простой. (110).

The late poem «Ot Lache-ozera do Vyga» from the cycle «Razrukha», abounds with apocalyptic signs and their interpretations, partially in the context of a kind of inverted pilgrimimage in the Russian north (where Lake Lache and the Rivers Vyg, one of them home to the famous Old Believer communities, are located), tied to one of the poem's master images of contemporary apocalypse, the *belomorskii smert'-kanal*. In the

third section (lines thirty-two to fifty-eight), the journey trope is resumed: the red shroud of the opening lines reappears, and oils the path to "tormented lakes", where the speaker casts his glance into their waters and catches a "fresh white fish, boney as death". Here the text is corrupt, but Sergei Subbotin, the most learned of Klyuev's commentators, relying on apparent allusions to Isaiah, 1:6, reconstructs as follows: the white fish (now, apparently, a man) is partially eaten by other fish and his flesh is rotting, but he mouths a prayer, and apparently calls for the extermination of a cuckoo.

It might be noted that birds associated with divination and omens abound in Klyuev's work, especially the loon or diver (*gagara*), the cuckoo, and the crow and other corvidae (as well, of course, as the "prophetic bird" Gamayun). Klyuev's most extended and intriguing "constructed autobiography" is entitled "Gagar'ya sud'bina".

Other natural omens, some agricultural, are also encountered. A poem of 1917 or 1918 opens:

Се знамение: багряная корова,
Скотица с подойником пламенным, --
Будет кринка тяжко-свинцова,
Устойка с творогом каменным. (372-3).

A poem of 1918 or 1919 is characteristic in the presentation of a vision of the union of local specifics both with the exotic and with the high-cultural:

Стада носорогов в глухом Заонежье,
Бизонный телок в ярославском хлеву...
Я вижу деревни седые, медвежьи,
Где Скрябин расставил силки на молву. (404)

In Klyuev's second-longest narrative work, *Pogorel'shchina* (1928), Pronya, the village lacemaker has a prophetic dream, anticipating the destruction of her village – the burned ruins of the title:

Приснился Проне смертный сон:
Сиговец змием полонен,
И нет подойника, ушата,
Где б не гнездились змеята. (680)

This dream is related to a recurrent Klyuev motif (also present in *Pogorel'shchina*) -- St George abandoning his icon, and is one of many ominous signs encountered by the inhabitants of Sigovyi Lob, the village which meets its apocalyptic end in *Pogorel'shchina*. In another, Neil the local hermit ("Nil stolpnik" – an expressly Near-eastern hermit in northern Russia), ascends to the heavens – his departure an example of the recurrent motif of the saints and holy men abandoning Russia. Immediately before his ascension, he sends a bird with a warning message to the villagers. The message is blunt indeed: *gotov'tes' k smerti* (682).

Pesn' o Velikoi Materi abounds with dreams and other signs, interpreted by Parasha, the mother of the hero Nikolai; by a shaman; by an orthodox priest; by the hero himself (a young and then mature Nikolai Klyuev, sharing some but not all of his biography with the author of the text); and by others. In an episode that is revealed at its end to have been an extended prophetic dream of the young hero a multinational gathering of seers takes place. Their musings on the apocalyptic consequences of industrialization are concluded by the song of Gamayun, quoted above and also a part of the cycle "Razrukha". The characteristically diverse confessional landscape also includes abundant allusions to the Old Belief and to Sectarianism, and yet another favourite and ambiguous figure in Klyuev's verse – the Siberian seer Grigorii Rasputin. Late in this massive poem the mature hero has a prophetic vision about the last Emperor.

Among the allusions to the image of the poet as prophet in *belles lettres*, the most striking and obvious is, predictably, to Pushkin. At least twice Klyuev embeds allusions to Pushkin's "Prorok" in his poetry. At the end of the last poem of the "Razrukha cycle", "Est' demony chumy, prokazy i kholery", the speaker asks a question which is a barely encoded allusion to "Prorok", with its image of a fiery coal inserted by a six-winged Seraph into the poet/prophet's body. Klyuev's speaker asks:

Но кто целящей головней
Спалит бетонные отеки... (631)

Pushkin's poet and prophet, violently reconstructed by the seraph, is famously told in the final lines of "Prorok" to walk across seas and lands and to burn with his

words the hearts of men (*Glagolom zhgi serdtsa lyudei*). Klyuev domesticates the fiery coal, transforming it to a burning log, and renders contemporary his own previous images of plague, asking who will burn off the *concrete* swellings of flesh, but the shallow-buried allusion to Pushkin also and most tellingly provides an intermediate genealogical point between ancient prophecy and "Razrukha", and between the popular images of wandering seer and the high-cultural models of visionary which are implicit here, and explicit earlier in the cycle, in the position of the lyrical speaker.

Equally characteristic is the context of the other reference to Pushkin's "Prorok" – the first part of the fragmentary *Kain*, on which Klyuev worked in 1929. The *poema*, as published, is divided into four parts, of which only the fourth appears complete.² In the first, very fragmentary, part, the speaker describes an October vision in which a diabolical figure tells him, the *zhguchii otprysk Avvakuma* (burning issue of Avvakum – a name which occurs in Klyuev, incidentally, to designate not only the schismatic leader, but also, on at least one occasion, the minor prophet of the Old Testament), that he is *ognem slovesnym opalen* (singd with the fire of words), but that nothing can be done without the friendship of Cain. The expression clearly emulates the language and imagery of Pushkin. Allusions to the fallen sites of Russian spirituality -- Radonezh, Sarov, Diveevo – follow this allusion, and then a sinister picture of Stalinist Russia. It might be noted that Part IV, the only complete section of the poem, not only provides in all probability a more or less reliable model for the preceding parts in its almost seamless combination of past and present; personal (lyrical recollections of the speaker's pastoral youth) and general (history and fate of Russia), but is also highly characteristic of Klyuev's "prophetic" work in general. The lyrical recollections include memories of early (homosexual) love, while the history and fate of Russia is presented in a blending of pagan and Christian elements, and with the bloody present interwoven not only with the Arcadian past, but also (and typically) with a somewhat ambiguous resurrection. Nature and culture are run together (Christ has appeared to the "loon backwaters", and the trees

² "Ty, zhguchii otprysk Avvakuma...", in *Rasterzannye teni: izbrannye strannitsy iz "del" 20-30-kh godov VChK-OGPU-NKVD, zavedennykh na druzei, rodnykh, literaturnykh soratnikov, a takzhe na literaturnykh i politicheskikh vragov Sergeya Esenina*, compiled by Stanislav and Sergei Kunyayev (Moscow, 1995), 204-28. First in *Nash sovremennik*, no 1 (1993), 92-98, pseudonymously as publication of "S. Volkov".

watch in astonishment this "second Baptism" of Russia); medieval elements, both pagan and Christian, emphasize the antiquity of the scene, while the context is apparently modern (if not simply timeless in its apocalyptic blending of periods); as a conclusion, the scene offers a disorienting mixture of pagan and Christian deities (some of them simultaneously pagan *and* Christian), in what seems to be the Second Coming, accompanied, as the author's prose note states, by the singing of the opening of a wedding hymn, "Holy martyrs, who have well beautified the church with your blood". It is also entirely characteristic that, as Eduard Meksh observes in the only substantial scholarly treatment of this poem, there is no such *venchal'nyi Irmos*.³

The preoccupation with last things, evident in *Kain* and elsewhere in Klyuev's poetry, is also (appropriately) clear in what appear to the last lines of Klyuev's last poem, quoted above, treating the fate of the individual poet, and his association with national identity, and markedly combining Christian and pagan terminology:

И ангел вторил: «Буди, буди!
Благословен родной овсень!
Его, как розаны в сосуде,
Блюдет Христос на Оный День!» (632)

As is, it is hoped, evident, prophetic discourse and thematics, broadly defined, are abundant, but diverse in their realization in Klyuev's poetry, and often constructed of highly eclectic elements. Frequency studies confirm the significance of both themes and discourse. While the root of the word *prorok* is not a very prominent part of Klyuev's poetic vocabulary, the root of *veshchii* occurs forty-five times in Klyuev's poetry ("On zhiv, Olonetskii vedun", the poet declares famously about himself in a late poem), making it the one-hundred-and-sixteenth most commonly used root in Klyuev's poetic vocabulary, according to the compilers of a frequency dictionary of his verse. *Chuyat'* occurs twenty-two times. Among proper names which may be associated with the

³ E. Meksh, *Obraz Velikoi Materi (religiozno – mifologicheskie traditsii v epicheskom tvorchestve Nikolaya Klyueva)* (Daugavpils, 1995), 111.

prophetic idea, Kitezh (which occurs most frequently as an image of contemporary, rural Russia) occurs nineteen times, and Sarov seven times.⁴

Prophecy is at its densest, in every sense of the word, after the Bolshevik coup and in the mid and late 1930s. In these cases it appears as a response to and description of the present with reference to the past (prophecy is, after all, first and foremost about the present and the past). It also provides a very significant model for Klyuev's poetry and for Klyuev the poet. As with the appropriation of Old Believer and Sectarian forms, histories, and identities (for which Klyuev is so well known, and about which there is considerable dispute), there is a strong polemic element in the employment of prophetic discourse – not least in the reiterated apocalyptic descriptions of the destruction of rural Russia, its cultural and moral values. There is also a very strong assertion of individual identity present in many of Klyuev's allusions to himself as prophet, seer, visionary, and so on. Indeed, prophetic discourse and the model of prophet-as-poet provide Klyuev with at least a partial resolution of what might be asserted as one of the most pressing issues confronted by the generations of Russian Modernism from Blok to Pasternak: the relationship between a highly individualized, essentially lyrical "I", and a mobile, disruptive, even chaotic social history which the poet feels or finds himself obliged to chart.

In the case of Klyuev, prophecy is also part of a very complex and even contradictory synthetic identity, which continues to be the subject of much polemical discussion, as it was throughout Klyuev's own career and life (the poet is an authentic even Messianic voice from the people – "Khristos sredi nas", in the words of Blok; the poet is an elegant and clever fraud – the famous portrait by Georgii Ivanov, quoted by Khodasevich, suggested by Ol'ga Forsh, and rendered in vulgar, primitive terms by the poet's Stalinist persecutors and their successors).

The complexity of that identity may be illustrated by reference to texts other than poetry. Klyuev's dreams provide a typically hybrid form, and are open to interpretation

⁴ "Spisok naibolee chatotnykh slov v poeticheskom slovare N. A. Klyueva (Predvaritel'naya publikatsiya)", Appendix 1, *Klyuevskii sbornik*, vypusk pervyi (Vologda, 1999), 109-115.

as prophecy, not least because they are the products of a culture much preoccupied with prophetic dreams, but also because actual prophetic dreams occur in his autobiographical prose. In the dream "Mertvaya golova" (1922), as recorded by Klyuev's one-time companion and amanuensis Nikolai Arkhipov, the narrator and protagonist is lost in market where people-who-are-not-people, with canine eyes, are trading, and from which he knows there is no way back:

Стали попадаться ларьки с мясом. На прилавках колбаса из
человечьих кишок, а на крючьях по стенам руки, ноги и туловища
человеческие. Торгуют в этих рядах человечинной. Мне же один путь
вдоль рядов, по бурой грязи, в песьем воздухе...⁵

As the dream continues, the protagonist finds himself bargaining for parts of the body of Arkhipov, while a walking (military) corpse takes an interest in the dead head.

Texts from the 1930s are even more telling. As is now well known, the poet was arrested in Moscow in 1934, interrogated and convicted of two crimes (one the usual political crime, according to the 58th statute, the other homosexuality – a less widely discussed conviction). He was sent to exile in Siberia, at first to Kolpashev (now Kolpashevo), near Narym. (Incidentally, that last toponym occurs at least six times in Klyuev's verse, most tellingly and prophetically in a poem of 1932, when the speaker asks of the lover-addressee *v kakom Naryme/Naidet on deda...*(612/3)). After several months in Kolpashev, Klyuev was allowed to move to Tomsk, some two hundred kilometres to the South, and a much larger city. There he was to be arrested twice in 1937, the second arrest followed by a perfunctory interrogation and then execution and, presumably, burial in a mass grave.

When Klyuev was arrested in 1934 his interrogators seized the drafts of *Kain*, "Razrukha", and *Pesn' o Velikoi Materi*, and it is as appendages to his Moscow KGB file that these texts survived, to be published in and after the last years of Soviet power, as

⁵ Stalls with meat began to appear. On the counters were sausages from humanguts, and on the hooks along the walls human arms, legs, and torsos. In these market rows human flesh was being traded. I was obliged to walk along these rows, through the brown mud and the dog-infested air.

"Mertvaya golova", in "Sny Nikolaya Klyueva", ed. with an introduction by Aleksandr Mikhailov, *Novyi zhurnal*, no 4 (1991), 9.

were the transcripts of his interrogation in Moscow, and his final interrogation in Tomsk. In his Moscow interrogation Klyuev is recorded as having glossed "Razrukha" as follows: "the policy of industrialization is destroying the foundation and beauty of Russian national [narodnaya] life, moreover that destruction is accompanied by the suffering and death of millions of Russians".⁶ In other words, *in extremis* the poet insisted on the absolute authenticity of his vision.

His return to Tomsk from Kolpashev occasioned even more intriguing responses, *in extremis*. In his letters, he provides different correspondents with two radically different accounts of his arrival in Tomsk. Immediately after his arrival, on 12 October, 1934, he wrote to Varvara Gorbacheva, the wife of the poet Klychkov:

Dear Varvara Nikolaevna, it is a shame that I sent you a long letter, as I have been transferred to the city of Tomsk, they say it is a favour [*milost'*], but once again I am without a corner of my own and without a crust of bread. For a place to sleep, I knocked at the first door I came to: "For the love of Christ". The place turned out to be filled by a whole family, a mad son in the corner, he cannot control his bodily functions [*khodit pod sebya*], tortured. God! What will become of me? Every drop of blood weeps... Help with whatever you can. Farewell.⁷

On 24 October, 1934, however, he described his first night in Tomsk to Nadezhda Khristoforova-Sadomova as follows:

Right at the Feast of the Protection of the Holy Virgin I was transferred from Kolpashev to the city of Tomsk, a thousand versts closer to Moscow. Such a transfer must be considered a favour and leniency, but, as I left the steamer on an unpleasant

⁶ First in "Gamayun -- Ptitsa Veshchaya", ed. by Vitalii Shentalinsky, *Ogonek* (1989, no 43), 10.

⁷ *Dorogaya Varvara Nikolaevna, zhalko, chto poslal Vam bol'shoe pis'mo, kak poluchil perevod v g. Tomsk, govoryat, chto eto milost', no ya vnov' bez ugla i bez kуска khleba. Postuchalsya dlya nochlega v pervuyu dver' — Khrista radi. Zhil'e okazalos' nabitoe sem'ei, v uglu sumassheshii syn, khodit pod sebya, isterzannyy. Bozhe! Chto budet so mnoi? Kazhdaya krovinka rydaet. ... Pomogite, chem mozhet. Proshchaite.*

"Nikolai Klyuev v poslednie gody zhizni: pis'm i dokumenty", ed. S. Sbbotin and G. Klychkov, *Novyi mir*, no 8 (1988), 176.

and cold morning, I found myself for the second time in my exile without a corner of my own and without a crust of bread. I set off despondently along the unbelievably dirty streets of Tomsk. Here and there I sat down, sometimes on a bench at some entrance, sometimes on some step or other. Wet through, hungry and cold, when it was already getting dark, I knocked at the first door of a crooked-sided old building in the remote outskirts of the city — hoping to be able to beg lodgings for the sake of Christ. To my astonishment, I was met by a pale, middle-aged man with curly hair and beard — and with the greeting, "Providence has sent us a guest! Come in, take your coat off, you must be tired". At these words, the man, with a smile, started taking off my coat, brought me a chair, knelt down and took off my boots, which were covered in thick mud. Then he brought me felt boots, bedding and a pillow, and quickly set up a place for me to sleep in a corner of the room. I thanked him, scarcely containing my tears, undressed and lay down — as the master of the house, without inquiring about anything, asked just one thing of me — to relax, lie down, and fall asleep. When I opened my eyes, it was already morning, a little samovar was boiling on the table, and there was black bread on a wooden plate... Over tea the man told me the following: "There came to me a beautiful, stately woman in Old-believer attire, in a white head scarf worn down to her eyebrows: 'Take in my sufferer [*Primi k sebe moego stradal'tsa*],' she asked me, 'I will pay you for him', and she offered me gold." Dear Nadezhda Fedorovna, you must understand my tears and that condition, in which every drop of a man's blood weeps within him. She who gave me birth is watching over me [*moya roditel'nitsa uprezhdaet moi puti*].⁸

⁸ *Na samyi prazdnik Pokrova menya pereveli iz Kolpasheva v gorod Tomsk, eto na tysyachu verst blizhe k Moskve. Takoi perevod nuzhno prinyat' za milost' i sniskhozhdenie, no, vyidya s parokhoda v nenastnoe i studenoe utro, ya ochutilsya vtoroi raz v ssylke bez*

Klyuev then describes another miraculous event which occurred in the home of his benefactor (an exiled church deacon): the unexpected discovery of a five-rouble golden coin hidden in a patch on his bag.

The difference between the two accounts is striking. One writer suggests that the second was written in an attempt to "comfort and calm" Klyuev's correspondent, but since his letters to Khristoforova-Sadomova are of an exceptionally confessional nature, and since all of Klyuev's correspondence from Siberia tends to emphasize rather than to elide his hardships, this explanation seems unlikely.⁹ Rather, a comparison of the two pieces suggests that the immediate impressions of his arrival in Tomsk, as relayed to Gorbacheva, had undergone a transformation into a more appropriate form for a Klyuev narrative by the time of the letter to Khristoforova-Sadomova (written when the poet had already found permanent lodgings). An integral part of that narrative is the prophetic dream in which his future host sees the poet's late mother (herself frequently presented in life as endowed with foresight, when Klyuev writes prose or verse accounts of his provenance). It is quite possible that both accounts reflect aspects of Klyuev's actual experience that first day in Tomsk, but it is the second which belongs with his complex created lives and with his prophetic discourse. Equally noteworthy, when the two versions are compared, is another characteristic feature of Klyuev's writing — the verbatim and almost verbatim reiteration of lexicon in quite different (stylistic and tonal) contexts: "favour"; "without a corner of my own and without a crust of bread"; "I knocked at the first door I came to: 'For the sake of Christ'" and "I knocked at the first door ... to beg lodgings for the sake of Christ"; "Every drop of blood weeps" and "that

ugla i bez kуска khleba. Unylo so svoim uzlom ya probrel po neizmerimo gryaznym ulitsam Tomska. Koi-gde prisazhivayas', to na sluchainuyu skameiku u vorot, to na kakoi-libo pristupok. Promokshii do kostei, golodnyi i kholodnyi, uzhe v potemki ya postuchalsya v pervuyu dver' kosobokogo starinnogo doma na glukhoi okraine goroda — v nadezhde vyprosit' nochleg Khrista radi. K moemu udivleniyu, menya vstretil srednikh let blednyi, s kudryavymi volosami i takoi zhe borodkoi chelovek — privetstviem: "Providenie poslalo nam gostya! Prokhodite, razdevaites', veroyatno ustali". Pri etikh slovakh chelovek s ulybkoi stal razdevat' menya, pridvinul stul, stal na koleni i stashchil s moikh nog gusto oblepenye gryaz'yu sapogi. Potom prines valenki, postel' s podushkoi, bystro naladil mne v uglu komnaty nochleg. Ya blagodaril, edva sderzhivaya rydanie, razdelsya i ulegsya — tak kak khozyain, ni o chem ne rassprashivaya, prosil menya tol'ko ob odnom — uspokoit'sya, lech' i usnut'. Kogda ya otkryl glaza, bylo uzhe utro, na stole kipel samovarchik, na derevyannom blyude — chernyi khleb... Za chem khozyain povedal mne sleduyushchee: "Prishla — govorit, — ko mne krasivaya, statnaya zhenshchina v staroobryadcheskom naryade, v belom plate po brovi: primi k sebe moego stradal'tsa — obratilas' ona ko mne s pros'boi — ya za nego tebe uplachu — i podaet zolotoi". Dorogaya Nadezhda Fedorovna, Vy poimite moi slezy i to sostoyanie cheloveka, kogda vsyakaya krovinka rydaet v nem. Moya roditel'nitsa uprezhdaet puti moi.

N. Klyuev, "Pis'ma k N. F. Khristoforovi-Sadomovoi" in Aleksandr Mikhailov, "Prostitute. Ne zabyvaite", Sever (1994, no 9), p. 125.

⁹ L. Pichurin, *Poslednie dni Nikolaya Klyueva* (Tomsk, 1995), 22.

condition, in which every drop of a man's blood weeps within him". These stylistic features, and the proximity of the second version to Klyuev's own intriguing and very literary dream narratives — told in the early 1930s to Khristoforova-Sadomova herself, among others (Klyuev certainly had a strong sense of his readership or audience, as, indeed, a comparison of the tone and manner of his letters from exile to different correspondents indicates very clearly) — suggest that, even in the appalling conditions of his Siberian exile, an integrated artistic and personal life could be created and re-created by the poet, often, however, in multiple versions.

Hence we see clear evidence of multiplicity and of synthesis in identity and in text, not least when associated with prophecy and related phenomena. The arcane, esoteric knowledge and the elevated cultural and moral position of the poet are emphasized, even by texts which are on the margins of the literary (the "dreams" and letters). These texts also invite the reader to participate in the esoteric, to become part of a very particular created readership (or, since some of these texts were actually only *heard* during the poet's life time, audience), which further legitimizes the authority of the author, while apparently generating a kind of mystical association between author and auditor or reader.

That all of these texts and motifs are, *inter alia*, a description of and response to times of extraordinary upheaval, in which the apocalyptic did indeed seem to be almost everyday, hardly needs to be stated. However, it does need to be pointed out that at least one of the starting points for Klyuev's apocalyptic thematics is surely the *positive* millenarian treatment of the Bolshevik coup and the anticipated attendant circumstances which characterize, albeit often in highly ambiguous contexts, much of his verse of the early revolutionary period. For example, the utopian vision of rhinoceri in the Trans-Onega region quoted above is from a poem which forms part of the Lenin cycle, where the proletarian leader is praised and is compared with Klyuev's Old-Believer heroes, and where the coming Soviet state is seen as essentially millenarian. Klyuev's interpretation of Bolshevism's initial reciprocation of his enthusiasm is equally well attested – for example, by the anonymous note cited above (where Klyuev is the Red Bard, honoured by workers' and peasants' power). His path from enthusiastic revolutionary to prophet of

destruction is far from unique (in Vytegra he staged a *Krasnaya Paskha* – the text appears to be lost, before he began to inveigh against vulgar atheist propaganda and the desecration of relics), and, indeed, it helps to explain not only the despair but also the tone of penitence often encountered in autobiographical passages in the later poetry (including, most notably, *Kain* and *Pesn' o Velikoi Materi*). However, it is to be borne in mind before accepting wholeheartedly what is a very widespread interpretation of the poet today.

In order to consider that aspect of Klyuev's reception today – a key element for an understanding of the poet and his prophetic discourse – it is important also to examine the chronology of the poet's verse, a chronology that, like so many in twentieth-century Russia, is far from linear. Very little of Klyuev's work was published after the mid-1920s, although the poet read his verse quite actively, and copies of some unpublished works circulated widely (most notably *Pogorel'shchna*, a copy of which the poet arranged to export to Italy). Only after his death, and in the West, did his later poetry find its way into print, most notably in the 1969 edition, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*. While examples of the late Klyuev published there (mostly from drafts) certainly found their way back into Russia, when Klyuev was published again in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s, after some thirty years of almost total silence, it was hesitatingly and very selectively, and largely without the late and ideologically problematic lyrics. With *glasnost'*, all the work previously published only abroad returned home, but the major Klyuev publications of this period were entirely new, and, for the most part, newly discovered. Until the journalist and author Vitalii Shentalinskii gained access to the KGB archive for a brief period in the late 1980s, no one suspected that even a draft of what was known to have been the poet's longest work, *Pesn' o Velikoi Materi*, had survived, and no one had any inkling of the existence of the cycle "Razrukha" or the fragmentary *Kain*. Other, essentially entirely new texts also came to light, including many letters, the "dream texts", and a good number of lyrics.

In other words, in the very vaults of the murderous enemy and in other hidden places, fragments and remnants of the martyred poet's literary testament were discovered, at the very moment that the enemy state was collapsing. And among those fragments and

remnants were many that contained visionary accounts of the apocalyptic nature of the present and future – now, it could be argued, fully realized. Not surprisingly, words such as *veshchii* and *prorok* were as common among Klyuev's critical readers as they were in the texts themselves (perhaps even more so). Shentalinsky's publication of extracts from Klyuev's interrogation and of "Razrukha" in *Ogonek* was entitled "Gamayun – ptitsa veshchaya". For Lyudmila Kalinina, writing in 1997, Klyuev is a *narodnyi mudrets iz medvezh'ego ugla...and vseyu sut'yu kharaktera i sud'by Klyuevu prednachertano bylo stat' providtsem*.¹⁰ And more learned commentators are not without the same inclination – Eduard Meksh is the author of an article entitled "'Nispala polynnaya zvezda' (prorochestvo Nikolaya Klyueva)", and A. P. Kazarkin entitles his interpretive essay on *Pesn' o Velikoi Materi* "Apokaliptika Nikolaya Klyueva".¹¹ Recently Aleksandr Mikhailov, a prominent Klyuev scholar, was able to identify a new Klyuev *inskript* – his dedicatory remarks on the back of an icon of the prophet Elijah, which Klyuev had given to the Il'ya Arkhipov son of his friend and erstwhile companion Nikolai Arkhipov. In his remarks, Klyuev played upon the traditional associations in Russia of Elijah/Il'ya with thunder and lightening (an association also encountered in his poetry). Mikhailov pointed out the significance of the death of Il'ya Arkhipov during the *bombardment* of Leningrad at the time of the seige.¹² Even more telling is the appropriation of Klyuev's prophetic vision by cultural ideologues – Stanislav Kunyaev writes of Klyuev's *predchuvstvie budushchei gibel'noi ssyl'ki* and of his vision of a resurrected Russia. At its most extreme, this version of Klyuev may be encountered among the leaders of the National Bolshevik movement, one of whom, Aleksandr Dugin, is the author of a "radio mystery" available on the internet, and entitled "Nikolai Klyuev – Prorok sekretnoi Rossii" (Finis Mundis, no. 15).¹³

¹⁰ L. Kalinina, "'Gremel moi praded Avvakum...'", *Nizhnii Novgorod*, no 2 (1997), 210-11.

¹¹ E. Meksh, "'Nispala polynnaya zvezda' (prorochestvo Nikolaya Klyueva)", in *Nikolay Klyuev: issledovaniya i materialy*, ed. S. Subbotin (Moscow, 1997), 68-77; A. Kazarkin, "Apokaliptika Nikolaya Klyueva (k istolkovaniyu poemy *Pesn' o Velikoi Materi*)", *Vestnik tomского gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, vol. 266 (1998), at <http://ns2.ic.tsu.ru/vestnik/Jan1998/klyuev.html>.

¹² Oral presentation at the sixteenth *Klyevskie chteniya*, October, 200. Mikhailov's work has been published in a St Petersburg newspaper.

¹³ "Nikolai Klyuev -- prorok sekretnoi Rossii", *Finis Mundis* 15, "radio mystery" by A. Dugin, <http://www.arctogaia.com/public/finis15.htm>

These are but a few examples of one of the frequently practiced appropriations of Nikolai Klyuev, and they have been discussed elsewhere and at some length by the author of this paper. These accounts – often popular, sometimes populist, usually conservative in ideology, and sometimes even neo-fascist -- have been strenuously, even stridently, resisted by Klyuev's most prominent reader among the card-carrying *filologicheskaya elita*, Konstantin Azadovskii, but their prominence may help to explain why Azadovskii is the only such figure to have shown much interest in the poet (although there are other reasons, also explored at length elsewhere by the author of these pages).

However, the prophetic interpretation of Klyuev is not to be neglected. While much of his prophetic discourse may be understood *in situ* as part of a complex and contradictory fabric of textual, literary, and personal identities, it is also true that especially striking texts came to light at precisely the moment when their prophetic content might seem to be fulfilled – for example, the parts of "Razrukha" appearing to predict not only the general ecological disasters of the later twentieth century, but also and specifically the troubles of the Aral Sea, not to mention the strife in Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, they came to light in a manner bound to relocate them as, in a sense, texts of the *late twentieth century* (another and familiar paradigm of Russian literary history – for example, similar observations, also not without prophetic colouring, might be made about some of the work of Platonov, an author with whom Klyuev has several significant points of contact in terms of manner, thematics, and identity). Moreover, and paradoxically, they were seen less as works of *belles lettres* belonging to an admittedly very particular late development of Russian Modernism, and more as texts which functioned somewhat in the manner imagined for pre-modern prophetic materials. Fragmentary in form, highly elusive and inconsistent in voice, referents, manner and form, sometimes clearly textual and cultural hybrids, and often linked to oral as well as to written form and presentation, these newly published texts fully justified such an approach, even if it might be somewhat reductive. Their fate had even been predicted by the author himself. In *Pogorel'shchina* the narrator, *pesnopolisets Nikolai*, cites his promise to his homeland:

«Моя родимая земля,
Не сетуй горько о невере,
Я затворюсь в глухой пещере,
Отрощу бороду до рук –
Узнает изумленный внук,
Что дед не даром клад копил
И короб песенный зарыл,
Когда дуванили дуван!...» (686)

In “Ya znayu, rodyatsya pesni –“ of 1920, the poet is even chronologically specific:

В девяносто девятое лето
Заскрипит заклятый замок,
И взбурлят рукой самоцветы
Ослепительных вещей строк. (468)

Once discourse is declared prophetic, it can almost always be declared fulfilled – and it should be duly noted that the first authoritative edition of Klyuev’s verse, mentioned above, is *Serdtshe edinoroga*, published, of course, in 1999.

In general, the story of Klyuev’s prophetic discourse is predicated on loss – loss of that which is presupposed (a living context in high culture, and a sensitivity to the complexity of the synthetic, yet paradoxically *authentic* identities and texts created by the poet), and loss of the texts themselves, and even the poet himself. Recontextualized in the late twentieth century and in the new millenium, what was initially figurative has become literal. Here is another paradigm for the period – just as the romantic and early modernist interpretation of martyrdom is given bloody and widespread concreteness in the Soviet period, so too, in this example, the complexities of Klyuev’s prophecies are, in the present of their discovery, often rendered all too literal by their partial accuracy. While this has given Klyuev an enthusiastic following, it must be said that the following is limited, sometimes eccentric, and even rebarbative in the extremes of the ideology of some (few) members of the following – there is, of course, yet another irony in the appropriation by the cultural right of a *homosexual martyr*, but that is another story. The very elements which appeal because of their apparent literalness to some readers

(although Klyuev is an unlikely choice for the average enthusiast of Esenin or Rubtsov, it must be said), must certainly repel others.

This story began in Vytegra, the only town in Klyuev's home region. There in the immediate post-revolutionary years, the poet practiced extensively his complex and contradictory prophetic discourse, and two examples were cited at the very beginning of this paper. Vytegra now houses a Klyuev museum, hosts an annual Klyuev symposium, and (remarkably for a town of 13,000 mostly not very prosperous inhabitants) regularly publishes Klyuev material in its newspaper and in special almanacs and museum publications. Although Klyuev was economical, at best, in references to the specific sites of his *petit pays* (his realization of northern cultural and geographic space is more abstract and general), Vytegra now appropriates him with some enthusiasm and much specificity. The 1994 *Klyuevskie chteniya* went under the banner "On zhiv, Olonetskii vedun!", an appropriately, if not transparently unproblematic, self-fulfilling prophecy. However, it is perhaps appropriate to end on a note of gentle irony. Four years earlier, *Krasnoe znamya Vytegry* (the name is unchanged to this day) had published an article entitled "A. V. Kirillova vspominaet", in which the author of that article commented as follows on the poem of 1918 addressed to her, which begins, it will be recalled, "Eta devushka umret v rodakh": "Klyuev ne okazalsya prorokom, u menya rodilos' troe detei" (901).

The seer of Olonia might well be said to be alive now in his texts and, institutionally, in his home region, but it is a slyly sobering reminder of the problems of prophecy to note that Anna Kirillova was herself alive sixty-two years after the poet had predicted her death in childbirth (and was still alive in 1999). Some prophecies cannot be declared fulfilled however hard their interpreters work on them after the fact.

Add on prophecy: Mikhailov article on icon; Pereyaslov; Svetsitskii preface to *Bp*. Brikhnichev too – prorok noveishego vremeni. Az. 97. Gumilev, on Klyuev – prorok (see BP chapter). Mikhailov on *sny* in *Glagol*. Emergence of prophet idea with

Golg. Christians. Mikhailov in intro to *Serditse*, 29. Shentalinskii's first preface (see Mikhailov, intro 53).