



Sergei Esenin

1926

In Memory of Esenin

(Reminiscences)

Since Voronsky met Esenin in the fall of 1923, he knew the poet only for slightly more than two years. Yet their relationship seems to have been one of strong mutual respect. Voronsky published Esenin's poetry regularly in *Red Virgin Soil*, and intervened repeatedly to assist the poet as he drifted from one drunken scandal to another. When Esenin faced official censure and hearings at the Writers' Union, Voronsky wrote a highly sympathetic article which was published in the January-February 1924 issue of *Red Virgin Soil*.

Esenin reciprocated in his own way: when the campaign against Voronsky was accelerating in the fall of 1924, Esenin announced that if Voronsky were removed from *Red Virgin Soil*, he would cease to publish his poems in that journal. As another token of friendship and support, Esenin dedicated his long poem, "Anna Snegina," to Voronsky in the spring of 1925.

In 1925, Voronsky actively intervened to have Esenin's alcoholism treated. In November and December, Esenin underwent treatment at one of the best psychiatric clinics in Moscow, but left before his health was restored, declaring that he wanted to move to Leningrad.

Voronsky was at the Fourteenth Party Congress in Moscow when Esenin hanged himself at the Hotel Angleterre in Leningrad during the night of December 27–28.

After Esenin's death, Voronsky defended the poet's heritage at a number

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of public meetings and in several articles, including the one below. Members of RAPP, meanwhile, were calling Esenin “a banner of kulak counterrevolution.” Then, in 1927, Bukharin published an article, “Nasty Comments,” in *Pravda*, in which he declared: “‘Eseninism’ is the most harmful phenomenon of literary life today, and it truly deserves condemnation.” Voronsky replied that Gosizdat was “doing the right thing by printing the works of this great and original poet.”

Voronsky never joined in dismissing Esenin as a peasant poet, or in simply condemning his Bohemian behavior. Instead he searched for the conflict between Esenin’s utopian vision in poems such as “Inoniia,” and the harsh realities of the NEP which drove Esenin to his drunken scandals and eventual suicide. Voronsky recognized that Esenin’s idyllic inner core was ill-adapted to contemporary Soviet life; he therefore watched almost helplessly as Esenin succumbed to the encroachments of “the iron guest,” a recurrent nightmarish image in his poems.

The only real salvation for Esenin might have come from an upsurge of revolutionary pathos sparked by vast political events outside Russia’s borders. Instead, the revolution receded in the West, and the next few years witnessed a reaction that would sweep away not only apolitical or disoriented poets, but most of the Bolshevik old guard as well.

I.

IN THE FALL of 1923 a young man of about twenty-six or twenty-seven walked into the editorial office of the journal *Red Virgin Soil*. He was thin, well-proportioned, and slightly taller than average. He wore a brand-new gray suit made of fine English material, and it seemed to fit in a surprisingly pleasant manner. The coat which was thrown across his arm revealed a satiny lining. The man looked around calmly, placed his cane with an ivory knob in the corner and, removing his gloves, said in a quiet and muffled voice:

“Sergei Esenin. I have come to make your acquaintance.”

An improvement in the economy and in culture had barely been felt at that time. People had still not managed to clean themselves up and dress better. Poets and artists lived poorly, as, by the way, many live even now, and for this

reason Esenin's entire outer appearance made an unusual and extraordinary impression. And even at that time one could notice: his regular, simple and quiet face, slightly oval in shape, was illumined by calm but deep blue eyes, and his hair made one think of our fields of rye or straw. His hair was curled, and his cheeks were obviously covered, as I later became convinced, by a thick layer of white make-up. His eyelids were puffy, the turquoise of his eyes was a bit dull, and the area around the eyes was questionable. The image immediately suggested a strange duality: through the foppish exterior of a flaneur or dandy from the city streets, one could detect the simple, thoughtful, perhaps wistful or sorrowful, but thoroughly familiar visage of a Russian man of average means. And most importantly: one visage underscored the unlikelihood and unreasonableness of being combined with the other, as if someone had mechanically forced them to join without any apparent reason or obvious intention. That is how Esenin remained in my mind until the end of his days, not only with regard to his external appearance, but in every other sense as well.

Esenin said that he had recently returned from abroad, that he had been in Berlin, Paris and overseas. But when I began to try to find out what exactly he had seen and brought back from there, I soon became convinced that he either didn't want to share his impressions, or was unable, or had nothing to talk about. He answered my inquiries with monosyllables and evidently with little desire. He didn't like it abroad; in Paris he was beaten in a restaurant by Russian White Guardists, losing his top hat and gloves in the process; in Berlin there were scandals, and in America also. And yes, he drank out of boredom, and he wrote almost nothing because he wasn't in the mood. In many encounters with him at later times, I tried in vain to find out about the thoughts and feelings aroused by his trip abroad, and even then he told me nothing more than what I heard from him on the first day of our acquaintance. The satirical article on this subject, which appeared, it seems, in *Izvestiia*, was weak and written reluctantly. I think that this was a product of the poet's secretiveness.

At that time, I couldn't forget his smile. He smiled continually. His smile was soft, vague, indefinite, absentminded and "moon-like."

He seemed to be polite, restrained, calm, reasonable and very quiet. Esenin spoke little, preferring to listen and nod in agreement. I didn't notice any artificial posing, but his whole appearance was suffused with a charm which could overwhelm, subdue and conquer; it was a pleasant but persistent charm, soft yet firm.

In bidding farewell he noted:

“We will work together and become friends. But keep in mind: I know that you are a communist. I am also on the side of Soviet power, but I love Rus’. I do things my own way. I won’t allow anyone to put a muzzle on me, and I won’t dance to anyone’s fiddle. It just won’t do.”

He said this smiling, half in jest and half seriously.

I never ceased to be surprised after this first acquaintance; I had already heard a lot about Esenin’s drunken escapades and scandals. It seemed inexplicable and unbelievable: how could this well-mannered, modest and almost bashful person have been able to even utter an unkind or sharp word, let alone create an uproar or scandal!



About two weeks later I was taking part in a writers’ evening gathering when Esenin appeared. He arrived surrounded by a gang of young poets and various people who had accidentally joined his entourage. He was drunk, and the first thing that we heard from him was a string of the latest and choicest swearwords. He flung insults, made a row, began to fight with someone after a few minutes, and shouted that he was the best poet in Russia, that all the rest were blockheads, or talentless people, and that none of them were his equal. He was intolerable, and it was becoming difficult to put up with what he was doing and saying. He insulted the first people at hand, behaved in an affected manner, mimicked those present, and smashed some dishes. The evening was ruined. The writer who had been reading his short story rolled up the manuscript and hopelessly waved his hand. Suddenly a lot of drunken people appeared, as if Esenin had brought the noise and drunkenness with him. Someone rushed to put on his coat and leave. Others tried in vain to lead Esenin out of the room. But then somebody proposed that we convince the poet to recite some of his poems. Esenin readily climbed onto a chair, began by giving an arrogant, incoherent and boastful “speech,” and then started to recite “Down-and-out Moscow [«Дни в Москве»].” He recited from memory, gently rocking back and forth, in a voice that was hoarse and rasping from too much drinking; declaiming and stretching out the words in a drunken manner. But it was a masterful recital. Esenin was one of the best at reciting poetry in Russia. The poems came from his very core, and any excesses came

from the heart; he was able to highlight or place special emphasis on the right places, and he held his listeners in a state of tension. His memory never once betrayed him. I subsequently became convinced many times in later years that he could recite poetry while completely intoxicated, almost without hitch or hesitation. Only in the very last months, not long before the end, he seemed to lose ground somewhat. But perhaps this happened because he was reading things that were not completely finished.

When he had finished reciting, Esenin began to act up once again.

He drank steadily for a couple more days. During this time new pages were added to the usual police records.

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One cold winter night, by the Pegasus' Stall¹ on Tverskaya, I saw him crawling out of a sleigh. He was wearing a top hat and a Pushkin cloak which hung from his shoulders almost to the ground. It had come open, and Esenin was trying to wrap himself in it. He was still sober. Struck by his unusual apparel, I asked him:

“Sergei Aleksandrovich, what does this all mean, and why such a masquerade?”

He smiled an absentminded and somewhat mischievous grin, and then replied simply and naively:

“I want to look like Pushkin, the best poet in the world,” and, having paid the driver, he added, “I’m very bored.”

He looked like a capricious and offended child.

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His favorite prose writer was Gogol. He placed Gogol above all others, even above Tolstoy, about whom he spoke in a restrained manner. Once when he saw *Dead Souls* in my hands, he asked:

“If you want, I’ll read you the place which I love most of all in Gogol,” and he read by heart the beginning of the sixth chapter in part one.

Here are selected passages from this chapter:

1. Café on Tverskaya in Moscow, the meeting place of many poets and prose-writers.

In former days, a long time ago, in the years of my youth, in the years of my irrevocably vanished childhood, I used to experience a feeling of joy whenever I came for the first time to any strange place: it made no difference whether it was a hamlet, a lowly township, a large village or a settlement, the inquisitive eyes of a child picked out much that was curious about them. Every building, everything that bore the impress of some observable peculiarity, everything arrested my attention and amazed me....

Now I feel quite indifferent when I drive through any new village and it is with indifference that I watch its dreary exterior. To my chilled gaze it looks uninviting and no longer amuses me; and what in bygone years would have provoked a lively animation in my face, laughter and a flow of words, now merely passes me by, and my unmoving lips preserve an impartial silence. Oh, my youth! Oh, my spontaneity.²

I think that these words by Gogol could serve as the best epigraph to all that Esenin wrote.

He valued Kliuev highly and considered himself his pupil. Among the young prose writers I recall a highly favorable assessment of pieces written by Vsevolod Ivanov. It seems that he liked *The Child and Colored Winds* most of all.

Esenin told ironic stories about Gippius and Merezhkovsky. During the first years of his poetic activity he visited their literary evening gatherings.

“Once I somehow ended up at their literary salon wearing felt boots. Gippius walked up to me and asked:

“ ‘It seems you are wearing new gaiters?’

“‘No, these are simple village felt boots....’ She knew very well that I was wearing felt boots....”

In recent years Esenin spoke with disapproval and hostility about technique in poetry:

“We know all these things. They think that all these formal devices and clever tricks are beyond our understanding. We understand them no less than

2. Nikolai Gogol, *Dead Souls*, translated by George Reavey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), pp. 114–115.

they, and once upon a time we made a thorough study of all these things. People should write as simply as possible. That is more difficult.”

His “simple” mastery was great. At first glance, Esenin’s poetic lexicon is modest and even bland, but look what he does in his poems with cherries, gardens and birch trees; they are always things we know well, but at the same time they appear to be different. Even trite, hackneyed and clichéd things emerge refreshed by the power of his feelings and his winning sincerity.

In the early spring of 1925 we met in Baku. Esenin was preparing for a trip to Persia; he wanted to see the gardens of Shiraz and breathe the air which Saadi had breathed. Esenin’s appearance was far from what he looked like in Moscow. On the train to Baku his outer clothing had been stolen, and he was wearing a shabby, secondhand coat. His shoes were clumsy, long and unpolished; perhaps they too had belonged to someone else. He no longer curled his hair and was not powdering his face. He had quite a lot of friends who lovingly took care of him. He was staying with Comrade Chagin, who was in charge of his treatment, but during those days he appeared to be a lonely, abandoned and accidental guest who had turned up without rhyme or reason in this city of oil, soot and dust, seeming not to give a damn where he stayed or settled down.

We said farewell by the seashore. The sky was a leaden color. A brisk and cold wind blew in from the sea, stirring up an acrid dust over the city. The Maiden’s Tower stood mutely like an ancient guardian of the centuries. The sea bared its teeth, showing its white fangs, and the noise of the breakers was heartless and inhospitable. Esenin stood there, absently smiling and kneading his hat in his hands. His coat had come open and was hanging awkwardly; his eyelids were inflamed. He had caught a cold and was coughing; he spoke in a hoarse whisper and was constantly wrapping a black scarf more tightly around his neck. Everything about him seemed doomed, and he looked absolutely superfluous here. For the first time I felt sharply that he didn’t have long to live, and that his fire was dying out.

After getting drunk at a dacha outside the city, he carried on scandalously for a long time, swearing the whole while. They put him in a separate room. I walked in and saw him sitting on the bed, sobbing. His entire face was covered with tears, and he had crumpled a wet handkerchief into a ball.

“I have nothing left. I feel terrible. I don’t have any friends, or people close to me. I don’t love anyone or anything. All I have left are my poems. I gave them everything, do you understand, everything. Once there was the church, the village, the countryside, the fields, the forest. Now they have left me all by myself.”

He cried for more than an hour.

“May my whole life be sold for a song”—these words are from one of his last poems.



He was no stranger to mischief. Only in his usual, that is, sober state, however, did his mischievous behavior resemble a clever prank. People tell how, not long before his death, he visited one of his old friends. Noticing the small lamp flickering in front of the corner icons, he pulled out a cigarette and, not finding any matches, asked permission to get a light from the “holy flame.” The master of the house asked him not to do this, and went for some reason into another room, perhaps to fetch some matches. Esenin got up, lit up from the icon lamp, and then asked an acquaintance who had come with him to extinguish the light:

“Just wait and see. He won’t notice it, I swear. That’s the way he is, everything will turn out fine.”

The friend returned and, indeed, didn’t notice that the lamp had been extinguished.

On one of his earlier visits, he had brought as a gift for the same friend ... a live rooster.

Sometimes he would talk about his scandals abroad: “Well, yes, I raised hell, but I raised hell in good fashion, I raised hell on behalf of the Russian Revolution.” And he would repeat the story of how in Berlin at a gathering of White writers he had demanded the Internationale, and how in Paris he started to make fun of former Wrangel and Denikin officers who had become restaurant “bouncers” in their retirement. He was beaten up both in Berlin and in Paris.

In recent times some of his pranks were strange and incomprehensible. Once he showed up at my place a bit tipsy, carrying a packet of match boxes. He threw them onto the table and said, with a smile:

“I was walking along and thinking: I’d like to buy you something as a gift. You see, turns out it’s Sunday, and everything’s closed. Then I found some matches at a stand. Take them—they’ll come in handy. Or even better: give them to your daughter, let her play with them.”

Esenin was intelligent and farsighted. He never was as naive in questions concerning the political struggle or in problems of artistic life as he appeared to other simpletons. He was capable of orienting himself, of grasping what was needed; he could generalize and draw conclusions. He was quick and saw much further than the poets who were his own age. He would weigh things and make careful calculations. He easily gained success and recognition not only due to his enormous talent but also due to his intellect.

He sometimes would speak disingenuously about our “dear little peasants.” He would drop a series of hints: “It’s not so simple, comrade communists. You’re going to have to huff and puff a bit when it comes to our dear little peasants. You’re not necessarily doing so well with them.” When he returned from his native village, he complained that the city was mistreating the countryside: the entire harvest was going toward boots and a few yards of cloth, and taxes. Plus the local authorities were mistreating the peasants. He intended to go to M. I. Kalinin in search of some help. But the basic impression was something else. After this trip Esenin walked about subdued for a while. He seemed to have lost something back home.

“Everything is new and different. It’s all very strange.”

By the way, the poet gives a better account of all this in his poems.

During the last two years Esenin always intended to travel to the countryside and live there for a while as he should. He knew that he was ill, and it seemed that he was seriously frightened by his illness. He yearned for a simple and uncomplicated life, for simple human relationships and simple things. It

would be good to busy himself with common, everyday affairs, with things that were clear and palpable. It would be good to be around gardens and lime trees, to talk about haymaking and the harvest, to enjoy quiet and soothing evenings. Or to travel somewhere else, perhaps to Leningrad, and earn a living doing something new; he could work regular hours, and devote himself to a journal, a novel or a novella. He would stay at home, seeing his friends from time to time. He had an idea: he would write a novel of about eight to ten author's pages (200 to 250 pages). The theme would be street urchins, homeless orphans and juvenile delinquents. Once he showed me a few pages from this novel. Of course it was only two or three pages, but after some time had passed, Esenin admitted that "the writing had stopped" and that "it wasn't working out."

The writer Nikitin told me in a personal conversation: "Seriozha lived towards the end with his eyes perpetually screwed up; he would narrow his eyes, get drunk and raise hell." This is very true and accurate. He would often squint his eyes, especially when he wasn't sober.

And I, lowering my head,
Shed tears that are mingled with wine,
So I won't have to look fate in the face,
And for a moment I can think about something else.

This "something else" was simple, intimate, and personal; but everything around him was complex, confused, social and distant. And he knew that there was no return to what had been. When people tried to convince him to undergo serious medical treatment, he replied with his ever-present smile that first he needed to prepare a collection of his works for Gosizdat, and then he would undergo the necessary treatment. Later it turned out that he had done no serious work on this new edition. And he hardly believed his own excuses.

Before his last trip to Leningrad I asked him on the telephone why he was going there, but didn't receive a clear answer. Then again, he wasn't sober.

Esenin never mentioned suicide to me. I thought that Esenin had little time left to live, but I never imagined that he could lay hands on himself: he loved life very much. I must say once again that Esenin was very secretive.

Undoubtedly he suffered from a persecution complex. He feared being left alone. Moreover, they say—and this has been verified—that in the Hotel Angleterre, before his death, he was afraid of being alone in his room. In the evenings and at night, before returning to his room, he would sit by himself and linger for a long time in the lobby. But it is better not to dwell on this, for who knows what Esenin concealed behind this persecution mania, and what this illness really was.

II.

We critics oftentimes are unable, or still haven't learned, to synthetically recreate the image of an artist, poet or writer. We analytically divide what is whole, unique and individual into separate parts. Esenin's image splits into two parts. There were two Esenins. There are various sides, there are complex and contradictory aspects of his poetic profile, and much has both been said and written about them. But in the end, this was a "single, live, human being"; the poet lived as a concrete personality who combined within himself the various qualities and stages of his works. And when this living Esenin arises before us we begin to understand better not only his influence and the beauty of his poetry, but why he was widely read, why his poems were learned by heart, and why he was imitated. Wherein lies the secret to the success and enchantment of his poetry? After all, they are about death, about fate, about down-and-out places, about all that is passing away. They are about a lonely poet who felt that he was an unneeded stranger in Soviet Rus'! But we know old and experienced communists: in the intervals between official meetings, in the few hours which are free from stressful, dry or prosaic work, they have found time to read through the poet's verse. Or is it that they feel close to the down-and-out, fatal moods of what is dying out? Hardly. Perhaps we must search for explanations of this success in Esenin's simplicity, his song-like qualities, sincerity and lyricism; or perhaps in the popular feeling embodied in his poems, or in the power of his talent. Yes, it is all of this, but more. But what exactly? Esenin's poems are the highly biographical. The living human personality of the poet is fully reflected in them. When you compare the poet's personality, as it emerges through the verbal fabric of his works, with the living Esenin, the images coincide, you experience one and the same basic feeling and it becomes understandable where the power of his poetry lies. A love for everything "which wraps the soul in flesh" touches

and subordinates all in Esenin's poems; this is a love for the earthly, for all that we are forgetting, that is moving away from us in the noise, bustle and urban commotion, or that is missing in the stones and asphalt. It is no accident that the poet wrote so movingly about animals, and sensed their feelings so well: "I am a good friend to animals." It was no slip of the tongue when he once called his poems "a paean to animal rights." The positive force of the city in our iron age is great. Let the clanking and clanging of the large cities annihilate the torpor, stagnation and sorrow of our fields; but at the same time in our iron age there are elements that are twisted, one-sided, threatening, dark and malignant. Here's what often happens: we, children of the city and of our age, are like birds who from time to time eagerly try to escape from the "crooked streets," so that we won't have to hear the clanking of the streetcar. We search for ways to hide further in the depths, in the backwoods, in the silence of our fields, greenery, meadows and forests. And in Esenin's poetry, the meadows, fields and greenery rise up in their "wild and simple attire," in their overwhelming and pacifying seductiveness, and we accept and understand the poet's longings. We must give praise, especially in Russia, to iron and steel, steam and electricity, but we must never forget that they are not an end but a means. Man was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath for man. There is something that is primordial, indisputable, inexorable and fundamental: the powerful instincts and forces of life. They are transformed and changed with every epoch, but woe to those who infringe upon their rights and laws. Steel and cement and Yablochkin blast furnaces serve them, and exist for their triumph, well-being and happiness. The struggle exists for them. Socialism exists for them. Rising to its full height, human personality is embodied in them, in the forces and juices of life, freed from their chains.

But what is most troublesome in modern civilization is that, in place of immediate human relations, it offers material and ideological fetishism, a love for things and illusions. Serving things and ideas obscures the immediate relations between people. The instincts of man are such, however, that, rather than a dream or an illusion, a thing or a poem, he needs to latch onto a live, concrete fellow being; a human needs to sense another's being, to help him and to work for his sake. Only in the proletariat are there rudiments of these profaned and desecrated direct social relations which can completely flourish only in a fully developed communist society. With his intimate lyricism, and with an outlook that had been determined in a childhood spent in the narrow personal milieu of the countryside, Esenin had to feel with all its sharpness a

longing under the new conditions of life for these direct relations and for the community of people with each other. He had to work hard and to create so that it would be obvious: this is what real, flesh-and-blood people need; both his instincts and his past demanded the same from them. He had to worry about living things so that they in turn would worry about him. The modern city, which Esenin knew well, neither gave this to him, nor was able to do so. He cracked under the strain. In his poems and verses, in the life, fate and demise of the poet, in his poetic and life's image, there is commingled what is tender and brittle, subtle and moving, doomed and beloved. Take for example his red-maned colt; this image is both a warning and an omen directed against what is dark and malignant in today's one-sided urban civilization. ... That is what brings him so close to many who are distant from the poet's down-and-out or mischievous inclinations. That is why his image is so dear to us, and so long-lasting.



The end of every human being is felt in a special way. Esenin's death arouses the great feelings which are imparted by one's mother, sister or brother, and about which has been said: "A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel is weeping for her children and cannot be consoled, for there is no consoling her."

In the Russian Ramah we have bid him farewell, as our own child and loved one.

