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**Yevtushenko**

*A Precocious  
Autobiography*

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*Part One*





# I

A poet's autobiography is his poetry. Anything else can only be a footnote. A poet is only a poet when the reader can see him whole as if he held him in the hollow of his hand with all his feelings, thoughts and actions.

If the poet tries to split himself in two between the man and the poet, he will inevitably commit suicide as an artist.

Rimbaud, whose life clashed with his ideals as a poet when he became a slave trader, stopped writing. This at least was an honest way out.

Unfortunately there are many other poets who, when their life is no longer in keeping with their poetry, continue to write, trying to pass themselves off as different from what they are.

But then it is only to themselves that what they write is poetry.

Poetry is not to be deceived.

And poetry deserts them.

Poetry is a jealous woman who will not forgive untruth.

Nor will she forgive anything less than the truth. There are people who pride themselves on never having told a lie.

But let them ask themselves how often they have failed to tell the truth, preferring a convenient silence.

Such people use as an excuse the ancient saying invented by their kind: 'Silence is of gold.'

But if silence is of gold, the gold is hollow. This is true of life in general and all the more of poetry since poetry is life in a concentrated form.

Evasiveness about oneself unfailingly becomes evasiveness about the lives and sufferings of others.

For a long time many Soviet poets wrote nothing of their own ideas, their own conflicts and complexities and therefore nothing of the difficulties and conflicts of others. What I have in mind is not only the substitution of the 'we' for 'I' by the Proletarian Culture<sup>1</sup> movement—the 'we' that drummed and thundered from the printed page drowning out the music, subtle and inimitable, of the human individuality. Long after the disintegration of the movement, many poems written in the first, the singular, the unique person still bore the hallmark of that gigantic stage-prop 'we.' The poet's 'I' was purely nominal. Sometimes even the simple words 'I love' were spoken in so abstract, so oratorical a voice that they might have been 'we love.'

This was the time when the term 'lyrical hero' came into fashion with our literary critics. According to their recipe, the poet in his poetry was not to be himself: he was to be a symbol.

Much of the poetry written at that time was outwardly biographical. There were place-names in it—the poet's native town, the places he had visited and some of the events of his life. Nevertheless the poems were fleshless. The more gifted of their authors could be distinguished by their manner of writing, but to tell them apart by their

manner of thinking was extremely difficult. It was impossible to feel that they were living, real, existing people because the thoughts and the feelings of every real, existing person are unique and inimitable. No account of a man's outward life has any meaning without an account of his interior life, of his thoughts and feelings.

What I have said of the disintegration of the poet's 'I' is not of course an accusation against the whole of Soviet poetry.

When Mayakovsky says 'we,' he is still Mayakovsky.

Pasternak's 'I' is the 'I' of Pasternak.

I could easily put down a list of Soviet poets who remained themselves throughout the hardest times, but unfortunately their names would mean nothing to the Western reader.

If the work of a genuine poet is a moving, breathing, sound-filled picture of his time, it is also a self-portrait, as vivid and as inclusive.

Why, after all this, am I writing an autobiographical sketch? Because in the West, where my poetry is unknown, newspaper articles which fall into the hands of the readers have sometimes built me up into a fantastic figure said to be in striking contrast to the greyness of the Soviet background.

But I am nothing of the sort.

The things I hate and fight against are just as hateful to many other Soviet people. What I love and struggle for is just as dear to countless others as it is to me.

I know that there are people who enrich society by their own original ideas, which society uses as weapons in its struggle. Theirs is perhaps the highest form of creativity, but I am not of their number.

The new thoughts and moods I express in my poetry were there in Soviet society before I began to write, they had only not been expressed in verse. Someone else would have put them into poetry if I hadn't.

Do I seem to contradict myself by first speaking of the poet's irreplaceable 'I' and then of the poet as the mouth-piece of others? I don't think so. It seems to me that only in a sharply outlined individual can that which is common to many be combined and fused.

I should be very happy to spend all my life expressing the as yet unexpressed ideas of others while remaining myself. I know that if I ceased to be myself I would not be able to express them.

But what is my 'self'?

## II

I was born on the 18th July, 1933, in Siberia, at Zima, a small railway junction near Lake Baikal. My surname, Yevtushenko, is of Ukrainian origin.

Long ago, at the end of the last century, my great-grandfather, a peasant from the Zhitomir Province, was deported to Siberia for having 'set a red cock' at his landlord. This is the Russian peasant way of saying that he had set fire to his house. No doubt, my inclination to reach for that red cock whenever I meet anyone with a landlord's outlook goes back to this event.

No one in our family uttered the word 'Revolution' as if he were making a speech. It was uttered quietly, gently, a shade austerely. Revolution was the religion of our family.

My grandfather, Yermolay Yevtushenko, a soldier in the First World War who could barely read, was one of the organisers of the peasant movement in the Urals and in Eastern Siberia. Later, he studied at the Red Military Academy, passed out as a brigade commander, and held the important post of deputy C.O. of artillery in the army of the Russian Republic. But even in his commander's uni-

form he remained the peasant he had always been and kept his religious belief in Revolution.

I last saw him in '38, when I was five. I well remember our conversation.

He came into my room. I had already been put to bed. He had a box of liqueur chocolates in his hand and sat down on the edge of my bed. His eyes usually smiled mischievously but that night they looked at me from under his grey prickly crew-cut with a tired and sad expression. He offered me the box of chocolates and got a quarter bottle of vodka out of the pocket of his trousers.

'I want us to have a drink together,' he said. 'You have the sweets and I'll have the vodka.'

He slapped the bottom of the bottle with the flat of his hand and the cork shot out. I helped myself to a chocolate.

'What shall we drink to?' I asked, trying to sound grown-up.

'To the Revolution,' my grandfather said starkly.

We touched glasses—that is, my sweet touched his bottle—and we drank.

'Now go to sleep,' Grandfather said.

He switched off the light but remained sitting on my bed.

It was too dark for me to see his face but I felt that he was looking at me.

He began to sing softly. He sang the melancholy songs of the chain gangs, the songs of the strikers and the demonstrators, the songs of the Civil War.

And I went to sleep. . . .

I never saw my grandfather again. My mother told me he had gone away for a long time. I was asleep when, that very night, he was arrested on a charge of high

treason. I didn't know that night after night my mother stood in that street with the beautiful name, Marine Silence Street, among thousands of other women who were also trying to find out whether their fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, were still alive. I was not to learn all this till later.

Later I also learnt what had happened to my other grandfather who also vanished: Rudolph Gangnus, a Latvian by origin—an old mathematician with stooping shoulders and a grey beard, whose text books on geometry were used in Soviet schools—arrested on a charge of spying for Latvia.

None of this I knew at the time.

I went with my father and mother to watch the holiday parades, and I would beg my father to lift me up a little higher.

I wanted to see Stalin.

And as I waved my small red flag, riding high in my father's arms above the countless crowd, I imagined that Stalin saw me too.

And I was filled with a frantic envy of those lucky children of my age who had the honour of presenting bouquets to Stalin and whom he gently patted on the head, smiling his famous smile into his famous moustache.

To explain the cult of Stalin's personality by saying that it was imposed by force is, to say the least, naïve. There is no doubt that Stalin had a hypnotic charm.

Many genuine Bolsheviks who were arrested at that time utterly refused to believe that this had happened with his knowledge, still less on his personal instructions. They wrote to him. Some of them, after being tortured, inscribed 'Long live Stalin' in their blood on the walls of their prison.

Did the Russian people understand what was really happening?

I think the broad masses did not. They sensed intuitively that something was wrong, but no one wanted to believe what he guessed in his heart. It would have been too terrible.

The Russian people preferred to work instead of thinking and analysing. With a heroic stubbornness unprecedented in history, they built power station after power station, factory after factory. They worked in desperation, drowning the cries that might have reached them across the barbed wire of Siberian concentration camps by the thunder of machines, tractors and bulldozers.

All the same, not to think at all was impossible. We were living in the shadow of the worst danger in the history of any people—the divorce between its outward and its inner life. It was noticeable even to us children. Our parents did their best to shield us from realising it but their concern only underlined it.

My parents were psychologically at opposite poles from one another. This—and not political motives (as was playfully suggested by *Time* magazine)—ultimately led to their divorce.

They met at the Geological Institute where they were both studying. This was in the twenties.

In those days the great majority of students admitted to the universities were children of workers or peasants. This was a perfectly natural reaction against the Tsarist era when education was reserved for the children of the well-to-do. It was intended to restore the balance. But as so often hap-



pens when the balance is restored too zealously new injustices were countenanced.

In modern Russian this phenomenon is graphically described as 'overbending.'

Owing to overbending in the system of admissions, the sons and daughters of intellectuals stood out among their fellow students like white crows. This was the case with my father.

Once, at a meeting of the Komsomol in his Institute, he was accused of bourgeois leanings, on the grounds—that he wore a tie.

(My father smilingly told me of this incident only the other evening when we couldn't get into a Moscow restaurant because we were not wearing ties.)

My father's tie did not, however, get in the way of his friendship with the slender girl whose revolutionary principles made her wear a man's red Russian shirt and high boots—this was to be my mother. They soon got married.

My mother, born in Siberia, was less well read than my father, but to make up for it she had a deep understanding of such things as the countryside and manual work.

I am grateful to my father who taught me in my childhood to love books, and to my mother who gave me my love of the soil and of working with my hands. I think that, to the end of my days, I will always be half an intellectual and half a peasant. I realise that being half an intellectual is a limitation, but at least the other half of me, the peasant, will always save me from the intellectual's vice—snobbishness.

My father was very well read and his reading included history. Though I was still too young to understand him, he would spend hours telling me about the fall of Babylon, the