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“Chudnaia kartina”: Wanderers' Night-Songs—East and West

“I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere . . .” “The age of world literature is at hand.”—Goethe

Russian scholarship recognizes two different approaches to comparative literature. The first applies when the works being compared have a genetic or historical relationship, which allows them to be put on the same footing. The other applies when the works are placed “side by side” or juxtaposed typologically, though they are not otherwise related. In Russian we refer to the *sravnitel'nyi* vs. *sopostavitel'nyi podkhod*. This paper first takes the approach of typological juxtaposition. Thus I begin from a distance, by juxtaposing a well-known poem by Fet to a Tang-dynasty Chinese lyric in a comparison which suggests that the imagination can work in similar ways across cultures and time-periods. My study starts from what I call a Russian poem that might have been Chinese, Fet's “Chudnaia kartina.” However, the two approaches can also work in tandem, as they do when I go on to explore the relationship of this poem to its own national and European antecedents. The argument comes full circle with none other than Goethe, whose famous reflection about world literature serves as my epigraph.

Slavists have been struck by Fet's way of constructing “verbless poems” using a subtly organized sequence of nouns and qualifiers. In fact, this has seemed to be one of Fet's specialties, almost a unique facet of the kind of bold invention that Tolstoy recognized as Fet's “lyrical daring.” However, in the end we see that such minimalist poetry and such daring are attested across world literature.

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