

**Bragg Billy****"Talking With The Taxman About Poetry - Vladimir Ma"**

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[Translated from the Russian by Peter Tempest]  
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Sorry to bother you,  
Citizen taxman!  
No thanks...  
Don't worry...  
I'd rather stand.  
I've come to see you  
on a delicate matter;  
the place  
of the poet  
in a worker's land.  
Along with  
storekeepers  
and land users  
I'm taxable too,  
and am bound by the law.  
Your demand  
for the half-year  
is 500 roubles,  
and for not filling forms - 25 more.  
My labour's  
no different  
from any other labour.  
Examine these figures  
of loss and gain,  
the production  
costs  
I have been facing,  
the raw material  
I had to obtain.  
With the notion of "rhyme"  
you're acquainted, of course?  
When a line of ours  
ends with a word  
like "plum"  
in the next line but one  
we repeat  
the syllable  
with some other word  
that goes  
"tiddle-ti-tum".  
A rhyme  
is an IOU,  
as you'd put it.  
"Pay two lines later"  
is the regulation.  
So you seek  
the small charge of inflexion, suffix  
in the depleted till  
of declensions,  
conjugations.  
You shove  
a word  
into a line of poetry  
but it just won't go -  
you push it and it snaps.  
Upon my honour,  
Citizen taxman,  
words  
cost poets a pretty penny in cash.  
As we poets see it,  
a barrel  
the rhyme is,  
a barrel of dynamite,  
the fuse is  
each line.  
The line starts smoking,

exploding the line is,  
and the stanza  
blows  
a city  
sky-high.  
Where to find rhymes,  
in what tariff list,  
that hit the bull's eye  
with never a failure?  
Maybe  
a handful of them  
still exist  
faraway somewhere  
in Venezuela.  
I have to scour  
freezing  
and tropical climes.  
I flounder in debt,  
I get advance payments.  
My travel expenses  
bear in mind.  
Poetry -  
all poetry -  
is an exploration.  
Poetry  
is just like mining radium.  
To gain just a gram  
you must labour a year.  
Tons of lexicon ore  
excavating  
all for the sake of one precious word,  
But  
how searing  
the heat of this word is  
alongside  
the smouldering  
heap of waste.  
There are the words  
that go rousing, stirring  
millions of hearts  
from age to age.  
Of course,  
there are different brands of poet.  
Famed for sleight of hand  
are quite a few.  
Verses they pull,  
like a conjuror,  
boldly  
out of their own mouths -  
and others' too.  
What can one say  
of the poetry eunuchs?  
They write  
stolen lines in -  
not turning a hair.  
Thieving  
like that  
is nothing unusual  
in a country  
where thieves are enough and to spare.  
These  
contemporary  
odes and verses  
which with rapt ovations  
audiences greet  
will go down  
in history  
as overhead charges  
for the achievements  
of a few of us -  
two or three.  
It takes  
quite a time,  
to get to know people,  
smoke many a packets of cigarettes  
till you raise  
that wonderful word  
you're needing  
from the deep artesian  
folk wells.

straightaway  
the rate of tax  
grows less.  
Knock  
that wheel-zero  
of the total due.  
I pay one rouble 90  
for a hundred cigarettes  
and one rouble 60  
for the salt I consume.  
I see your form  
there's a host of questions:  
"travelled abroad?  
Or spent all the time here?"  
What if  
I've run down  
a dozen Pegasus  
in the course of  
these  
fifteen years?!  
You want to know  
how many servants  
I'm keeping,  
what houses?  
My special case please observe:  
where  
do I stand  
if I lead people  
and simultaneously  
the people serve?  
The class  
speaks  
with the words we utter  
and we  
proletarians  
push the pen.  
The soul-machine  
wears out,  
begins to splutter.  
They tell us:  
"Your place  
now  
is on the shelf."  
There's ever less love,  
less bold innovation,  
time  
strikes my forehead  
a running blow.  
There comes  
the most terrifying depreciation,  
the depreciation  
of heart and soul,  
When  
one day this sun  
shall like a fattened hog in  
a land rid of beggars  
and cripples  
rise,  
dead by the fence  
I'll  
have long  
been rotting  
along with  
ten or so  
colleagues of mine.  
Drae up  
my posthumous balance-sheet!  
I tell you -  
upon this I'm ready to bet -  
unlike  
all the dealers and climbers  
you see  
I'll be  
a unique case -  
hopelessly in debt.  
Our duty is  
to roar  
like brass-throated sirens  
in philistine fog

and in stormy weather.  
Paying  
fines in cash  
and high interest  
on sorrow,  
the poet  
is always  
the Universe's debtor.  
And I  
owe a debt  
to the lights of Broadway,  
a debt to you also,  
Bagadady skies,  
to the Red Army  
and to Japan's cherry blossom -  
to all  
about which  
I had no time to write.  
Why  
did I undertake  
this burden?  
With rhyme to shoot,  
with metre anger to spark?  
Your resurrection  
the poet's word is,  
your immortality,  
Citizen clerk.  
Read any line  
a hundred years after  
and it brings back the past,  
as fast as a wink,  
all will come back -  
this day  
with the taxman  
with a glint of magic  
and the reek of ink.  
Come, you smug dweller in the present era,  
buy your rail ticket  
to Eternity  
here.  
Calculate  
the impact of verse  
and distribute  
all that I earn  
over three hundred years!  
Not only in this  
lies the power of a poet,  
that it's you  
future generations  
will think about.  
Oh no!  
Today too  
are the rhymes of a poet  
a caress,  
a slogan,  
a bayonet,  
a knout.  
Five -  
not five hundred -  
roubles I'll pay  
you, Citizen taxman!  
Delete every nought!  
As of right  
I'm  
demanding a place  
with workers  
and peasants  
of the poorest sort.  
But if  
you think  
all I do is just press words other people use into my  
service Comrades, come here, let me give you my pen  
and you can yourselves write your own verses!

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