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James Bailey

I first became acquainted with Jim Bailey in Moscow during the first months of 1970. We had met at a reception, during which he invited me to visit him at the Akademicheskaja hotel, a short walk from the Oktiabr'skaia metro station, where he was staying while conducting research on Russian folklore. Living in my rather cramped quarters at Moscow State University, I had imagined that his staying at a hotel would mean he was living in relative luxury, a notion that was immediately belied when I entered his equally unprepossessing room. That was the first of several long sessions, during which I took pleasure in his wry observations on just about everything as we talked extensively about Russian literature and about the challenges of conducting research in the Soviet Union. He was both then and ever after a wonderful raconteur, with an endless reserve of stories and a joke for every occasion.

At the time, and much to my subsequent regret, I had only a faint inkling of the topics on which he was working. A couple of years later, when Ian Lilly and I were both at the University of Washington, at Ian's instigation we began reading extensively about the work that was being done on Russian versification. We at once came across articles by Jim and realized that he was one of the leading authorities in the field. We wrote to him, and he got back to us quickly with both encouragement and advice. That was the beginning of what became several decades during which Jim provided generous assistance to each of us. It was thanks to Jim that I was introduced to many of the leading Soviet scholars working in that area and soon became a regular participant in conferences on Russian verse theory. He was both prompt and generous with his comments on my own writing, often suggesting additional resources and kindly (but firmly) correcting any missteps that he observed. He proved to be an ideal mentor and in later years just as ideal a colleague.

His own research was extraordinarily impressive and has influenced numerous scholars. He eventually turned from working on literary verse to folk poetry, where the study of versification is especially challenging. The very text of a song can be affected by the melody, which may introduce several kinds of expansion; accentuation in folk texts often differs from literary stress; while the works themselves are not always accurately transcribed and may exist in many variants. Jim eventually filled thousands and thousands of index cards on the way to dealing with all these issues and producing the most definitive research to date regarding the metrical nature of Russian folk verse. His studies of literary verse, mostly published during the 1970s, are no less valuable. While the topics ranged widely, he was particularly concerned with the changes in Russian verse that occurred around the turn of the twentieth century and that have had an influence on the writing of Russian poetry ever since. While some of his articles focused on the work of a single poet and used it to draw larger conclusions about the tendencies affecting Russian verse, others surveyed large bodies of poetry in an effort to describe and classify various forms that came into prominence with the Modern era. The meticulous nature of his work, the intelligence of his analyses, and the deep understanding he brought to the nature of the poetic text ensure that his scholarship will be of enduring value.