

# Anthology of Russian Literature

From the Earliest Period to the Present Time

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By

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IN TWO PARTS



From the Tenth Century to the Close of the  
Eighteenth Century

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“ Besides,” he said, “ my elephants’ good sense  
Will soon my asses’ ignorance diminish,  
For wisdom has a mighty influence.”  
They made a pretty finish!  
The asses’ folly soon obtained the sway:  
The elephants became as dull as they!

—From Sir John Bowring’s *Specimens of  
the Russian Poets*, Part I.

### THE METAPHYSICIAN

A father had heard that children were sent beyond the sea to study, and that those who had been abroad are invariably preferred to those who had never been there, and that such people are respected as being possessed of wisdom. Seeing this, he decided to send his son also beyond the sea, for he was rich and did not wish to fall behind the others.

His son learned something, but, being stupid, returned more stupid yet. He had fallen into the hands of scholastic prevaricators who more than once have deprived people of their senses by giving explanations of inexplicable things; they taught him no whit, and sent him home a fool for ever. Formerly he used to utter simply stupid things, but now he gave them a scientific turn. Formerly fools only could not understand him, but now even wise men could not grasp him: his home, the city, the whole world, was tired of his chattering.

Once, raving in a metaphysical meditation over an old proposition to find the first cause of all things,—while he was soaring in the clouds in thought,—he walked off the road and fell into a ditch. His father, who happened to be with him, hastened to bring a rope, in order to save the precious wisdom of his house. In the meantime his wise offspring sat in the ditch and meditated: “ What can be the cause of my fall? The cause of my stumbling,” the wiseacre concluded, “ is an earthquake. And the precipitous tendency towards the ditch may have been produced by an aërial pressure, and a coactive interrelation of the seven planets and the earth and ditch.” . . .

His father arrived with the rope: "Here," he said, "is a rope for you! Take hold of it, and I will pull you out. Hold on to it and do not let it slip!" "No, don't pull yet: tell me first what kind of a thing is a rope?"

His father was not a learned man, but he had his wits about him, so, leaving his foolish question alone, he said: "A rope is a thing with which to pull people out of ditches into which they have fallen." "Why have they not invented a machine for that? A rope is too simple a thing." "'T would take time for that," his father replied, "whereas your salvation is now at hand." "Time? What kind of a thing is time?" "Time is a thing that I am not going to waste with a fool. Stay there," his father said, "until I shall return!"

How would it be if all the other verbose talkers were collected and put in the ditch to serve him as companions? Well, it would take a much larger ditch for that.

#### **Yákov Borísovich Knyazhnín. (1742-1791.)**

Knyazhnín was born in Pskov, where he received his early education; in St. Petersburg he acquired German, French and Italian, and began to write verses. He served in civil and military government offices. In 1769 he wrote his first tragedy, *Dido*, which attracted Catherine's attention to him. He then married Sumarókov's daughter and devoted himself more especially to literature. Knyazhnín wrote a number of tragedies and comedies: the subject of all of these is taken from Italian and French, thus his *Vadím of Nóvgorod* is based on Metastasio's *Clemenza di Tito*, and the original of *Odd People* is Destouches's *L'homme singulier*. The *Vadím of Nóvgorod* had a peculiar history. Knyazhnín had great admiration for Catherine and her autocratic rule. In his *Vadím* he tried to depict the struggle between republican Nóvgorod and the monarchic Rúrik, in which the latter comes out victorious, to the advantage of unruly Nóvgorod. He had written it in 1789, but did not stage it on account of the disturbed condition of Europe under the incipient French Revolution. Two years after his death, in 1793, Princess Dáshkov, the President of the Academy, inadvertently ordered it to be published. The book appeared most inopportunistly, at the very time the Revolution had broken forth. The tendency of the tragedy was overlooked, and only the republican utterances of *Vadím* were taken notice of. The book was ordered to be burnt by the executioner, but