

# The ‘Wicked Songs’ of Guillaume du Vintrais: A Sixteenth-Century French Poet in the Gulag

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## *Introduction*

One day in 1947, two inmates named Iurii Veinert and Iakov Kharon were released from the incongruously-named camp Svobodnoe (Free), the headquarters of the sprawling network of labour camps that were harnessed to the construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline railway (BAM) in the Soviet Far East. Between them, these two inmates had spent a quarter of a century in the Gulag (Veinert on and off since his first arrest in 1930 and Kharon since 1937), so it is little surprising that each left Svobodnoe bearing lasting scars of labour camp life. Among these, for Kharon, there was the tuberculosis that would later kill him, while for Veinert, seemingly, there was psychological trauma that contributed to his apparent suicide in 1951.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the two men also took with them several manuscript copies of a small book of sonnets, the cover of which was inscribed in both French and Russian with the author’s name, Guillaume [*sic*] du Vintrais, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Aleksei Simonov, ‘Tret’ia biografiia Giioma diu Ventre’, in Ia. Kharon, *Zlye pesni Giioma diu Ventre: Prozaicheskii kommentarii k poeticheskoi biografii*, Moscow, 1989, pp. 3–24 (p. 3); Ia. Kharon, *Zlye pesni Giioma diu Ventre: Prozaicheskii kommentarii k poeticheskoi biografii*, Moscow, 1989, p. 196; Diana Khazarova, ‘Veinert-Ventre: “Blagodariu tebia, Sozdatel’ moi”’, Radio Svoboda, 21 July 2006 <<http://www.svobodanews.ru/content/article/165143.html>> [accessed 12 October 2010] (para. 16 of 17). Cf. Georgii Fedorov, ‘Basmannaia bol’nitsa’, in G. Fedorov, *Bruschatka*, Moscow, 1997, pp. 175–283 (p. 279). According to many accounts, the most immediate cause of Veinert’s decline was the death of his pregnant wife in 1950.

publication information ‘Chalons-sur-Marne 1597’ and ‘Komsomol’sk na Amure 1946’; the book’s title page included the inscriptions ‘translation from the French [by] Iu. Veinert’ and ‘introductory article, general editing [and] commentary [by] Ia. Kharon’.<sup>2</sup> The introductory article identifies the sonnets’ author as ‘one of the many largely forgotten French warrior-poets [and] humanist-poets of the second half of the 16th century’, while an accompanying portrait depicts du Vintrais in an elaborate periwig and lace-frilled shirt, book in hand and quill at the ready.<sup>3</sup>

These manuscripts, which Veinert had written out, single-sided, on tracing paper and waxed paper spirited out of the camp’s engineering office,<sup>4</sup> are remarkable for two reasons. The first of these is the very fact of their existence: numerous accounts attest to the difficulty of writing privately in the Gulag, so the clandestine production of manuscripts under such conditions is quite a remarkable feat.<sup>5</sup> The second of these is the simple fact that Guillaume du Vintrais never existed: both the poet and his sonnets were entirely invented by Veinert and Kharon; his surname is a close anagram of Veinert’s own; and his elegant portrait is a doctored file photo of Veinert himself. Both of these sets of issues cry out for attention,

<sup>2</sup> Aleksei Simonov, ‘Kharon i russkii zek Giiom diu Ventre’, *Novaia gazeta*, 57, 2008 <<http://www.novayagazeta.ru/gulag/39199.html>> [accessed 28 August 2008]; Simonov, ‘Tret’ia biografiia’, p. 21; Kharon, *Zlye pesni*, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>4</sup> Simonov, ‘Tret’ia biografiia’, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Widely cited difficulties include the lack of writing materials and the necessity of hiding one’s writings or memorizing them and then destroying physical copies in order to prevent unwanted scrutiny and likely confiscation. According to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, ‘[i]n the camps you are allowed to have a pencil and clean paper but may not keep anything *in writing* (unless it is a poem about Stalin). And unless you get a trusty’s job in the Medical Section or sponge on the Culture and Education Section, you have to go through the morning and evening searches at the guardhouse’. *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956*, 3 vols, Boulder, CO, 1998, 3, p. 99. Gleb Anfilov, who was a prisoner in the BAM camps from 1935–1937/8, wrote that ‘[c]ertain people know that I write poems, and this is already an issue for ill-disposed surveillance over me’. Letter of 16 July 1935, available from Gleb Iosafovich Anfilov, ‘Vyderzhki iz pisem’, *Memorial*, 1996 <<http://www.sakharov-center.ru/asfcd/auth/?t=page&num=2607>> [accessed 4 January 2011]. Elena Vladimirova, who wrote an extended poem called ‘Kolyma’ during her nearly two decades of incarceration in various labour camps and prisons, recalls that she ‘resorted to paper’ only to help her ‘firmly memorize the latest sections by writing down the first letters of each line (after that [she] threw the paper away)’; and that when she later felt compelled to revise her work, she ‘decided to write it out on cigarette papers and bury them’. ‘From “Kolyma: A Narrative Poem”’, in *Till My Tale Is Told: Women’s Memoirs of the Gulag*, ed. Simeon Vilensky, Bloomington, IN, 1999, pp. 88–95 (p. 93). As Ilkka Mäkinen summarizes, in Soviet labour camps ‘[w]riting as a hobby was closely watched; all notes had to be given to the camp office’. ‘Libraries in Hell: Cultural Activities in Soviet Prisons and Labor Camps from the 1930s to the 1950s’, *Libraries & Culture*, 28, 1993, 2, pp. 117–42 (p. 129).

because they provide a new perspective on important but as yet under-researched issues of unsanctioned or 'independent' cultural activity in the Gulag; and on ways in which, even in the Gulag, individuals' cultural aspirations and activities could challenge established hierarchies of power and mechanisms of control. However, scholarly work on Veinert and Kharon and their poetic creation is virtually nonexistent. Aside from a single passing mention in a study of amateur cultural activity in the 1930s to 1950s and a brief background story by a local literary historian from the town of Svobodnyi, the relevant secondary literature is limited to a few journalistic accounts about du Vintrais and personal reminiscences about his creators.<sup>6</sup>

The present article aims to address this lacuna in two ways: first, by examining the context in which Guillaume du Vintrais came into being; and second, by analysing metapoetic aspects of the sonnets themselves. In the first case, attention will focus on the cultural (and especially literary) facilities that were available to inmates of the BAM camp system, and on piecing together the extent to which Kharon and Veinert were engaged with the official cultural life of the camp. This will help to shed light on the crucial question of how these two men — neither of whom had a literary background, and one of whom had a decidedly patchy education<sup>7</sup> — were able to create a detailed and sophisticated literary mystification

<sup>6</sup> S. Iu. Rumiantsev and A. P. Shul'pin, 'Samodeiatel'noe tvorchestvo i "gosudarstvennaia" kul'tura', in Rumiantsev and Shul'pin, *Samodeiatel'noe khudozhestvennoe tvorchestvo v SSSR: Ocherki istorii, 1930–1950 gg.*, Moscow, 1995, pp. 7–52 (p. 43); Evgenii Parshin, 'Frantsuzskii poet, rodivshiisia v lagere GULaga...', *Svobodnenskii kur'er*, 10 December 2008 <<http://www.proza.ru/2009/07/25/382>> [accessed 12 October 2010]. The popular accounts I have been able to identify are as follows: Fedorov, 'Basmannaia bol'nitsa', pp. 277–81; Khazarova, 'Veinert-Ventre'; Sergei Makeev, 'Gaskonets iz GULAGA', *Sovershenno sekretno*, 2008[?] <<http://www.sovsekretno.ru/magazines/article/1370>> [accessed 12 October 2010]; Viktor Rudaev, 'Mistifikatsiia za koliuhei provolokoi', *Vestnik Online*, 2002 <<http://www.vestnik.com/issues/2002/0626/win/rudaev.htm>> [accessed 12 October 2010]; Aleksei Simonov, 'Poet, kotorogo ne bylo?', *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, 27 December 1988, p. 6; Simonov, 'Kharon i russkii zek Giiom diu Ventre'; Simonov, 'Tret'ia biografiia'; Ia. A. Veinert, 'Kniga dlia moikh detei: Glava iz vospominanii [1957]', in Ia. Kharon, *Zlye pesni*, pp. 210–24. According to Parshin, after Kharon's own account came out in 1989, there were 'many significant publications about this unique fact of literary history' (section 4, para. 2 of 4). Regrettably, however, Parshin does not provide information about any of these publications.

<sup>7</sup> Kharon had a background in music and cinema, having studied at the Berlin Conservatory in the late 1920s to early 1930s and having worked at Mosfilm from 1932 until his arrest in 1937. Veinert attended a vocational college and studied briefly at what would later be called the Leningrad Institute of Railroad Transport, but he never completed his higher education. For brief biographies of both men, see 'Vospominaniia o GULAGe i ikh avtory', *Muzei i obshchestvennyi tsentr 'Mir, progress, prava chekoveka' imeni Andreia Sakharova* <<http://www.sakharov-center.ru/asfcd/auth/?t=list>> [accessed 4 January 2011].

while in the Gulag. In the second case, analysis will concentrate on the connections established between poetic identity, freedom and power in the sonnets of du Vintrais. Moving beyond obvious characterizations of the sonnets as implicit acts of rebellion, this will help to clarify the particular notions of freedom and of power that Kharon and Veinert expressed and achieved through Guillaume du Vintrais. In a broader sense, the answers to these questions will also enrich our understanding of the myriad ways in which Soviet citizens, even those in confinement, routinely undermined mechanisms of control simply by making use of sanctioned opportunities and resources in unexpected ways.

The chief primary source for this study will be Iakov Kharon's *Zlye pesni Giioma du Ventre: Prozaicheskii kommentarii k poeticheskoi biografii* (*The Wicked Songs of Guillaume du Vintrais: A Prosaic Commentary to a Poetic Biography*, 1989), in which Kharon's recollections of his camp experiences, written in 1965, are interspersed with the texts of the sonnets. This is an invaluable source, but it must be approached with care for various reasons. First, being Kharon's own account, *Zlye pesni* provides a singular viewpoint on a joint creation. Indeed, Kharon observed in a draft version that 'Turka [Veinert] did not give me any authority to make such revelations... Here I alone take responsibility'.<sup>8</sup> Second, Kharon's account is frustratingly convoluted and at times even opaque, often obscuring as much as it reveals and necessitating painstaking reconstruction to establish even basic facts. This may be attributable to a self-censoring impulse, linked to Kharon's friends' and relatives' hopes that the account would be published swiftly after its completion; or to the fact that Kharon's years in the labour camp were 'a bitter experience and a bitter story' that he preferred not to recall.<sup>9</sup> It is also possible, however, that Kharon simply wished to retain some of the mystery surrounding Guillaume du Vintrais, a sixteenth-century Gascon poet who was born in the twentieth-century Soviet Far East.

### 1. Official cultural life in the BAM camp system

Kharon and Veinert had very different backgrounds, yet in its own way each man's biography is typical of the Soviet generation that came of age in the early 1930s. Born in Moscow in 1914 to working-class parents, Kharon received his early education in Berlin, where his mother worked in a Soviet industrial enterprise. After returning to Moscow in his late teens, Kharon

<sup>8</sup> Excerpted in Simonov, 'Tret'ia biografiia', p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 23.

went on to join the ranks of the creative intelligentsia, beginning work as a sound technician at Mosfilm in 1932. Arrested for the first time in late summer 1937, Kharon was, like so many other members of the creative intelligentsia, a '58er', charged with counterrevolutionary activity under article 58 of the Soviet criminal code.<sup>10</sup> Born in St Petersburg in March 1914, Veinert was still in school when his parents were arrested and exiled in 1929; and he had barely finished his secondary education when, in 1930, he himself was incarcerated for the first time. As the son of exiles and an arrestee himself, Veinert subsequently found higher education institutions closed to him. Following his arrest and imprisonment in 1930, Veinert spent much of the next five years in exile, returning home for brief periods only to be arrested once again for (as his mother, Iadviga Adol'fovna Veinert, recalls) 'reading non-recommended literature [and having] conversations about things one should not talk about'.<sup>11</sup> In 1937, Veinert was arrested yet again, this time for "'questionable" trips to Leningrad' from his legal place of residence in Pskov and for a "'suspicious" telegram' from two girlfriends that revealed his involvement in a very un-Soviet love triangle.<sup>12</sup> Sentenced to ten years, Veinert spent periods in various camps in western Siberia before arriving at Svobodnoe in the early 1940s.

The labour camp in which Kharon and Veinert had the misfortune to find themselves and the good fortune to find one another was established under the aegis of the state security directorate (OGPU) in 1932. The Baikal-Amur Corrective Labour Camp (BAMLag), as it was then called, was created for the express purpose of railway construction, just one of many such camps formed at the time to support massive new industrial projects.<sup>13</sup> Overarching administrative responsibility for BAMLag shifted when the OGPU was absorbed into the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) in 1934; and again when the camp was placed under the control of the NKVD's Chief Camp Administration (GULag) in 1935. Between 1934–38, direct leadership of BAMLag remained constant, with the notorious Naftalii Frenkel' — a former inmate of the Solovetskii

<sup>10</sup> Kharon, *Zlye pesni*, pp. 38–39, 56.

<sup>11</sup> Veinert, 'Kniga dlia moikh detei', p. 212.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217; 'Vospominaniia o GULAGE i ikh avtory'. As various sources attest, the telegram read 'We are free, be free yourself', and was intended by its authors to give Veinert the opportunity to choose between them. See, for example, Simonov, 'Tret'ia biografiia', p. 17, and Veinert, 'Kniga dlia moikh detei', p. 217.

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion, see M. B. Smirnov, S. P. Sigachev and D. V. Shkapov, 'Sistema mest zakliucheniia v SSSR. 1929–1960', in M. B. Smirnov (ed.), *Sistema ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerei v SSSR, 1923–1960: Spravochnik*, Moscow, 1998, pp. 25–74 (pp. 30–32).

Special Purpose Camp (SLON) who is widely considered to be the ‘father’ of the Soviet forced labour system — as its head.

Under Frenkel’, BAMLag grew faster than any other NKVD camp, quickly becoming ‘one of the largest camp complexes in the Gulag system’.<sup>14</sup> In 1938, BAMLag was formally dissolved and rearranged into seven smaller railway construction camps, but the BAM camp system remained by far the most populous of the more than forty camps and camp networks under NKVD control.<sup>15</sup> Throughout their existence, the BAM camps were also among ‘the most chaotic and lethal’ in the Far East, notable for their appalling material conditions and unusually high prisoner mortality rates.<sup>16</sup> In 1934, for example, regional NKVD head T. D. Deribas remarked upon the ‘completely inhumane labour conditions’ in the BAM camps and upon the ‘wretchedness both of the everyday material provision and of the technical equipment’.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, in 1938 the Procurator General of the USSR, A. Ia. Vyshinskii, reported that ‘there is not a single change of underwear, boots, or clothes in the Bamlag’; that ‘[t]he food situation is catastrophic’; and that, as a result of these conditions, ‘[p]eople become brutalized, and some are nearly insane’.<sup>18</sup> In short, the BAM camp system provided a striking example of ‘how ruinous the Stalinist system of forced labor mobilization was’,<sup>19</sup> in both economic and human terms.

Despite the horrendous conditions in which BAM prisoners were forced to live and work, camp authorities there — as in labour camps across the Soviet Union — devoted considerable resources to facilities and activities

<sup>14</sup> Iu. A. Poliakov, *Naselenie Rossii v XX veke: istoricheskie ocherki. Tom 1. 1900–1939*, Moscow, 2000, p. 315; Wilson T. Bell, ‘One Day in the Life of Educator Khrushchev: Labour and Kul’turnost’ in the Gulag Newspapers’, *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 46, 2004, 3–4, pp. 289–313 (p. 297).

<sup>15</sup> As of 1 January 1939, the BAM camp system held over 260,000 prisoners, or approximately 20 per cent of the total number of people incarcerated in NKVD camps (see Poliakov, *Naselenie Rossii v XX veke*, p. 312). In the subsequent discussion, ‘the BAM camp system’ is used as an umbrella term to refer to BAMLag and its successor camps. Exceptions are made only where the term ‘BAMLag’ appears specifically, for example, in direct quotations or titles.

<sup>16</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, New York and London, 2003, p. 97. In 1938, prisoner mortality increased considerably in all NKVD camps, but in the BAM camp system the rate of increase was double that of other camps. For relevant comparative data, see Poliakov, *Naselenie Rossii v XX veke*, p. 321.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in O. P. Elantseva, ‘BAM: maloizvestnye stranitsy istorii 30-kh gg.’, *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, 8, 1991, 319, pp. 144–47 (p. 146).

<sup>18</sup> Top-secret memorandum from Vyshinskii to NKVD head N. I. Ezhov (19 February 1938), reproduced in Oleg Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror*, trans. Vadim Staklo, New Haven, CT and London, 2004, pp. 173–75 (pp. 174–75).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 62–63.

of a cultural nature. The reason for this, scholars now broadly agree, was that cultural propaganda provided an important support system for the use of collective labour as an instrument of coercion; or that, as Wilson Bell puts it, *kul'turnost'* (cultured behaviour) and labour productivity were seen to be interconnected, suggesting that 'the personal and the economic could not be separated'.<sup>20</sup> Beginning in the 1930s, these cultural activities fell within the purview of the camp system's central Culture and Education Department (KVO), and of the subordinate Culture and Education Sections (KVCh) within individual camps.

Emphasizing the role of cultural activities as instruments of control, each KVCh was headed by a mid-ranking officer belonging to the Ministry of Security; and it was staffed by 'instructors' or 'cultural organizers' (*kul'torgi*) chosen from among the prisoners, who performed a supervisory and surveillance function as well as a cultural and educational one.<sup>21</sup> Because KVCh work freed prisoners from heavy physical labour, such jobs were highly desirable, yet they were also still firmly situated within official confines.<sup>22</sup> In addition, KVCh 'instructors' recruited an *aktiv*, a group of prisoners who participated in cultural activities as well as performing daily heavy labour. For example, an *aktiv* could assist in 'book propaganda and work with the reader', as one contemporary official account describes; or in organizing musical and theatrical events, as Kharon's own experiences gathering instruments and performers for orchestral and operatic productions illustrate.<sup>23</sup> Throughout the Soviet labour camp system, the KVO and KVCh promoted a broad range of cultural activities, including music, theatre, the fine arts and literature, and the BAM camp system was no exception in this regard.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Mäkinen, 'Libraries in Hell', p. 117; Bell, 'One Day in the Life', p. 292. Cf. O. P. Elantseva, 'Periodicheskaia pechat' BAMLaga', *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, 4, 1993, pp. 167–75 (p. 167); Thomas Lahusen, *How Life Writes the Book: Real Socialism and Socialist Realism in Stalin's Russia*, Ithaca, NY and London, 1997, p. 46.

<sup>21</sup> For a more detailed description of the KVCh administrative hierarchy, see Mäkinen, 'Libraries in Hell', pp. 127–28. Solzhenitsyn describes the workings of the KVCh extensively, and scathingly, in *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 2, part 3, chapter 18 ('The Muses in Gulag').

<sup>22</sup> Mäkinen, 'Libraries in Hell', p. 127; Bell, 'One Day in the Life', p. 310.

<sup>23</sup> D. Stel'makh, 'Bibliotchnaia rabota v ispravitel'no-trudovykh uchrezhdeniiakh SSSR', in A. Ia. Vyshinskii (ed.), *Ot tiurem k vospitatel'nykh uchrezhdeniiam*, Moscow, 1936, pp. 162–72 (p. 168); Kharon, *Zlye pesni*, pp. 79–82. While Kharon does not state explicitly that he was a member of a KVCh *aktiv*, the close contact he had with the KVCh and his involvement in a range of sanctioned cultural activities strongly suggest that this was the case.

<sup>24</sup> See Lahusen, *How Life Writes the Book*, pp. 44–45.

Of greatest interest here is literary activity, which centred on the camp library and the camp press. About the BAM camp library, regrettably little specific information is available.<sup>25</sup> It is certain, however, that the BAM camp system had a central library (presumably located, like other central organs, in the garrison town of Svobodnyi) and an associated library network, the holdings of which included both books and periodicals;<sup>26</sup> and that, at least for a time, the camp system's librarian was Ustin'ia Ivanovna Surkova, the wife of KVCh (1st Division) head Anton Ivanovich Surkov.<sup>27</sup> Indirect information about the extent of the library's holdings and the availability of books and other printed materials can be gleaned from frequent references in camp periodicals to the Red Corner (the physical location where most cultural and propaganda activities took place) and to the importance of literacy.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, some prisoners were able to keep their own books in the barracks. For example, in a letter dated 17 October 1935, BAM inmate Gleb Anfilov described the following:

In all likelihood, nowhere is there such an abundance of poets as in corrective labour camps. Recently I went into the neighbouring room in the barracks. On a shelf above one bed there were many books. Among them [there were] books about versification. Who among us is interested in poetry? Oh, that bunk is occupied by a true poet.<sup>29</sup>

By contrast, considerably more is known about the BAM camp press, which was headquartered in Svobodnyi and staffed by some 120 people in the mid 1930s.<sup>30</sup> The BAM camp press published a wide variety of materials, including several dozen different periodicals with print runs of thousands

<sup>25</sup> In a contemporary official account, D. Stel'makh states that in the Soviet corrective labour system as a whole, reading rates were high and all prisoners had 'free access to library and reading-room premises' ('Bibliotchnaia rabota', p. 168); however, such claims must naturally be treated with caution. For an overview of library services in corrective labour camps, see Mäkinen, 'Libraries in Hell', pp. 126–35.

<sup>26</sup> O. P. Elantseva, *BAMlag v kontekste istorii i literatury*, Vladivostok, 2000, p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> These brief identifying notes accompany photographs of Ustin'ia Ivanovna Surkova and Anton Ivanovich Surkov displayed in the Museum of the History of Baikal-Amur Mainline (Tynda, Amurskaia oblast'). Digital copies of these photographs are available from Nauchno-informatsionnyi tsentr 'Memorial' (Petersburg), 'Muzei istorii Baikalo-Amurskoi magistrali', *Virtual'nyi muzei GULAGa* <[http://gulagmuseum.org/showObject.do?object=310899&viewMode=B\\_10461&link=1](http://gulagmuseum.org/showObject.do?object=310899&viewMode=B_10461&link=1)> [accessed 4 January 2011].

<sup>28</sup> See Mäkinen, 'Libraries in Hell', pp. 129–33; Bell, 'One Day in the Life', p. 304ff.

<sup>29</sup> Available from Anfilov, 'Vyderzhki'. This was a normal entitlement in ordinary corrective labour camps, but in the harsher 'special' camps, prisoners' books were often confiscated. Mäkinen, 'Libraries in Hell', p. 134.

<sup>30</sup> Elantseva, 'Periodicheskaia pechat' BAMLaga', p. 168.



of copies and strict limits on circulation; a series of short pamphlets called *Biblioteka 'Stroitel'ia BAMA'* (*The Library of 'The Builder of the BAM'*); and a number of books.<sup>31</sup> While some attention was paid to literature and other forms of 'high culture' in the central camp newspaper, *Stroitel' BAMA* (*The Builder of the BAM*),<sup>32</sup> there were also specialist publications devoted to literature and the arts. These included *Literatura i iskusstvo BAMLaga* (*The Literature and Art of BAMLag*), which was published as a supplement to *Stroitel' BAMA*; and the literary journal *Putearmeets* (*The Soldier of the Rails*), which was published for at least three years in the mid 1930s.<sup>33</sup> These and other camp periodicals were used to promote the consumption of literature by prisoners, but also to encourage prisoners to try writing themselves. This latter aim was achieved by rewarding prisoners for writing in to camp newspapers (many letters contained poems, some contained longer literary works); and through a range of literary competitions and prizes that were organized by and publicized through various camp periodicals.<sup>34</sup>

Among the books published by the BAM camp press, two are particularly notable here because of their poetic focus. The first is a primer on versification titled *Vvedeniie v stikhovedeniie* (*Introduction to Prosody*, 1935). This was written by Arsenii Al'ving (pseudonym of Arsenii Alekseevich Smirnov, 1885–1942), a minor Silver Age poet and translator who was an inmate of the BAM camp system between 1932 and 1940.<sup>35</sup> The second is the collection *Putearmeitsy. Stikhi i pesni lagkorov* (*Soldiers of the Rails: Poetry and Songs of Camp Correspondents*, 1935), which was

<sup>31</sup> A brief overview of BAM camp periodicals is provided in Lahusen, *How Life Writes the Book*, pp. 44–45. More detailed studies include Bell, 'One Day in the Life'; Elantseva, 'Periodicheskaia pechat' BAMLaga'; A. Iu. Gorcheva, *Pressa Gulaga (1918–1955)*, Moscow, 1996, and S. A. Paichadze, 'Izdatel'skaia deiatel'nost' i ispol'zovanie literatury uchrezhdeniiami OGPU-NKVD v zone stroitel'stva BAM (1933–1937 gg.)', in Iu. L. Rozenman (ed.), *Izdanie i rasprostranenie knigi v Sibiri i na Dal'nem vostoke: Sbornik nauchnykh trudov*, Novosibirsk 1993, pp. 127–52. See also, Elantseva, *BAMlag v kontekste istorii i literatury*.

<sup>32</sup> Bell, 'One Day in the Life', p. 303. Cf. Elantseva, *BAMlag v kontekste istorii i literatury*, p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> See *The GULAG Press, 1920–1937: Guide to the Microform Collection*, Leiden, 2000, pp. 31–32.

<sup>34</sup> Elantseva, 'Periodicheskaia pechat' BAMLaga', p. 169; Elantseva, *BAMlag v kontekste istorii i literatury*, p. 18; Lahusen, *How Life Writes the Book*, p. 54.

<sup>35</sup> Elantseva, *BAMlag v kontekste istorii i literatury*, p. 59. *Vvedeniie v stikhovedeniie* was first published in Moscow in 1931, shortly before Al'ving's arrest. On Al'ving's pre- and post-camp creative activity, see Elantseva, *BAMlag v kontekste istorii i literatury*, pp. 57–58 and M. B. Gornung, 'Arsenii Al'ving: Bessonnitsa', *Znamia*, 2004 <<http://magazines.russ.ru/znamia/2004/2/alv.html>> [accessed 20 January 2011].

compiled and edited by Al'ving.<sup>36</sup> Al'ving's early experience translating French verse (he published a translation of Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* in 1908) and his late composition of several 'imitation sonnets' (dated 1941) raise the intriguing possibility that Kharon and Veinert might have had at least an indirect connection to him. Though there is insufficient evidence to prove such a connection conclusively, the publication of Al'ving's primer and his work writing and editing poems for the BAM camp press provide convincing evidence of the extent to which poetry was actively cultivated as a part of sanctioned camp culture.<sup>37</sup>

Having established that diverse cultural activities and facilities were promoted amongst prisoners in the BAM camp system, we must now try to gauge the extent to which Kharon and Veinert made use of such opportunities; and also the extent of the interconnections between their sanctioned and unsanctioned activities in camp. Here again, detailed information is limited. Nevertheless, clues from Kharon's published recollections and correspondence can be used to construct a picture of his and Veinert's labour and leisure activities in camp. From Kharon we learn that both men 'started out on general work' but that they later came to occupy reasonably privileged positions as so-called 'trusties' (*pridurki*).<sup>38</sup> Similarly, we learn that they both received various awards and certificates of merit for their work and that they also participated in organized amateur cultural activity (*samodeiatel'nost'*) under the aegis of the KVCh.<sup>39</sup> Initially

<sup>36</sup> Like periodical editions, this book was inscribed with the notice 'Not for circulation outside the camp'. In 1975, however, a single copy was located in Moscow in the possession of Anna Pavlovna Sotskova, the widow of Naftalii Frenkel'. See 'Kak poety stroili BAM', *Izvestiia.ru*, 13 November 2010 <<http://www.izvestia.ru/news/368033>> [accessed 14 December 2010] (para. 4 of 24).

<sup>37</sup> According to Gleb Anfilov there also existed a 'circle of true poets', headed by his (unnamed) poetry-loving neighbour from the barracks. Letter of 17 October 1935, available from Anfilov, 'Vyderzhki'. It is entirely possible that Anfilov is referring to Al'ving, as he notes further that the person in charge of the 'circle of true poets' also 'edit[ed] poems written for the camp press'. Cf. 'Kak poety stroili BAM', (paras. 8–9 of 24).

<sup>38</sup> Undated letter from Kharon, excerpted in Simonov, 'Tret'ia biografiia', p. 12. It should be noted that in Russian the term *pridurki* (singular *pridurok*) has markedly negative connotations that the English term 'trusties' lacks. Solzhenitsyn defines *pridurki* as 'what the [camp] natives rudely called everyone who managed not to share the common, foredoomed lot — who either got out of *general work* or never ever got into it'. *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 2, p. 251. In the notes to his translation of *The Gulag Archipelago*, Thomas Whitney explains further that *pridurki* has a 'markedly contemptuous shade, and is closely related etymologically to a whole series of terms referring to half-wits and those who pretend to be half-wits' (vol. 2, p. 675).

<sup>39</sup> Letter (c.1965) from Kharon to P. N. Demichev, reproduced in Kharon, *Zlye pesni*, pp. 234–38 (p. 237). Between 1961 and 1974, Demichev was Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU.

Kharon was engaged in manual labour at an automobile repair factory in the camp, but he was subsequently transferred to the factory's Bureau of Rationalization and Invention (BRIZ) and eventually became its head. Kharon was able to obtain this transfer thanks to Vasiliï Nikolaevich Azhaev, the head of the camp system's Central Bureau of Rationalization and Invention (TsBRIZ), whom he knew from 'faraway Moscow times'.<sup>40</sup>

It seems that Kharon and Veinert first met in 1943, when Kharon (by then already in a position of authority) came with 'interested bosses of workshops and divisions' to inspect a group of newly arrived prisoners, 'in order to pick out [...] the most suitable workers and specialists'.<sup>41</sup> By that point Kharon was already involved in musical activities; and (as he recounts) he hoped to find among these prisoners 'someone from the artistic fraternity, [because] after all, we were awfully short of musicians [and] singers'.<sup>42</sup> Striking up a conversation with one of the new arrivals, Kharon discovered a kindred spirit who 'loved and knew music. And poetry, of course, who among us of that generation did not love poetry?' — that is, Iurii Veinert.<sup>43</sup> Veinert was first assigned to work in the factory's technical division (*tekhotdel*), but Kharon soon 'pulled [him] over' to his own division as a draughtsman.<sup>44</sup>

In the present context, the significance of the two men's working histories is twofold. First, Kharon's acquaintance with Vasiliï Azhaev provides grounds to speculate that Kharon may have been more than passingly familiar with the camp's official literary activities: Azhaev was both a sometime KVCh inspector and an active contributor to the official literary life of the camp, publishing numerous literary works in the camp press and eventually becoming (in 1937) editor-in-chief of *Putearmeets*.<sup>45</sup> Both Kharon's musical activities and his recollection of having seen Evgenii Cherviakov's film *Zakliuchennye* (*The Prisoners*, 1936) in camp make it all but certain that he had regular access not just to the KVCh, but also to the camp's Red Corner specifically.<sup>46</sup> So while it is not yet clear

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 80–81. Kharon's transfer to the factory BRIZ is likely to have occurred before 24 October 1940, when Azhaev was transferred from the TsBRIZ to the camp administration. On Azhaev's transfer, see Lahusen, *How Life Writes the Book*, p. 44.

<sup>41</sup> Kharon, *Zlye pesni*, p. 98.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 99, 86.

<sup>45</sup> Lahusen, *How Life Writes the Book*, pp. 43–44, 46–50, 53. Azhaev would later become famous as the author of the 'production novel', *Daleko ot Moskvy* (*Far From Moscow*, 1948), which was awarded the Stalin Prize (1st Class) in 1949.

<sup>46</sup> Kharon, *Zlye pesni*, pp. 79–82, 122. Cherviakov's film was a prime example of

whether Kharon contributed to the camp press himself,<sup>47</sup> his involvement with official cultural activities and his connection to Azhaev make it highly likely that he had reasonable access to materials of a literary nature along the lines detailed above. In short, while Aleksei Simonov is probably correct in asserting that Veinert and Kharon ‘had to quote Dumas and Mérimée exclusively from memory’ and that ‘French reference books and Latin dictionaries’ were not available to them either,<sup>48</sup> it is important to recognize that du Vintrai’s creators were not operating in total cultural isolation; and that not just exemplars of poetry but also materials designed to aid beginning poets were disseminated within the confines of the BAM camp system.<sup>49</sup>

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the nature of Veinert and Kharon’s official work helps to explain both how the two men could indulge in their unofficial poetic pastime without attracting undue scrutiny, and how they were able to acquire the materials they used to make their manuscripts. As the head of the factory BRIZ, Kharon was *raskonvoirovannyi*, that is, not subject to constant armed escort; and so he had, if not actual freedom, at least a certain scope for unmonitored activity not permitted to ordinary prisoners.<sup>50</sup> As a draughtsman, for his part, Veinert would have had at his fingertips the paper upon which he artfully wrote out du Vintrai’s sonnets. Evgenii Parshin implies that the BAM camp authorities knew about Veinert and Kharon’s writing, which the two men presented as a translation project; but asserts that ‘the camp bosses and special agents [*osobistam*] did not have the intelligence or the

entertainment propaganda, being based on Nikolai Pogodin’s comic play *Aristokraty* (*The Aristocrats*, 1934) about the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal and the ‘reforging’ of criminal inmates in the process.

<sup>47</sup> Kharon makes no mention of such activity, and the vast majority of available editions of BAM camp publications predate his arrival in camp. Details of these publications can be found in *The GULAG Press, 1920–1937*.

<sup>48</sup> Simonov, ‘Tret’ia biografiia’, p. 20.

<sup>49</sup> Kharon and Veinert may also have had access to books sent from outside the Gulag. Both men had the right to correspondence (*pravo perepiski*); and alongside foodstuffs, clothing and tobacco, books and other reading materials were among the articles that prisoners were permitted to receive in parcels from external correspondents. In addition, they may have been able to glean material from so-called ‘novelists’ or ‘storytellers’ (*romanisty*), prisoners who were adept at retelling literary works for the entertainment of other (primarily criminal) inmates. Adventure novels by authors such as Dumas, Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling and Jack London were particular favourites among the storytellers’ audiences. See, for example, Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, trans. John Glad, London, 1994, p. 86.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Kharon, *Zlye pesni*, pp. 80–81, 101.

education to suspect the sonnets of being seditious.<sup>51</sup> This may very well be true (Parshin does not give a specific source for this information and Kharon himself provides little clarity), but the evidence analysed above suggests that Kharon and Veinert may also have been able to use their small and hard-earned privileges to keep du Vintrais and his sonnets from being examined too closely.

2. *The posthumous birth of Guillaume du Vintrais*

This, then, was the broader cultural context surrounding Kharon and Veinert when they embarked upon their unusual literary project. More specifically, Kharon's story of the sonnets' conception suggests a combination of serendipitous discovery and playful ribbing. As Kharon tells it, his initial conversation with Veinert revealed not just a mutual love of poetry, but also a mutual interest in sonnets and in the French poets who would later be enlisted as du Vintrais's contemporaries:

We began to recollect translations of Shakespeare's Sonnet 66 that were well-known to us [...] And then, somehow, we imperceptibly shifted to French poets of the 16th century; and to Iurii Nikolaevich it probably seemed commendable that I not only knew certain names, but also remembered a few things from [Pierre de] Ronsard [and Théodore-Agrippa] d'Aubigné, in truth only fragments, the odd line... — 'And what do you think of Guillaume du Vintrais?' he asked.<sup>52</sup>

It seems, therefore, that Veinert (who had already begun to dabble in writing and translating verse)<sup>53</sup> had conceived of du Vintrais previously, and that he put his imaginary poet to Kharon as half-joke, half-test. Kharon's recollection of a conversation that took place several years after the initial conversation about poetry supports such an interpretation, as the following passage demonstrates:

Iur'ka burst out laughing one day: 'to think that our meeting might not have come to anything, that it would simply have ended then and there, if you [...] had taken it into your head then, during our first conversation, to blurt out that you were familiar with du Vintrais!'<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Parshin, 'Frantsuzskii poet', section 3, para. 3 of 6.

<sup>52</sup> Kharon, *Zlye pesni*, p. 99.

<sup>53</sup> Parshin, 'Frantsuzskii poet', section 2, para. 3 of 4; Kharon, *Zlye pesni*, p. 99.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Though he did not understand the joke until later, fortunately Kharon passed that first test: having searched his memory, he admitted that the name du Vintrais was unfamiliar.

Perhaps on the basis that du Vintrais was Veinert's invention, some accounts suggest that he alone wrote the sonnets.<sup>55</sup> Kharon's own recollections contradict this, however. He recounts that both his friendship with Veinert and their incipient literary partnership were cemented when he, lying ill in the camp infirmary, met Veinert's implied challenge with a jocular riposte:

When Iurii Nikolaevich [Veinert] came to visit me [...], I met him in fine fettle:

— I have remembered your du Vintrais, blast him! [...] I have remembered one sonnet, though I can't say whose translation it is: 'The frost has burnished the lunar disc to a shine, The snow has sprinkled sparks across the ground...'

Iura listened to the end, gave a satisfied nod, and said:

— Well, then what are you lying around here for?

Thus we became sworn brothers.<sup>56</sup>

Kharon's verse would later become 'Bessonitsa' ('Insomnia'), which occupies the forty-fourth position in du Vintrais's hundred-sonnet *oeuvre*.<sup>57</sup> A similar flight of poetic fancy in prosaic circumstances lies behind 'Kuznetsy' ('The Smiths'), the seventy-third entry in du Vintrais's *oeuvre*, which came into being at the factory foundry while the two men were watching molten iron flowing into a mould: as Kharon recalls, 'Iur'ka remarked wistfully, "And thus Vulcan forged weapons for the gods..." [and] I put in, speaking with difficulty, "Perseus equipped Pegasus for the journey".<sup>58</sup>

While the genesis of du Vintrais and his sonnets can be reconstructed in reasonably linear fashion, however, the same cannot be said of the sonnets' textual history. Here, between Kharon's own recollections and those of his close acquaintances, there are significant discrepancies regarding issues such as when and where certain of the sonnets were composed and when they first began to be known outside the BAM camp system. Such discrepancies naturally complicate a contextualized analysis of the

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Khazarova, 'Veinert-Ventre', para. 7 of 17.

<sup>56</sup> Kharon, *Zlye pesni*, p. 98.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 88, 148.

sonnets, and thus they deserve careful attention here. Perhaps the best-known version of the sonnets' history comes from Aleksei Simonov, the son of a family friend with whom Kharon lived after returning to Moscow in 1954.<sup>59</sup> According to Simonov, when Kharon and Veinert left the camp in 1947, they took with them four copies of their small manuscript, containing forty sonnets. After a brief stint in Moscow, the two men were arrested once again and exiled to different places, but they continued writing and refining the sonnets through correspondence until Veinert's untimely death in 1951. It was during this period that, according to Simonov, the number of sonnets grew to one hundred; and that 'du Vintrais and his sonnets [...] were making their first tentative inroads [*dorogi*] to the reader', being passed into 'new hands, into new places' — including a labour camp post in Vorkuta — by family and friends of both men.<sup>60</sup>

In contrast, according to Georgii Fedorov, another of Kharon's Moscow friends, Kharon managed to send a manuscript containing sixty-four sonnets to Moscow *from* the camp prior to 1947, '[b]y a channel unknown to the masters but that had existed for the persecuted since time immemorial'.<sup>61</sup> Fedorov writes, too, that he and others passed on the manuscript to friends and to various writers including Konstantin Simonov, Il'ia Ehrenburg, Nikolai Aduiev and the Shakespeare scholar Mikhail Morozov — among whom only Aduiev recognized du Vintrais and his sonnets as an invention.<sup>62</sup> This would imply, in contrast to Simonov's account, that the sonnets were becoming known in certain circles well before Kharon and Veinert's release in 1947.

Kharon's own version of the sonnets' textual history supports Fedorov's account more closely than Simonov's, but even here there are points of divergence. According to Kharon, while still in camp he and Veinert sent copies of the sonnets to friends and relatives in Moscow and Leningrad;<sup>63</sup> and by 1946 they were receiving feedback on the sonnets from outside the camp system. The responses they received included 'unconditional

<sup>59</sup> Simonov, 'Tret'ia biografiia', p. 22. Cf. Simonov, 'Poet, kotorogo ne bylo?', and 'Kharon i russkii zek Giom diu Ventre'. Simonov is also credited with making a fourteen-minute documentary about Guillaume du Vintrais, but I have not yet been able to locate a copy of this film. See 'Aleksei Simonov: Obzor', *Afisha*, n.d. <<http://www.afisha.ru/people/272763/>> [accessed 6 January 2011]. Simonov has probably done the most to bring du Vintrais and his sonnets to a broader audience, and his 2008 account forms the basis for various others, including Parshin's article 'Frantsuzskii poet'.

<sup>60</sup> Simonov, 'Tret'ia biografiia', pp. 21–22.

<sup>61</sup> Fedorov, 'Basmannaia bol'nitsa', p. 278.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>63</sup> Letter to P. N. Demichev, reproduced in Kharon, *Zlye pesni*, p. 237.

apologias for the work of du Vintrais by such world-leading figures as [translator] M[ikhail] Lozinskii in Leningrad and M[ikhail] Morozov in Moscow'; and a far more sober assessment from Nikolai Aduiev, who sent Kharon and Veinert 'a detailed letter — four pages of compact typescript! — with extremely rigorous corrections, criticisms and concrete advice'.<sup>64</sup>

Kharon makes reference to the 'first little volume, the first forty sonnets', seemingly supporting Simonov's description of the camp manuscript; but he also implies that all one hundred sonnets had been composed and a typewritten copy of them passed on to Aduiev for comment by 1947.<sup>65</sup> According to Kharon, the biography of du Vintrais was written 'towards the very end', presumably meaning in 1946 (if the date that appears on the reproduced manuscript is accurate) or not long before the two men were released in 1947; at that stage, Kharon describes,

it was not work anymore, but a lighthearted game: we were kicking up our heels, playing the fool, giving our fantasies free rein and chortling, imagining the indignation of learned men — our future readers — at the 'unforgivable transgressions' against history, linguistics, stylistics and so forth.<sup>66</sup>

From Kharon's account it is also clear that he reworked some of the sonnets independently after Veinert's death, using the typewritten copy to which Aduiev had appended marks and notations as the basis for his revisions.<sup>67</sup> Unfortunately, however, it is not clear from the available sources which sonnets Kharon reworked and how much.

### 3. *Poetic identity, freedom and power in the 'Wicked Songs' of du Vintrais*

If this complicated context reveals something about how Kharon and Veinert were able to create Guillaume du Vintrais and his *oeuvre*, a closer look at the sonnets themselves helps shed light on what they achieved with the help of their imaginary poet. A brief overview of all one hundred sonnets reveals two loose cycles and a number of recurring themes. The cycles (totalling approximately twenty sonnets) comprise, first, sonnets dedicated to 'Marquise L.', who is identified in secondary sources as Veinert's beloved Liudmila Khotimskaia;<sup>68</sup> and second, sonnets dedicated

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., pp. 193–94.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 100, 94.

<sup>66</sup> Undated letter from Kharon, excerpted in Simonov, 'Tret'ia biografiia', p. 6.

<sup>67</sup> Kharon's draft, excerpted in *ibid.*, p. 6; Kharon, *Zlye pesni*, p. 194.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Fedorov, 'Basmannaia bol'nitsa', p. 278.



to the Huguenot soldier-poet Théodore Agrippa d'Aubigné (1552–1630), who is identified in the introductory article as a close friend and literary competitor of du Vintrai.<sup>69</sup> Often overlapping with these cycles, major recurring themes include love and death; fate and judgement; freedom and exile; and poetry and the poet. Among these themes poetry and the poet emerge as clear dominants, featuring in nearly a third of the sonnets. While discussion of all of the sonnets on this theme lies beyond the scope of this article, analysis of a select few reveals important insights not just about the poetic identity with which Kharon and Veinert animated Guillaume du Vintrai; but also about the ways in which this poetic identity embodied both personal liberation and individual empowerment for du Vintrai's creators.<sup>70</sup>

The first sonnet of a metapoetic nature is 'Moi uchitelia' ('My Teachers'), which occupies the fourth position in the complete series.<sup>71</sup> In this sonnet, the poet enumerates the various sources of inspiration from which he learned his art; among these, natural phenomena ('the silvery trill of nightingales', the wind, 'the mountains and forests') figure prominently. In the final four lines of the sonnet, however, the true origin of the poet's calling is identified:

Моих стихов набрасывала кроки  
Гасконских утр прозрачная краса.

Меня учил... Но суть совсем не в этом:  
Как может быть гасконец не поэтом?!

The lucent beauty of Gascon mornings  
Sketched the outlines of my verse.

I was taught... But that is not the point:  
How can a Gascon not be a poet?!

Here, then, an explicit link is made between du Vintrai's poetic identity and his imagined Gascon homeland, a region that — thanks to native sons both fictional (Dumas père's d'Artagnan and Rostand's Cyrano de

<sup>69</sup> Kharon, *Zlye pesni*, p. 207.

<sup>70</sup> The sonnets' formal features (including Kharon and Veinert's use of numerous different rhyme schemes) and literary echoes and intertextual references likewise provide rich material for further analysis. Space constraints prevent any serious investigation of these issues here, however.

<sup>71</sup> Kharon, *Zlye pesni*, p. 28.

Bergerac) and historical (the charismatic Henry of Navarre, who would later become Henry IV of France) — carries with it strong connotations of dashing courage and undying loyalty. This link between poetic identity and place of origin is reiterated in 'Benedictus', the fourteenth sonnet in the series, in which the poet thanks his Creator (*Sozdatel'*) for the fact that he 'was born a poet and a Gascon'.<sup>72</sup>

Though the link between du Vintrais's homeland and his poetic nature is not entirely incidental, what the references in 'Moi uchitelia' and 'Benedictus' ultimately suggest is that poetry is not an acquired skill but rather an innate calling. In 'Benedictus', moreover, this calling is firmly linked to the 'passion for Freedom' for which the poet also thanks his Creator. The connection between poetry and freedom is again stressed in the sixteenth sonnet, 'Mea Culpa', in which the poet speaks of his 'unquenchable love of Freedom', and declares passionately,

Отречься от Свободы? Ну уж нет:  
Пусть лучше в пекле жарится поэт!

Renounce Freedom? Not for anything:  
'Tis better for a poet to roast in a furnace!<sup>73</sup>

Such declarations suggest that a love of freedom is a crucial element of poetic being, as inalienable from the poet as his own verse.

But while the freedom espoused in these sonnets is intangible, it nevertheless has a clear purpose: as is underscored in numerous other sonnets, poetic freedom is equated with power. In the fortieth sonnet, 'V izgnanie' ('Into Exile'), for example, the poet asserts the power of his own verse to achieve symbolic freedom:

О, Франция, прощай! Прости поэта!  
В изгнание несет меня волна.  
[...]  
Но я вернусь!... А если не придется —  
Мой гневный стих во Францию вернется!

Oh, France, farewell! Forgive the poet!  
A wave is carrying me into exile.  
[...]

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

But I shall return!... And if I am not able —  
My wrathful verse will return to France!<sup>74</sup>

Though the poet himself is physically powerless against the vagaries of fate — here in the form of a wave that drives him toward ‘the grey cliffs of Dover’ and the ‘hollow despair’ of exile, elsewhere incarnated as the ‘King, judge, executioner and God’, who are both vengeful and deaf<sup>75</sup> — his verse cannot be subdued so easily. The power that the poet attributes to his untamed verse, moreover, has a strongly civic cast: his poems are a ‘bell ringing out in times of tribulation’ (number 21, ‘Moi Stikhi’ [‘My Verses’]); a weapon with which, his opponents fear, ‘he incites people to mutiny’ (number 32, ‘Prokazhennyi’ [‘The Leper’]); and, in troubled times, ‘the conscience of the people’ and ‘the cockerel’s crow at dawn’ (number 63, ‘Dum spiro...’).<sup>76</sup>

In ‘Dum spiro...’, we learn that the price the poet must pay for his ‘wrathful verse’ is a dear one:

Плачу векам ценой мятежной жизни  
За счастье — быть певцом своей Отчизны,  
За право — быть Гийомом дю Вентре.

I will pay the ages the price of my mutinous life  
For the joy of being the singer of my Fatherland,  
For the right to be Guillaume du Vintrais.

The price of du Vintrais’s lyric rebellion is not simply exile, then, but death. As is revealed in the aptly titled ‘Morituri te salutant’ (number 35), however, both death and the despot who orders it are powerless over the poet, for his verses make him both immortal and free:

Я не умру. Моим стихам мятежным  
Чужд Смерти страх и не нужны надежды —  
Ты мне смешон, с тюрьмой и топором!  
[...]  
Мои сонеты ты казнить бессилен.  
Дрожи, тиран, перед моим пером!

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>75</sup> ‘V Bastilii’ (‘In the Bastille’), sonnet number 33, *ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 71, 143.

I will not die. The fear of Death is alien  
 To my mutinous verse, and hopes are unnecessary —  
 You are ludicrous to me, with your prison and your axe!  
 [...]
   
 You are powerless to punish my sonnets.  
 Tremble, tyrant, before my quill!<sup>77</sup>

It is difficult to deny that such declarations about the power of poetry over tyranny have a provocative edge to them; and Kharon himself remarked on the ‘sometimes extremely seditious’ nature of the sonnets.<sup>78</sup> Arguably, however, to view the sonnets of Guillaume du Vintrais within a simple paradigm of conformity and dissent is to overlook far more significant aspects of their creation. In one sense, the sonnets may have represented (as Kharon conjectures) a means of personal validation, a way ‘to test: what are you capable of?’; or they may have provided (as Simonov argues firmly) a means of self-preservation, by not allowing Kharon and Veinert to lose a sense of ‘their own particular nature’.<sup>79</sup> Certainly, these explanations ring true with the connection between the survival of the mind and the survival of the body, and the particular emphasis on the power of literature as a tool of survival, that is underscored in numerous Gulag narratives.<sup>80</sup> In another sense, though, the connections between poetic identity, freedom and power analysed above represent both a philosophical statement on the nature of freedom itself and an unequivocal declaration of Kharon and Veinert’s personal freedom, despite their physical confinement. Like their imaginary Gascon, Kharon and Veinert were natural-born poets, and through the sonnets of du Vintrais, they were able to envision and to achieve a powerful measure of self-defined freedom.

This last interpretation gains support from Kharon’s explicit musings on freedom, or more precisely, on the difference between ‘real [freedom], which belongs to me’ and freedom that is ‘bestowed out of mercy’.<sup>81</sup> As Kharon recalls, in camp,

various aspects of freedom passed before my eyes. Several officers who arrived at the factory in ’46 were considered free [*svobodnymi*], or civilian

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>78</sup> Letter to P. N. Demichev, reproduced in *ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 63, Simonov, ‘Tret’ia biografiia’, p. 18.

<sup>80</sup> See, for example, Eugenia Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, trans. Max Hayward and Paul Stephenson, New York, 2002, pp. 228, 82, and Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 3, part 5, chapter 5 (‘Poetry Under a Tombstone, Truth Under a Stone’).

<sup>81</sup> Kharon, *Zlye pesni*, p. 101.

[*vol'nonaemnymi*]. [...] [N]aturally, they avoided us, the prisoners, until they had got used to us a little. And when they had got used to us and started to talk, it turned out that their freedom was not so very different from our own. Not only did they not have passports, but they did not have the right to move about freely, they were tied to our factory and to their own apartments and even for a walk to the town they had to get approval from the commandant's office.<sup>82</sup>

In other words, Kharon clearly recognized that what was officially designated as 'free' bore little resemblance to any generally accepted notion of 'freedom', a recognition that must have been all the more striking in light of his incarceration in a labour camp town called 'Free'.<sup>83</sup> Precisely because of this recognition, Kharon asserts, both he and Veinert 'feared amnesty' because 'to give amnesty means to forgive sins, and we did not have any sins to our names'.<sup>84</sup> Deprived of freedom and consequently inflamed by a passion for it,<sup>85</sup> Kharon and Veinert both liberated and empowered themselves through Guillaume du Vintrais, long before they were released from Svobodnoe, and still longer before they were rehabilitated — that is, long before they could officially be called 'free'.

### *Conclusion*

When they arrived at Svobodnoe, Iakov Kharon and Iurii Veinert could little have suspected that they would take an imaginary Frenchman and a substantial body of his work with them when they left. Notoriously ill-provisioned and brutal even by Gulag standards, the BAM camp system would hardly have seemed a likely place to nurture any sort of creative outpourings, let alone something so remarkable as the invention of a sixteenth-century French poet and the composition of numerous sonnets in his name. Yet, as has been discussed here, the cultural life of the BAM camps was surprisingly rich and diverse. Cognizant of the potential of cultural activities to buttress power relations grounded in forced labour, the camp authorities devoted significant resources — human as well financial — to the development of musical, theatrical, literary, and other types of creative activity under the auspices of the KVO and KVCh. In return, this investment yielded a voluminous cultural output that conformed to

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>83</sup> Noting the bitter irony of this name, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn observes, '[a]nd so it is that symbols are spontaneously born of life'. *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 2, p. 142.

<sup>84</sup> Kharon, *Zlye pesni*, p. 101.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

familiar, prescribed models (poems about Stalin, tales of heroic feats of labour, narratives of personal transformation); and that was showcased through venues such as the Red Corner and the extensive camp press.

However, as the case of Iakov Kharon, Iurii Veinert and Guillaume du Vintrais demonstrates, the effectiveness of sanctioned cultural activities in maintaining prisoners' subordination and ensuring their ideological obedience was far from complete. Just like Soviet citizens living 'in freedom', Gulag prisoners did not always engage with or make use of officially promoted cultural facilities and activities in the ways that the authorities intended. In the process, some prisoners created works that not only did not support the oppressive system, but actually undercut it significantly. For Kharon and Veinert, the BAM camp library and camp press may have provided a degree of practical poetic training (and the camp engineering office a measure of inadvertent material assistance) that helped them bring du Vintrais and his sonnets to life. But by deploying these literary and material resources in entirely unanticipated ways, Kharon and Veinert were able to create a remarkable literary mystification that took on a life outside the physical and ideological confines of the BAM camp system, and to craft their own kind of freedom in the process.