

Russian Poetry



Mikhail Lermontov

* * *

No, I'm not Byron, it's my role
To be an undiscovered wonder,
Like him, a persecuted wand'rer,
But furnished with a Russian soul.
I started sooner, sooner ending,
My mind will never reach so high;
Within my soul, beyond the

mending,

My shattered aspirations lie:
Dark ocean answer me, can any
Plumb all your depth with skillful
trawl?
Who will explain me to the many?
I... perhaps God?... No one at all?

Translated by Alan Myers

THE SAIL

Amid the blue haze of the ocean
A sail is passing, white and frail.
What do you seek in a far country?
What have you left at home, lone sail?
The billows play, the breezes whistle,
And rhythmically creaks the mast.
Alas, you seek no happy future,
Nor do you flee a happy past.
Below the mirrored azure brightens,
Above the golden rays increase —
But you, wild rover, pray for tempests
As if in tempests there was peace!

Translated by Vladimir Nabokov

THE POET'S DEATH

The poet is dead, a slave to honor,
A sacrifice to slander, — dead!
With a cry of vengeance on his lips,
He bowed at last his kingly head.
His spirit could no longer bear
Dishonor, infamy, and pain;
Alone he rose once more against
A hostile world, but now he's slain.
Slain! Of what use your grief and tears,
Your barren praise beside his tomb,
Your cringing words of vindication,
When destiny has sealed his doom?
You hounded him and long had stifled
His free and wondrous song and fame!
You fanned, for pleasure and amusement,
His silent passions to a flame!
Rejoice outright! Before the final
Sorrow his head he would not bow:
Now dark the light divine, and faded
The crown of glory on his brow.
The ruthless slayer dealt his blow
With cold and calculated aim;
His heart was blind, his hand was steady,
And straight the cruel path of flame.
Why stare in wonder, why bewildered?
An adventurer of an alien race,
He came, like other greedy seekers
After fortune and official place.

What cared he for our speech and glory,
The faith and honor of our land?
How could he know, the blind despiser,
Against whom in hate he raised his hand?
Oh, slain! Our glory is no more!
Like the slain hero of his story dear
To us, the prey of jealous fear,
The youth he sang in verses full and clear,
Our poet is no more!..
Why did he leave the quiet ways of friendship plain?
Why did he seek a world where envy and disdain
The mind and heart impassioned overthrow?
Why did he clasp the hands of slanderers so base,
Believe their lying words, their false embrace,
He who from youth had learned mankind to know?
They took the poet's crown away; a wreath
Of thorn and laurel on him they laid, and now
Its hidden spines with cruel sting
Have seared his lofty brow...
Designing whisperers and crafty tongues
Maddened his days, and filled with hate his rest.
And thus he died, athirst with vain revenge,
With hopes defeated in his warring breast.
The sounds of song divine are still,
Never on earth again to peal:
The Singer's bed is dark and chill;
Upon his lips, the twilight seal ...

Translated by Eugene M. Kayden

* * *

But you, the spawn of worldly pride,
Breed of corruption, infamy, and shame,
And you, who crush with servile heel
The remnants of the lowly name, —
Hangmen of freedom, glory, thought,
A greedy pack who swarm around the throne, —
You hide behind the shadow of the law,
And mock at right and justice overthrown!
But God is just! A mighty judge, our God,
O men of crime! He waits!
The clink of gold will not avail!
He knows your infamies and hates!
Your slander then will help no more,
Nor will the sullen flood
Of your black gore then wash away
The poet's righteous blood!

Translated by Eugene M. Kayden



Alexander Pushkin

* * *

I've lived to bury my desires,
And see my dreams corrode with rust;
Now all that's left are fruitless fires
That burn my empty heart to dust.
Struck by the storms of cruel Fate
My crown of summer bloom is sere;
Alone and sad I watch and wait,
And wonder if the end is near.
As conquered by the last cold air,
When winter whistles in the wind,
Alone upon a branch that's bare
A trembling leaf is left behind.

Translated by Maurice Baring

NIGHT

My murmurous soliloquy of thee oppresses
The hush of midnight with its languorous caresses.
Beside the couch whereon I drowsing lie there glows
A fretful candle, and my verse wells up and flows
Till purling streams of love, full-carged with thee, run
through me.
Then, shimmering through the dusk, thy lustrous eyes
turn to me,
They smile at me and make a whisper as they shine:
My dearest, tender one... my love... I'm thine... I'm thine.

Translated by Walter Arndt

TO...

I recollect that wondrous meeting,
That instant I encountered you,
When like an apparition fleeting,

Like beauty's spirit, past you flew.
Long since, when hopeless grief distressed me,
When noise and turmoil vexed, it seemed
Your voice still tenderly caressed me,
Your dear face sought me as I dreamed.
Years passed; their stormy gusts confounded
And swept away old dreams apace.
I had forgotten how you sounded,
Forgot the heaven of your face.
In exiled gloom and isolation
My quiet days meandered on,
The thrill of awe and inspiration
And life, and tears, and love, were gone.
My soul awoke from inanition,
And I encountered you anew,
And like a fleeting apparition,
Like beauty's spirit, past you flew.
My pulses bound in exultation,
And in my heart once more unfold
The sense of awe and inspiration,
The life, the tears, the love of old.

Translated by Walter Arndt

THOU AND YOU

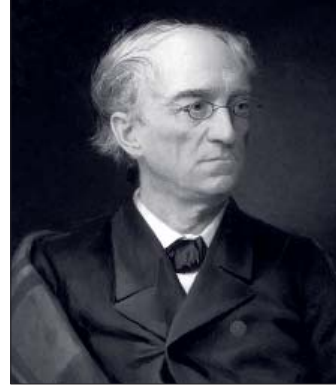
The pale «you are» by warm «thou art»
Through careless slip of tongue replacing,
She sent within the love-struck heart
All sorts of happy fancies racing.
I stand before her all beguiled;
I stare at her, and the old Adam
Blurts out: You are all kindness, Madam!
And thinks: God, how I love thee, child!

Translated by Walter Arndt

* * *

Blest he who at your fancy's pleasure
Your dreamy, languid ardor won,
Whose every glance you heed and treasure,
Before all eyes by love undone;
But pity him who, heart and bowels
With love's consuming flame ablaze,
Must hear in silence your avowals,
While jealous anguish clouds his gaze.

Translated by Walter Arndt



* * *

The Georgian hills above lie shrouded in the night;
 Aragva churns down in the hollow,
 I feel both sad and gay, my grief suffused with light;
 Your presence permeates my sorrow,
 Just you and you alone... My melancholy fit
 Is undisturbed, no outside thing to bother,
 My heart once more is warmed to love, and it
 Must love, for it can do no other.

Translated by Alan Myers

* * *

I loved you once: of love, perhaps, an ember
 Within my soul is not extinguished yet;
 But let that be no prompting to remember,
 Or be a cause of sadness or regret.
 I loved you once, quite hopeless, dumbly tender,
 By jealousy and diffidence oppressed;
 I loved you once with such complete surrender
 As may God grant you may again be blessed.

Translated by Alan Myers

A MONUMENT

I've raised myself no statue made with hands;
 The People's path to it no weeds will hide.
 Rising with no submissive head, it stands
 Above the pillar of Napoleon's pride.
 No! I shall never die; in sacred strains
 My soul survives my dust, and flies decay —
 And famous shall I be, while there remains
 A single Poet 'neath the light of day.
 Through all great Russia will go forth my fame,
 And every tongue in it will name my name;
 And by the nation long shall I be loved,
 Because my lyre their nobler feelings moved;
 Because I strove to serve them with my song,
 And called forth mercy for the fallen throng.
 Hear God's command, O Muse, obediently,
 Nor dread reproach, nor claim the Poet's bay;
 To praise and blame alike indifferent be,
 And let fools say their say!

Translated by John Pollen

* * *

Old Winter justly rages!
 Her days are nearly past.
 Fair Spring raps on the window
 And chases Winter fast.
 And now all Nature hustles
 The Winter witch along;
 The skylarks in the azure
 Soar high with peals of song.
 Old Winter frets and grumbles
 At her rival angrily;
 But Spring pipes even louder
 And laughs out merrily.
 Old Winter fumes and rages,
 And scampering away,
 She hurls a snowball flying
 At the fair child of May.
 Away with care and trouble!
 Spring laves her face in snow
 And, rosier than morning,
 She shines despite her foe.

Translated by Eugene M. Kayden

POETRY

Amidst the thunder, tempest, fire,
 Amidst their boiling, swirling ire,
 In flaming strife and disarray
 From heaven to the earth she flies
 With azure brightness in her eyes
 To live among the sons of clay, —
 And on the wild tumultuous sea
 She pours the oil of harmony.

Translated by Eugene M. Kayden

OUR AGE

No sickness of the flesh, our present plight;
 Our souls are sick, denying life, yet grieving.
 We strive in gloom for light; yet finding light,

Rebellious, we repine, still unbelieving.
 Withered and spent by unbelief, the soul
 Endures woes unendurable, not daring
 To pray for faith, yet knowing it has no goal
 Nor hope in life through days of long despairing.
 Our age will not cry out in tears, nor pray,
 Although we wait before closed doors in grief
 For man's salvation. We cannot humbly say:
 «Lord, I believe! Help Thou my unbelief!»

Translated by Eugene M. Kayden

K.B.

I've met you — and now all the by-gone
 Revives in my senescent heart,
 I've called to mind the moments golden

That all their warmth to me impart ...
 As in late autumn, bleak and bare,
 There chances an enchanting day
 When spicy scents waft in the air
 And thrill us through like scents of May, —
 So, bringing back the past that captures
 By young emotions' glare and blaze,
 Gone into long-forgotten raptures,
 I glut myself with your sweet traits ...
 As if an age-long separation
 How bids me gaze so avidly,
 And hark to bells of pure elation
 Which never ceased to ring in me ...
 It is not a remembrance only,
 Here life itself revives anew,
 And selfsame charm pervades you wholly,
 And selfsame love I feel for you ...

Translated by Alexander Pokido



Osip Mandelstam

He alone points at us and thunders.
 He forges order after order like horseshoes,
 Hurling them at the groin, the forehead, the brow,
 the eye.
 The broad-breasted boss from the Cuacarus
 Savours each execution like an exquisite sweet.

Translated by Richard and Elizabeth McKane

* * *

We are alive but no longer feel the land under our feet,
 You can't hear what we say from ten steps away,
 But when anyone half-starts a conversation
 They mention the mountain man of the Kremlin.
 His thick fingers are like worms,
 His words ring as heavy weights.
 His cockroach moustache laughs,
 And the tops of his tall boots shine.

He is surrounded by his scrawny necked henchmen,
 And plays with the services of non-entities.
 Someone whistles, someone miaows and another
 whimpers,

THE OCTETS [A FRAGMENT]

7

And Schubert in water and Mozart in the language
 of birds
 And Goethe, whistling along a tortuous path,
 And Hamlet, his fearful steps a kind of thought,
 All took the pulse of the crowd and trusted the crowd.
 Perhaps there was whispering before lips were born
 And leaves swirled a treeless land,
 And they, to whom we dedicate experience,
 Had substance before it.

Translated by John Riley

* Mandelstam Osip "What Agony! To Search for a Lost Word ..." Moscow: VAGRIUS, 2008. ISBN 978-5-9697-0591-3. P.282-283; 284-285.