Narrative Poems by
ALEXANDER
PUSHKIN
and by
MIKHAIL
LERMONTOV

Translated by
CHARLES JOHNSTON
Introduction by Kyril FitzLyon

Random House New York
INTRODUCTION BY KYRIL FITZLYON vii
TRANSLATOR’S NOTE BY CHARLES JOHNSTON xxii

ALEXANDER PUSHKIN: 3–53
ONEGIN’S JOURNEY 3
GRAF NULIN 14
MOZART AND SALIERI 27
THE BRONZE HORSEMAN 38

MIKHAIL LERMONTOV: 54–144
THE TAMBOV LADY 54
THE NOVICE 82
THE DEMON 107
his farewell... and before my death perhaps near by once more I'll hear my native tongue! and someone dear, I'll dream, some brother, or some friend, how, gently, over me he'll bend, how, tenderly, he'll wipe my brow clean of death's icy sweat, and how he'll sing to me in undertone of that dear country, once my own... and so I'll sleep—no curse, no groan!"

THE DEMON

An Eastern Story

PART I

I

A Demon, soul of all the banished, sadly above the sinful world floated, and thoughts of days now vanished before him crowdingly unfurled; days when, in glory's habitation, he shone out a pure cherubim, when comets flying on their station rejoiced to exchange a salutation of welcome and of love with him, when through the vapours of creation, hungry for knowledge, he flew on with caravans in their migration to space where headlong stars have gone; with love and faith to lean upon, happy first-born of our condition, he knew no evil, no suspicion, his mind undaunted by the length of fruitless aeons sadly falling... so much, so much there was... the strength, the will now fails him for recalling!

II

He wandered, now long-since outcast; his desert had no refuge in it; and one by one the ages passed,
as minute follows after minute,
each one monotonously dull.
The world he ruled was void and null;
the ill he sowed in his existence
brought no delight. His technique scored,
he found no traces of resistance—
yet evil left him deeply bored.

III

Above the steep Caucasian places
heaven's expatriate flew full-pelt:
below him, Kazbek's diamond-faces
glittered with snows that never melt,
and far beneath them, dark, arresting
as some crevasse where snakes are nesting,
Daryal wound its twisted belt,
and Terek, lioness-like, was springing,
shaggily-maned all down its back;
it roared, and mountain beasts and swinging
birds high on their circuitous track
in the azure heard its lifting water;
and clouds from far-off southern lands
escorted him in gilded bands
toward horizon's northern quarter;
and closely packed massifs of stone,
deep-sunk in their mysterious dreaming
had bowed their peaks as he had flown
above the bed where waves were gleaming;
and towered castles on the hard
precipice-top, above the entry
to Caucasus, in cloud stood guard
grim as some Cyclopean sentry!
How strange, how savage was the whole
divine landscape; but that proud soul
viewed with disdain and some derision
the product of his Maker's will;
his lofty forehead at this vision
expressed no thought, exactly nil.

IV

Before him now the picture changes;
a different scene, a brilliant hue:
luxurious Georgia's vales and ranges
are counterpaned-out for his view;
fortunate land, and sumptuous too!
Pillar-like ruined halls and granges,
and watercourses that ran loud,
over the dappled pebbles rolling,
and nightingales that in the crowd
of roses voice their amorous trolling
to which no answer is allowed;
plane-trees inside their ivy sheathing
with branching shadows; caves where deer
at flaming midday hide their fear;
and life, and sound of leaves, and glow,
a hundred tongues that murmur low,
and plants in thousands gently breathing!
The sensual heat of high noon-days,
nights which the never-failing sprays
of dew have drenched in aromatic,
and stars like eyes, clear and dramatic,
sharp as a Georgian maiden's gaze!

and yet, apart from envy's chilling,
this natural glory could inspire
the barren exile with no thrilling
of new emotion or new fire;

THE DEMON 109
and everything he contemplated
he either scorned or execrated.

V

A lofty hall, a broad courtyard,
grey-haired Gudäl built for his pleasure . . .
the building cost his slaves much treasure
of tears and labour long and hard.
His towers in light of morning barred
with stripes of shade the mountain fairway.
Out of the cliff was hacked a stairway
from where the angled bastions gleam
down to the river; Gudäl’s daughter,
white-veiled and flashing like a dream,
Princess Tamara, seeking water
runs down to the Arága’s stream.

VI

From the steep mountain every minute
the voiceless house stares at the vale;
today, though, there’s a feast, pipes wail—
the hall resounds, wine’s flowing in it,
for Gudäl has betrothed his girl,
the whole clan’s here, all’s in a whirl.
Up on the roof, among her hidden
girl-friends, the bride looks on the hall:
sitting on rugs, they sing and call
and play. Already sunk and hidden
by distant peaks the sun’s half-ball;
to keep the measure of their singing
the girls clap hands; the youthful bride
takes up her tambourine and, swinging
it round her head in sweeping-wide
circles, abruptly starts to glide;
one moment, like a bird, she dashes
and swoops; the next, she stands at gaze
and her moist eyes dart out their rays
from underneath malicious lashes;
and now she twitches a dark brow,
now suddenly she stops her gliding,
and halts, and makes a little bow;
meanwhile a heavenly foot is sliding
over the carpet; infantile
is the enjoyment in her smile.
Even the moonbeam’s fitful shivers
playing on water can’t in truth
rival that peerless smile: it quivers
as full of joy as life, or youth.

VII

I swear it on the midnight star,
on rays of sunset or of dawning,
ever did autocrat of far
golden Iran, or earthly tsar,
kiss such an eye; on sultry morning
no sparkling fount of the harém
ever in summertime was splashing
a waist so heavenly in the flashing,
the pearly dewfall of its stream!

Or by no human fingers, pressing
a loved one’s brow in their caressing,
was ever hair like this undone;
since earth lost heaven, with humble duty
I swear it, never did such beauty
blossom beneath the southern sun.

VIII

She'd dance no more. Alas, there waited
a different morrow; she was fated,
she, heiress of the celebrated
Gudal, she, lively freedom's own
nursling, to grim incarceration,
vowed to a strange expatriation
and to a family unknown.
Sometimes a secret hesitation
obscured the brilliance of her face;
and, with her, every single motion
was so compact of inner notion,
full of such sweet and simple grace,
that if the Demon, as he floated
above, had looked upon the bride,
thinking of brothers once devoted
he would have turned away—and sighed . . .

IX

And he did see her . . . For a second
by turmoil too deep to be reckoned
the Demon sensed that he was bound.
His dumb soul's emptiness was slowly
filled with loud chords of blissful sound—
and once again he reached that holy
shrine where love, beauty, goodness gleam! . . .
And long he gazed, with fascination,
at the sweet view; as if in dream
his earlier blisses' constellation
came as on summons from afar
and swam before him, star on star.
Then, riveted by unseen forces,
he came to feel a new sorrow;
emotion started on discourses
in language that he used to know.
Was this a sign of new begetting?
the cunning, covetousness-whetting
words came no more . . . had he forgot?
God never gave that; and he'd not
at any price accept forgetting . . .

X

At sunset, spurring on his beast,
the bridgroom to the wedding feast
with all impatient haste was riding,
and the green banks of brightly gliding
Aravg he had safely gained.
Behind him staggered, limped and strained
an endless line of camels bringing
his wedding gifts in towering load;
they gleamed, and all their bells were ringing
as they strung out along the road.
Sinodal's lord himself was heading
the sumptuous caravan. His waist
inside its belt is tightly laced;
sabre and dagger-mounts are shedding
the sun's reflections; his flintlock,
slung back, has notches on its stock.
And in the wind his sleeves are straying,
sleeves of a chukha* that all round
with trimming of galloon is crowned.

A saddle where bright silks are playing;
a bit with tassels downward swaying;
and, lathered under him, his bold
charger with that rare hue of gold.
Karabakh's brave offspring, ears with tension
pricked, all taut in apprehension
snorts as he squints down in the gloom
on the careering river's spume.
A path to make the bravest shiver!
The cliff to leftward; deep as doom,
to right the chasm of the wild river.
It's late; on snowy peaks the sliver
of radiance fades; mists rise apace...
the caravan begins to race.

XI

A wayside chapel... here is sleeping
since days of old, in God's good keeping,
now sanctified, an ancient prince
cut down by vengeance. Ever since,
heading for feast or bloody fighting,
here, as he hurried on his way,
the traveller never missed inditing
the strongest prayer that he could say:
that prayer, so fervently directed,
kept him from Moslem's knife protected.
But the bold bridegroom now disdained
the rite his forefathers maintained.

* Outer garment with sleeves that fold back. (Lermontov's note.)

The crafty Demon with infernal
reveries had tempted him; in thought
beneath the gloom, the shades nocturnal,
it was his sweetheart's lips he sought.
But suddenly, ahead, a figure—
no, two—no, more—a shot—whose trigger?
In clinking stirrups rising now,
ramming his fur cap on his brow
the dauntless prince in silence lifted
his Turkish whip; it flashed, it whirred,
Crack went the lash; he spoke no word
as, eagle-like, he swooped, he shifted...
Another shot! a screaming man—
then from the valley dull groans rended
the still of night. The Georgians ran,
the battle all too soon was ended!

XII

Now calm returned; the sheepish flock
of camels on the road, in shock,
gazed back upon the dead, astounded;
and in the still of steppe and rock
dully their little bells resounded.
The sumptuous caravan was sacked;
above those Christian corpses packed
the bird of night invigilated!
no peaceful sepulchre awaited
their bodies, in some cloister's trust,
where rested their forefather's dust;
no sisters and no mothers, trailing
lengths of impenetrable veiling,
with sobs and prayers and sighs and wailing
visit their grave and mourn their loss!
And yet, by loving hands erected
here at the highway verge, protected
by the steep cliff, there stands a cross;
in spring the amorous, neglected
ivy, in emerald nets displayed,
clasps it in tenderest embraces;
and, turning in from far-off places,
the walker, tired from the long grade,
rests in the consecrated shade . . .

XIII

Swift as a deer the horse is rushing,
snorting as if for battle; hushing
sometimes, he halts in mid-career,
blows out his nostrils wide in fear,
and listens to the breeze’s sighing;
now thunderously his hooves are flying,
beating tattoos of rhythmic sort;
his mane all tangled, wildly spraying,
he gallops on without a thought.
He bears a silent horseman, swaying
across the saddle or, down-pressed,
collapsed upon that golden crest.
His hand no longer steers the bridle,
feet in the stirrups are thrust back,
bloodstreams are flowing, broad and idle,
across the cloth of his shabrack.
Brave galloper, you brought your master
out from the battle like a dart,
but the Ossetian’s bullet, faster
than you, in darkness found his heart!

XIV

In Gudáí’s hall there’s grief and moaning,
the guests swarm out to the courtyard;
whose charger, broken past atoning,
outside the gates has fallen so hard?
and who’s the lifeless rider? traces
of war’s alarm lurk in the spaces
of his dark-favoured, furrowed brow.
On clothes, on weapons, blood is freezing;
his hand in a last furious squeezing
upon the mane is frozen now . . .
Oh, not for long the bride had waited
her young groom’s coming: and at least,
his princely word unviolated,
he galloped to the wedding feast . . .
Alas, no more that brave, hard-bitten
charger shall bear him—so it’s written! . . .

XV

Heaven’s punishment like thunder swooped
down on that family, so light-hearted!
pitiable, Tamara drooped
onto her bed; she sobbed, then started,
suddenly, tear on rolling tear,
her bosom laboured, breath oppressed her—
when, from above, a voice addressed her;
she seemed in magic tones to hear:
“Don’t weep, my child! no use in steeping
a voiceless corpse with tears unsleeping!
Such tears are no life-giving dew:
they simply cloud your eyes; such weeping
burns up complexion’s virgin hue!
he's far from here, he's past all knowing,
from him your grief can earn no praise;
celestial radiance now is glowing
before his incorporeal gaze;
for him heaven's choirs are now intoning . . .
what are life's paltry dreams, the oppressed
tears of a poor young girl, her groaning,
to the celestial country's guest?
No mortal creature should be reckoned,
whatever be his lot, as worth—
believe me—for a single second,
your grief, my angel of the earth!

"On the heavens' ethereal ocean,
rudderless, without a sail,
starry choirs in ordered motion
calmly float through vapour's veil;
over heaven's unbounded spaces,
unattainable, unheard,
leaving after them no traces,
pass the clouds in fleecy herd.
Times for meeting, or leave-taking,
bring them neither joy nor pain;
future brings them no wish-making,
past, no will to live again.
In the grievous hour of sorrows,
they are what you should recall;
take no heed for earthly morrows,
be uncaring, like them all!

"As soon as night on the Caucasian
summits has cast its mantle round,
as soon as its bewitching suasion
has stilled the world, as if spellbound;
as soon as on the cliff there passes
a night wind through the withered grasses,
and hidden deep in them a bird
cheerfully in the dark has stirred;
as soon as, under vineyard railing
thirstily drinking the unfailing
dewfall, the flower of night has bloomed;
as soon as the gold moon has loomed
silently from the mountain-sill,
looked at you sidelong in the still—
then I shall fly to you and keep
tryst with you till the daystar flashes,
and on the silk of your eyelashes
I shall infuse the gold of sleep . . ."

XVI

Then the voice faded like illusion,
the sound had come, the sound died out.
She started up, she looked about . . .
and inexpressible confusion
reigned in her breast; fear, grief, joy, doubt,
compared to this were just delusion.
Her feelings bubbled up in rout;
her soul arose and snapped its shackles,
while fire came racing through each vein;
that voice, so strange it raised the hackles,
she thought she heard it speak again.
Just before daybreak, welcome-seeming
slumber had dimmed Tamara's gaze;
and yet her mind was in a daze,
astonished with prophetic dreaming.
A stranger, mute, through mists that curled,
in beauty clad not of this world,
came to her, leaned above her pillow;  
and in his glance was such a bellow  
of love and grief that you'd infer  
all his compassion was for her.  
This was no angel to befriend her,  
this was no heaven-sent defender:  
no crown of iridescent beams  
adorned his forehead with its gleams;  
nor one of those who burn together  
in hell, no tortured sinner—no!  
he was like evening in clear weather:  
not day, nor night—not gloom, nor glow!  

PART II

I

“Oh, father, father, cease from chiding,  
leave your Tamara free from threat;  
I weep: see how my tears are gliding,  
they’ve flowed for days, they’re flowing yet.  
It’s futile that from distant places  
suitors crowd hither to my side...  
Georgia abounds in maiden graces;  
my fate is to be no one’s bride!...  
Oh, father, throw stern words away.  
You’ve noted how, from day to day,  
victim of poison’s curse, I’m fading:  
an evil dream, past all evading,  
torments me; there’s no way to flee;  
I’m lost, it’s pressing down on me!  
To holy sanctuary send me,  
send me to cool my raging head;  
for there my Saviour will defend me, with Him my anguish will be shed.  
No worldly joys can now deceive me...  
so in a shrine’s protecting gloom  
rather let some dim cell receive me,  
an early foretaste of the tomb...”

II

And so to a secluded holy  
cloister her parents took her; dressed  
in a habiliment of lowly  
hairshirting was that maiden breast.  
But even in her monastic twilling,  
as under damask’s figured gleam,  
still with the same illicit dream  
just as before her heart was thrilling.  
At the altar, in the candle’s glow,  
at moments of most solemn singing,  
or while the voice of prayer was ringing,  
would sound those tones she had to know.  
And where the dim cathedral lifted  
its vaulting, often would repair,  
soundless and traceless as the air,  
where the thin films of incense drifted,  
a starlike figure, shining there;  
it called, it beckoned her... but where?

III

Between two hills, in shade abounding;  
the sacred convent hid away  
in planes and poplars tight-surrounding;  
sometimes, when darkness came to stay.
on the ravine, a lamp, appearing
in a faint glimmer through the clearing,
revealed where that young sinner lay.
In shade that almond-trees projected,
sad crosses in their rows protected
the voiceless graves; there the small birds
in choirs of song rehearsed their words.
Over the stones ran, bubbling, springing,
fountains of water, chilled as ice,
that under beetling cliffs would slice
across the valley-bed and, singing,
tumble on further through a scrub
whose bloom hoar-frosted every shrub.

IV
To northward, mountain peaks were showing.
And when Aurora, early glowing,
watches the smoky mists of blue
rise from the valley, layer on layer,
and when, face to the east, as due,
all the muezzins call to prayer,
and the clear voice of the bell-tower
wakens the people with its shaking;
in that pacific, solemn hour
at which the Georgian maiden, taking
her long and tapering pitcher, goes
for water down the steep, there grows
a mountain range, all capped in snows;
against the limpid heaven it throws
a wall of lilae past comparing;
or in the sunset hour it's wearing
a chasuble that darkly glows;
and in the middle stands, invading
cloudland, the supreme peak by far,
Kazbek, all turbaned in brocading,
of Caucasus the mighty tsar.

V
With guilty thoughts in crowding session,
Tamara's deaf to the intercession
of honest pleasures. In her eyes
the whole world's wrapped in shade and sadness;
all things are cause for pain and madness—
night's gloom, or radiance of sunrise.
No sooner has the chill infusion
of sleepy night flowed all around,
than she in frenzy and confusion
before the icon falls to ground;
she weeps; and in the silent tension
of night her sobs with apprehension
trouble the wayfarer's attention:
"There groans some spirit of the height,
chained in a cavern, sadly stirring!"
he listens hard through the still night,
then gives his weary horse a spurring.

VI
Tamara at the window-sill
stares at the distant scene, and still
stares, languid, full of trepidation;
she sits in lonely meditation,
she sighs and waits, waits the whole day . . .
a whisper comes: he's on his way!
Her dreams, his manner of appearing,
such flattery had not failed to reach
her heart; his sad gaze, the endearing,
the tender strangeness of his speech.
Herself not knowing rhyme or reason,
she’s pined and languished many days;
her heart may wish to pray in season
to holy saints, to him it prays;
worn out by struggle unabating,
if she lies down on slumber’s bed,
herself burns, she’s suffocating,
she starts up, shivering with dread;
her breast, her shoulders flame, she races
to breathe, she chokes, mist’s in her eyes,
her arms are thirsting for embraces,
and on her lips a kiss that dies . . .

VII

Now Georgia’s mountains had been vested
in aery robes of twilight hue.
Down to the cloister, as suggested
by his sweet wont, the Demon flew.
And yet he shrank, long minutes through,
he started back from violating
the peace in which that shrine was waiting.
There was a moment when he dreamed
of giving up his grim designing.
Around the high wall, brooding, pining,
he roamed: without a breeze, it seemed
the leaves had stirred from his returning.
In shade he looked up; her undone
window displays a lantern burning;
she’s long been waiting for someone!
And now, amid the silence reigning.

chingar’s* harmonious complaining
lifted, and strains of song began;
they flowed, these sounds, they ran and ran,
they pressed, like tears, hard on each other;
so tender was that song, you’d find
that up in heaven, for mankind,
its melodies had been designed.
Perhaps to a forgotten brother
some angel, moved to meet again,
had flown in stealth and raised this strain
to alleviate the other’s pain,
songs where time past found sweet narration? . . .
Love’s swooning and love’s agitation—
for the first time the Demon now
experienced them; in shock and shiver
he thinks of fleeing—but no quiver
stirs in his wing! from his dimmed brow
a heavy teardrop, a slow river . . .
what marvel! till today, quite near
that cell, there stands in wondrous fashion
a stone scorched by a tear of passion,
burnt through by an inhuman tear! . . .

VIII

And, as he enters, love is winning,
his soul is opened to the good;
he thinks, for life a new beginning
has come, as he had prayed it would.
The vague alarm of expectation,
the unspoken fear of the unknown,
as if at a first confrontation

* Chingar: A kind of guitar. (Lermontov’s note.)
to that proud soul had now been shown.
Then comes a grim prefiguration!
he enters—there in front of him
heaven’s envoy, the cherubim,
radiant, on his protective mission
keeps the fair sinner from all things
evil, defends her from perdition
inside the shadow of his wings;
and sudden light, from heaven down-beating,
blinded the Demon’s unclean sight;
instead of a sweet-spoken greeting,
heavy rebuke was prompt to smite:

IX

“Oh, soul of evil, soul unsleeping,
in midnight gloom, what tryst is keeping?
None of your votaries are here,
no breeze of ill has dared to roister
till now in this my well-loved cloister;
so bring no wicked footsteps near.
Who summoned you?” A crafty sneer
was Demon’s manner of replying;
all red with envy was his look;
and once more in his soul, undying,
hate’s poison brew began to cook.
“She’s mine!” cried out the grim contender,
“release her, for you come too late,
too late to serve as her defender
and stand in judgement on her fate
or mine. On her proud soul, I tell you,
I have affixed my seal above;
so from your cloister I repel you,
this is my kingdom, here I love!”

And on the victim, now past saving,
the Angel cast a sorrowing eye
and slow as slow, with pinions waving,
was drowned in the ethereal sky.

X

TAMARA

Who are you, tempter-tongue? What duty
brings you to me—from heaven? from hell?
What do you want of me? ...

DEMON

Your beauty ...

TAMARA

Tell me, who are you? Answer. Tell ...

DEMON

He to whose voice with rapt attention
you listened in the still midnight,
whose grief you guessed at, whose intention
spoke to your soul, whose vague dimension
you saw in dreaming; who can blight
hopes with one glance, and bring them crashing;
whom no one loves; who lives for lashing
his earthly slaves with furious beat,
the king of freedom and cognition, 
heaven’s foe, and nature’s own perdition,
and yet, you see him at your feet!
I bring a message of devotion,
a prayer of love; for you I’ve kept
my first pains of earthbound emotion,
and the first tears I ever wept.
Oh, hear me out! oh, have some notion
of pity! back to heaven you
with just a single word could send me.
With your love’s raiment to defend me,
thus vested, I’d stand there, a new
angel with a new gleam to attend me;
oh, only hear me out, I pray—
I love you like a slave! the day
when I set eyes on you there started
in me a secret but whole-hearted
hatred for my immortal sway.
I found I envied such deficient
happiness as exists down here;
all life not yours was insufficient,
all life away from you brought fear.
Then in my dull heart, unexpected,
a glow began to warm and wake;
deep in an old wound and undetected,
grief started stirring like a snake.
What, without you, is life eternal?
what are my boundless realms infernal?
Just empty words, a loud discord,
a vast cathedral—with no lord!

TAMARA
Deceitful spirit, you must leave me!
Be still, I’ll not believe the foe...
Oh, my Creator... grief and woe!
no prayer comes out... my wits deceive me,
they falter, gripped by venom’s ire!
Listen, you pile up doom above me
with words of poison and of fire...
Tell me the reason why you love me!

DEMON
The reason why, fair one, you said?
Alas, I know it not... elated
with new life, from my guilty head
the thorny crown I relegated,
threw in the ashes all my days:
my heaven, my hell are in your gaze.
I love you with no earthly passion,
such love that you could never find:
with rapture, in the towering fashion
of an immortal heart and mind.
On my sad soul, from world’s first aeon,
deeply your image was impressed;
ever before me it progressed
through wastes of timeless empyrean.
My thoughts had long been stirred and racked
by just one name of passing sweetness:
my days in paradise had lacked
just your perfection for completeness.
If you could guess, if you could know
how much it costs in tribulation
throughout the ages’ long gradation
take one’s pleasure, suffer woe,
to expect no praise for evil, no
prize for good deeds; what condemnation
to live for self, by self be bored
in endless struggle—no reward,
no crown, no reconciliation!
To regret all, to seek no prize,
to know, feel, see all things for ever,
to seek to hate the world—whatever
there may be in it, to despise...!
As soon as I from heaven’s employment
was banned by curses, from that day
all nature's warmth and sweet enjoyment
grew chilled for ever, froze away;
bluer before me stretched the spaces;
I saw apparelled in their places,
like wedding guests, the lights I knew ...
crowned, gliding one behind another;
and yet their former friend and brother
not one would recognise anew.
So, in despair, the expatriated,
the outcasts I began to call,
but faces, words, and locks that hated,
I failed to recognise them all.
And so, in horror, wings inflected,
I swooped away—but whither? why?
I know not ... I had been rejected
by my old friends; like Adam I
found the world gone deaf-mute and dry.
So, at the current's free impulsion,
a helpless and storm-crippled boat,
sailless and rudderless, will float,
knowing no goal for its propulsion;
so at the earliest morning-tide
a rap of thunder-cloud will ride,
in heaven's azure vaults the only
visible speck, unhalting, lonely,
will without trace and without sense
fly God knows whither, God knows whence!
Briefly I guided mankind's thought,
briefly the ways of sin I taught,
discredited what's noble, brought
everything beautiful to nought;
briefly ... the flame of all committed
belief in man I firmly drowned ...
but was it worthwhile to confound
just hypocrites and the half-witted?

I hid where the ravines run deep;
I started, meteor-like, to sweep
on course through midnight's darkest glooming ... .
A lonely wayfarer was looming,
enticed by a near lamp—to fall
over the cliff-edge, horse and all;
vainly he called out—bloody traces
followed him down the mountain-side ... .
but hatred's tricks, its sad grimaces,
brought me a solace that soon died!
How often, locked in dusty battle
with some great hurricane, in shroud
of mist and lightning I would rattle
and swoop and storm amid the cloud,
and hope in element al churning
to stifle all my heart's regret,
to escape from thoughts that kept returning,
the unforgotten to forget!

What is the sum of the privations,
the labours and the grief of man,
of past, of future generations,
compared with just one minute's span
of all my untold tribulations?
What is man's life? his labour? why—
he's passed, he's died, he'll pass and die ... ;
his hopes on Judgement Day rely:
sure judgement, possible forgiving!
but my sorrow is endless, I
am damned to sorrow everliving;
for it, no grave in which to doze!
sometimes, snake-like, it creeps, or glows
like flame, it crackles, blazes, rushes,
or, like a tomb, it chokes and crushes—
a granite tomb for the repose
of ruined passions, hopes and woes.
[TAMARA]
Why should I share your griefs, your inner torments? Why listen to your moan?
You've sinned...

DEMON
Towards you, I'm no sinner.

TAMARA
Someone will hear us... 

DEMON
We're alone.

TAMARA
And God?

DEMON
Won't glance at us: eternal for heaven, but not for earth, his care.

TAMARA
And punishment, and pains infernal?

DEMON
What of them, if we both are there?

TAMARA
Sufferer, stranger-friend, unwilling—whenever you may be—I find your words set secret pleasure thrilling, ceaselessly they disturb my mind.
But if there's cunning in your story, if there's a secret, wicked goal...

oh, have some mercy! where's the glory to you, what value is my soul?
In heaven's eye could I be reckoned dearer than those you spurned instead?
they too are beauties, though unbeckoned!
as here, no mortal for a second has dared defile their maiden bed...
Swear me a fateful oath... in anguish
I bid you swear... see how I languish; you know the stuff of women's dreams!
instinctively you soothe my terrors... you understand my ways, my errors—and you'll have pity that redeems!
Swear it... from evil machinations you'll cease for ever, swear it now.
Have you no oaths, no adjurations, have you no single sacred vow?

DEMON
By the first day of our creation
I swear, and by its final night,
I swear by evil's condemnation
and by the triumph of the right,
by downfall, with its bitter smarting,
by victories I dream to score,
by bliss of seeing you once more
and by the threat of once more parting.
I swear by all the souls of those who serve me in predestined fashion,
I swear by my unsleeping foes;
by heaven, by hell, by earth's profession of holiness, and by your head,
I swear by your last look's expression,
I swear by the first tear you shed,
the air your sweet lips are inhaling, 
those silky curls that wave above, 
I swear by bliss and by travelling, 
I swear, believe it, by my love.

Old plans of vengeance and destruction
I have renounced, and dreams of pride; 
henceforth, by evil's sly seduction
no human spirit shall be tried;
with heaven I seek to end my warring,
to live for praying and adoring,
to live for faith in all that's good.

Tears of repentance, as they should, 
will from my forehead, thus deserving 
your virtues, wash off heaven's brand, 
and may the world, calm, unobserving, 
flourish untroubled by my hand!

Till now, you've found appreciation
at your true worth from me alone:
I chose you for my adoration, 
laid at your feet my realms, my throne.

I need your love, my benefaction 
to you will be eternal life;
in love, just as in evil action, 
I'm strong and quite unmoved by strife.

With me, free son of the ethereal, 
to stellar regions you'll be whirled; 
you're fated to be my imperial 
consort, and first queen of the world.

Then without pity, without caring, 
you'll learn to look down at the earth, 
where no true bliss and no long-wearing 
beauty exist, which brings to birth 
only misdeeds and retribution, 
where only paltry passions live;

where love and hate, without dilution 
by fear, are past man's power to give.
Surely you know how short and fleeting 
is human love's ephemeral rule!
just for a flash, young blood is heating—
then days go flying, blood runs cool!
Who can stand up to pain of parting, 
or to new beauty's tempting gleams, 
to weariness or boredom starting, 
or to the waywardness of dreams?

Be sure that you were never fated, 
my consort, to destroy your bloom 
and fade away incarcerated, 
enslaved in envy's narrow room, 
amongst the cold and the small-minded, 
the false friends and the open foes, 
the fears, the toils that vainly grinded, 
the fruitless hopes, the crushing woes.

No, pitifully, without passion, 
you'll not expire, in prayer, behind 
high walls, removed in equal fashion 
from God, and from all human kind.

Oh, no, you wonder of creation, 
a different destiny is yours;
you face a different tribulation 
and different bliss in bounteous stores; 
give up all previous ambition, 
renounce the fate of this sad world: 
instead, a lofty, splendid mission 
before your eyes will be unfurled.

A host of souls who owe me duty
I'll bring, I'll throw them at your feet; 
magically for you, my beauty, 
handmaids will labour, debt and fleet;
for you from the eastern star I'll ravish
a golden crown; I'll take for you
from flowers the midnight dew, and lavish
upon your crown that selfsame dew;
I'll bring a sunset ray; ecstacy,
I'll clasp it, belt-like, round your waist,
with breath of healing aromatic
the airs around you will be laced;
all day the strains of heavenly playing
will lull your hearing with their tune;
I'll build you halls with an inlaying
of turquoise, rooms with amber strewn;
I'll sound the bottom of the ocean,
high up above the clouds I'll climb,
al, all, that's earthly, my devotion
will give you—love me!...

XI

And this time
with ardent lips so lightly grazing
he kissed her trembling mouth, and then
answered her pleas, in language dazing
with sweet temptation; once again
those mighty eyes were fixed and gazing
deep into hers. He set her blazing.
He gleamed above her like a spark
or like a knife that finds its mark.
That devil triumphed! In the dark,
alas, to her bosom the infernal
poison of his embrace could pierce.
A cry resounded, tortured, fierce,
troubling the stillnesses nocturnal.
In it were love, and pain's hard kernel,
reproaches, a last desperate prayer,
and then a hopeless, an eternal
farewell to life—all these were there.

XII

Meanwhile, alone, the watchman pacing
past the steep wall serenely made
his nightly duty round, embracing
the iron gong that told his trade;
and near the cell of that young sinner
he slowed the measure of his tread;
above the gong his hand in inner
puzzlement poised, he halted dead.
And through the stillness all around him
he thought he heard an undertone,
two mouths that kissed, then came to astound him
a short, sharp cry, a feeble moan.
And a detestable suspicion
pierced to the old man's heart... but stay,
a moment passed in this condition
and all was silent; far away
only a breeze began to play
and brought the sound of leaves that rustled;
in its dark bed the torrent bustled
and sadly murmured on its way.
In fear the old night-watchman hurries
to say a text from holy writ,
and chase the wicked thought that worries
with its bad spell his sinful wit;
he crosses with his quavering fingers
a breast disturbed by reverie's force,
in silence he no longer lingers
but goes his customary course.
XIII

Like a sweet peri sleeping lightly
she lay inside her coffin now;
cleaner than counterpane, and whitely
blooming, the dull hue of her brow.
Lowered for ever were her lashes... .
But heavens! who would not have supposed
the eyes beneath them simply dozed
and marvellously just reposed
waiting a kiss, or daystar's flashes?
But fruitlessly the light of day
poured on them all its golden ray;
her parents' lips kissed them but vainly
in speechless sorrow. All too plainly
from them there's nothing has the power
to tear death's seal off at this hour!

XIV

Never in festal days' confusion
had sweet Tamara been so dressed,
in such bright hues, so rich a vest.
Flowers from her valley in profusion
(such is tradition's strict behest)
above her shed their perfume; pressed
in her dead hand, they looked like making
farewell to earth, a last leave-taking!
and nothing in her face implied
to onlookers how she had died
in blaze of rapture and of passion;
no, all her features were instilled
with a calm beauty that was chilled,
expressionless in marble-fashion,

blank of all thought, of feeling's breath,
impenetrable, just like death.
And a strange smile that had come fleeting
across her lips was frozen cold.
Of grief and much heartbreak, on meeting
any perceptive eye, it told:
it carried cool contempt's impression,
the scorn of one prepared to die,
it carried a last thought's expression
and, to the earth, a dumb goodbye—
of life now gone, a vain reflection,
deader than those death sets apart,
of eyes grown dim, a recollection
even more hopeless for the heart.
Just as, at sunset's grave occasion,
far on the skyline the Caucasian
snow-ranges—when in molten gold
day's chariot founders—iridescent,
their radiance for a moment hold,
in dark of distance incandescent—
and yet this half-dead light can show
no glimmer down to the benighted
desert, and no one's path is lighted
by gleams those icy summits throw.

XV

Now every neighbour, each relation,
for the sad pilgrimage is bound.
His grey locks all in laceration,
beating his breast without a sound,
for the last time Gudál has mounted
his faithful, his white-crested horse,
and the cortege begins its course.
Three days and three nights must be counted to reach the calm refuge she shares with bones of her long-dead forebears. Of every traveller and each village the scourge, an ancestor of hers, chained down by illness, all his pillage repented—history so avers—wished for past crimes to win redemption, and vowed to build a minster, right on top of a granitic height where blizzard’s dirge had the preemption, where no bird ventured but the kite. And soon from Kazbek’s snows a lonely temple arose, and on the crest the bones of that wrong-doer only in such a scene could find new rest; so to a graveyard was converted that rock, the kin of clouds on high: as if, the nearer to the sky, the tomb was warmer... or, averted and shut away from human gaze, as if death’s sleep were sounder-seeming... vain hope! for dead men, there’s no dreaming the joys, the griefs of earlier days.

XVI

A holy Angel through ethereal immensities of heaven’s blue winged it on golden pinions, who was carrying off from things material a sinful spirit as he flew. And with sweet words of consolation and hope he scattered all her doubt; all trace of crime and tribulation, with flowing tears he washed it out. Already, from far off, there swept them homeward the sounds of heavenly bliss—when there flew up to intercept them a hellish soul from the abyss. He was as mighty as the roaring whirlwind, as lightning did he shine; proudly, and with insanely soaring audacity he cried: “She’s mine!”

Tamara’s sinful soul was riding tight-gripped against her guardian’s breast; by prayer her terrors were suppressed. And now her fate was for deciding, again he stood before her eyes, but, God!—too changed to recognise! so evil was the whole impression, so full of poison and aggression and endless hatred; in a wave the Demon’s motionless expression breathed out the coldness of the grave. “Begone, dark spirit of denial!” so heaven’s ambassador replied: “for long enough your wicked pride has triumphed—God will now decide, for this is judgement hour; her trial is past, the days of test by fire; with earth’s corruptible attire from evil’s thrall she’s liberated. Her soul is ours, and long-awaited! Her spirit, one of those by right whose life on earth is to be reckoned a flash of sharpest pain, a second of unattainable delight; woven by God from an ethereal
substance are all their vital strings;
they were not made for things material,
nor made for them, material things!
In cruel, costly expiation
she has atoned for all her doubt.
She suffered love and tribulation—
and heaven for love has opened
out.”

The Angel, with stern gaze unceasing,
stared at the tempter, then on high,
his pinions joyfully upsweeping,
merged in the radiance of the sky.
Vanquished, the Demon execrated
his reveries and their mad scope,
was left once more to his inflated
arrogance, left there isolated
in all the world—no love, no hope!

Above Koishaur’s ravine, where climbs
the mountain through its rocky stages,
there stands, preserved to modern times,
a jagged wreck from bygone ages.
About it, tales for children’s ears
too frightful, linger in tradition . . .
And voiceless as an apparition,
witness of those uncanny years,
it lifts, through trees, its blackened towers.
Below, the aul houses spill,
the earth is green and bright with flowers;
a hum of voices grows, falls still
lost in the distance, and the tinkling
caravan bells sound far away,
while through the vapours, gleaming, twinkling,
the river shoots in foam and spray.

And vital, youthfully eternal,
loving the sunshine and the vernal
coolness, old Nature frolics there
just like a child without a care.
But the sad castle, after giving
long years of duty-service, ends
as some poor old man does, outliving
all of his dear ones and his friends.
Only its unseen dwellers, waiting
for moonrise, then begin to stir;
then is their time for celebrating!
they buzz, they scurry, and they whirr.
A spider, anchorite-beginner,
works at his web, the grey old spinner;
up on the roof a jolly pack
of lizard families are brawling;
a canny snake from his dark crack
comes out punctiliously crawling
across the flags of the old stair;
now in three coils he gathers there,
and now in one long streak he’s creeping,
just like a blade, all bright and steel-ed,
forgot on some old battlefield,
no use to heroes dead and sleeping! . . .
All’s wild, nowhere is any trace
of years gone by; no, in this place
Time’s hand has long been busy sweeping,
nothing there is that now recalls
the glorious state Gudál was keeping,
with his sweet daughter, in these halls!

But the church on the mountain-tower
where to the earth their bones were vowed,
kept safely by some sacred power,
can still be seen amidst the cloud.
By the church-door, on sentry-go,
a line of black granitic boulders,
with snowy mantles on their shoulders,
wear as breastplate against the foe
eternal ice's glittering show.
Relics of landslide, dreaming masses
like waterfalls, grooved with crevasses,
hang down where they were snapped and caught
by frost, as if in frowning thought.
And there the blizzard goes patrolling,
puffing snow-dust from those grey walls,
now setting a lament a-rolling,
now answering with sentry-calls.
And hearing in some far direction
of a famed minster in this land,
from eastward, clouds in sorried band
hurry to make their genuflection;
but on that circle of tombstones
no one now weeps, and no one moans.
There Kazbek's cliff, in dour ill-humour,
locks up its booty far from harm,
and mankind's everlasting rumour
troubles not that eternal calm.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

CHARLES JOHNSTON is the highly acclaimed translator of Pushkin's Eugene Onegin and has also published two volumes of his own poems. With his wife, formerly Princess Natasha Bagration, he translated A Sportsman's Notebook by Turgenev. From 1965 to 1971 he was British High Commissioner in Australia.