

Angela M. Livingstone

EUGENIE OF EALING.<sup>1</sup> A STORY IN VERSE

„Gazing at heights, and hastening to climb“  
Anon.

1

“My principles were always lofty,  
So when they summoned me to teach  
In college, never mind how draughty,  
I thought: no height I cannot reach.  
And, even though each day is boring  
With all my students lightly snoring  
Or humming some intrepid song  
During my classes fierce and long.  
At least I’ll have a high vocation,  
They’ll write about me in the press,  
And print my photograph, no less,  
In local papers; each vacation  
I’ll pen a chapter brilliantly:  
No one will be so wise as me!”

2

Thus a young Englishwoman pondered  
While flying north on British Rail,  
By Destiny, or Chance, surrendered  
Into the arms of Learning pale.  
Although she yearned for stronger magic,  
The die was cast: an academic!  
So let me, readers, introduce  
This bright and hopeful female, whose  
Perfervid life began near Ealing,  
Where very likely you were born  
To hurry down grey streets, forlorn,  
Without the faintest stir of feeling.  
I too have walked those pavements drear:  
Suburbs are bad for me, I fear.

3

Her mother was a kindly teacher  
Who knew no end of ways to make  
Arithmetic a sparkling feature  
Of daily life and, for the sake  
Of wit and progress, to embroider  
Shoe-bags with primroses in order.  
The child soon went, herself, to school  
Where she conformed to rite and rule,  
Though often, gazing through the window  
In lessons infinite and bleak,  
She’d cease to hear the teacher speak:  
On distant climes her hopes were pinned – Oh  
Could she be only free to look,  
And never read another book!

4

There came the years of adolescence  
For my Eugenie – such her name,  
Time when the merest boyish presence  
Excited her to secret shame.  
Now, leaving school, she put on lipstick,  
Wore what in Russian’s called a *lifchik*,<sup>2</sup>  
Yet could not hide the hapless fact  
That she (a linguist) wholly lacked  
That ignorance of lyric German,  
Of shapely French and misty Greek,  
Of how the vague Bulgarians speak,  
And how to write a Latin sermon,  
Required of her by all around  
Should boyfriends e’er for her be found.

5

Some of us diligently studied  
 For A-levels and scholarships.  
 To university we hurried  
 And had no time for hands on hips  
 Or looking round us in a rapture  
 And seeking out the means to capture  
 Romantic strangers in the park  
 For dangerous meetings after dark.  
 Eugenie, so the world decided.  
 Was far too brainy for the joys  
 Of love and going out with boys:  
 Bitter it was, to be derided.  
 Instead, she close embraced her work  
 Which understood her every quirk.

6

Soon though, with undeclared elation,  
 She slipped ambitiously away  
 From all those modes of irritation  
 That held her girlhood in their sway,  
 And fled to Cambridge, dimly hoping  
 There'd be an end to misanthropeing,  
 Moping in unhistoric lanes  
 And lonely intellectual pains.  
 She sought superior communion,  
 Desire, romance at such a height  
 That soul would vanquish body quite  
 In effortless ethereal union.  
 Aloft she soared in classic dream  
 With Russian poetry as her theme.

7

Each day would start with waking (seldom  
 Late) for breakfast with the crowd  
 Of ladies from Roedean and Cheltenham  
 And the odd Grecian countess, bowed  
 Alike o'er porridge: quelling envy,  
 "They're rich, I'm clever", thought Eugenie,  
 And strictly timetabled her day:  
 "Lecture at ten, but on the way  
 Visit the library, supervision  
 With Doctor So-and-so, and next –  
 Translation class on unseen text,  
 Later a studious intermission,  
 And then I'll shyly chant, in Hall,  
 The 'Benedictus' for them all."

8

Already nine: she'd swiftly settle  
 Briefcase and bottom on her bike,  
 Gown billowing above the saddle –  
 Down Silver Street to where, belike,  
 Wisdom was uttered from a lectern,  
 Mixed usually, with tedious hectoring  
 Or straight stupidity – alas,  
 'T was hard to sift divine from crass.  
 Eugenie listened, still ascending  
 (She hoped) to Heaven from purgatory,  
 Now and then glancing up to see  
 The clock amid a solemn rendering  
 Of Tyutchev's "Fortunate who trod  
 This earth in times marked out by God."

9

I too adored the sound of Russian,  
 That music measureable to man –  
 All 'cellos, basses and percussion,  
 Opaque to fathom, light to scan.  
 How often, murmuring verses Bacchic  
 In trochee, amphibrach or iambic,  
 I'd tell Eugenie, while we set  
 Our elbows on the parapet  
 Of Mill Lane bridge and sipped our cider  
 (The wayward Merrydown) of how  
 My spirit feasted, then as now,  
 On rhythms of Russian verse; no rider  
 Of racing steed knew such a fleet  
 Joy as my joy in metric feet.

10

O measured feet in Russian language,  
 I have rehearsed you on the shore<sup>3</sup>  
 Of desolate waves, in times of anguish  
 And times of *far niente*'s<sup>4</sup> law.  
 Heavenly wanderers, Lermontov's dactyl,<sup>5</sup>  
 And the light anapaest, and you Ó táctile  
 Spondee, and the intangible beat  
 Of unstress upon stress, O feet  
 Pushkinian, high and sure as pinions!  
 I worshipped you without a qualm  
 And might have known no other charm  
 Had folk not pushed at my opinions  
 With morals and with politics:  
 For verse with virtue cannot mix.

11

But, while I reminisce, Eugenie  
 Has done with studying, won her prize –  
 Her choice B.A. – and from *byliny*<sup>6</sup>  
 In lecture-halls shès off, she flies  
 To Russia, poetry's very country,  
 From fair monastic courts where gentry  
 Strolled as if no age had passed,  
 From Gothic gates, from punts, from vast  
 Discovered caves of glowing knowledge,  
 From influence and alchemy,  
 From subtly scheduled tyranny  
 Of life within a women's college,  
 She went, in all the zeal of youth,  
 To Russia, looking for the truth.

12

I'm always glad to note the difference  
 Between Eugenie and myself:  
 She raced with passionate persistence  
 Around the world, in search of – health?  
 What could she want? While I, less zestful,  
 Was born for rural life, for restful  
 Hours on some bench beside a church  
 Or ancient pump, not “doing research”  
 But jotting fragments of an epic  
 Full of the past and pastoral ease,  
 With ripening wheat and shady trees,  
 No aspirations, nothing hectic –  
 So, reader, you can surely see  
 I write of her and not of me.

13

.....

14

The fate of my eternal student  
 In that constrained yet boundless land  
 Where neither Mars bars nor detergent,  
 Nor maps, nor enterprises planned  
 For private gain, nor intellectual  
 Freedom, nor unemployment's ritual,  
 Were yet invented, can't be told  
 In English verses spry and cold.

I'll tell but one of her adventures –  
 How she, when woo'd in Russian tongue  
 (Whose praise she'd, stammering, ever sung),  
 Rejected fleshly love, with censure,  
 Since to expatiate I'm loth  
 I'll tell it in a single strophe.

15

“A letter from Iván! He proffers  
 Marriage to me, a Soviet life –  
 How rapturous everything he offers!  
 Except – I'd have to be his wife!  
 Oh horror!” Fast and rather flustered,  
 She met Ivan upon the *ploshchad'*.<sup>7</sup>  
 “I'll be your sister, Vanya dear,  
 But I'm blasé and insincere  
 Compared to you – by wealth corrupted:  
 You're deeper...” All the same she thought  
 Life in the west was what he sought.  
 Or was she being unjust, reductive?  
 Eugenie left, and Vanya pined.  
 (Later she longed to change her mind.)

16

She hurried home, O pallid Albion!<sup>8</sup>  
 How superficial, mild and bored  
 Your people seemed to one whose  
 halidom<sup>9</sup>  
 Was tragic depth of soul abroad.  
 O English language uninflected,  
 You made my heroine quite dejected  
 To find how easily you came  
 To mind, no sense of trial or game.  
 Now Russian haunted all her talking,  
 Tugged at the edge of every word,  
 A living palimpsest – unheard  
 By others, like an inner walkman.  
 To speak of this she rarely chanced:  
 She was ineffably entranced.

17, 18

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19  
 I'll have to end, for here's my turning.  
 We'd left Eugenie on a train  
 Travelling to where a seat of learning  
 Promised fulfilment to her brain.  
 Arriving at the appointed station,  
 She sped to work. A generation  
 Awaited all that she could tell:  
 She gripped it in her strenuous spell.  
 And now through seasons academic,  
 Though these were theoretic days,  
 Her life became a hymn of praise  
 For works of genius, mainly Slavic.  
 I, meanwhile, lazed about in bed  
 With Pushkin's metres in my head.

20<sup>10</sup>  
*Now love is past, the Muse, appearing,  
 Is brightening up my darkened mind.  
 I'm free. Once more I seek how feeling  
 With magic sounds may be combined.  
 My heart's not aching, yet I'm writing,  
 My pen's not gone astray delighting  
 To decorate lines left incomplete  
 With handsome heads and virile feet.  
 The ash is grey, no fire stirs in it,  
 I'm sad, of course, but – no more tears  
 As the last trace of tempest clears,  
 Soon, soon to vanish from my spirit:  
 Then I shall definitely contrive  
 A Poem in cantos twenty-five.*

1993

<sup>1</sup> Ealing is a suburban district to the West of London, near where I spent my childhood and which I always experienced as a boring and characterless place. I chose this district also for phonetic reasons: both the pattern of vowel-sounds and the amphibrachic rhythm (EuGENie of Ealing) repeat the vowels and the rhythm of the words „EvGENij OnEGin“.

<sup>2</sup> bra

<sup>3</sup> na beregu pustynnyx voln

<sup>4</sup> doing nothing (Italian phrase used by Pushkin)

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Lermontov: Túčki nebésnje, véčnye stránniki .. (Thúnderclouds héavenly, infinite wánderers)

<sup>6</sup> epic folk-poems

<sup>7</sup> Square

<sup>8</sup> England (as Pushkin called it)

<sup>9</sup> holy object

<sup>10</sup> This stanza is a translation of one of Pushkin's stanzas [EO I, LIX] with a variation in line 8.