

Angela M. Livingstone

Eugenie of Ealing. 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>1</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 misanthroping,  
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

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<sup>1</sup> bra

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>2</sup>  
Of desolate waves, in times of anguish  
And times of *far niente*'s<sup>3</sup> law.  
Héavenly wánderers, Lérmontov's dactyl,<sup>4</sup>  
And the light anapáest, and yóu 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>5</sup>  
In lecture-halls she`s off, she flies  
To Russia, poetry`s very country.  
From fair monastic courts where gentry  
Strolled as if no age had passed,<sup>6</sup>  
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.

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<sup>2</sup> na beregu pustynnyx voln

<sup>3</sup> doing nothing (Italian phrase used by Pushkin)

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Lermontov: Túc'ki nebésnye, véc'nye  
stránniki .. (Thúnderclouds héavenly, infinite  
wánderers)

<sup>5</sup> epic folk-poems

<sup>6</sup>

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

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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

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<sup>7</sup> Square

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

<sup>9</sup> holy object

Awaiting 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.*

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

## NOTE

'Eugenie of Ealing', an autobiographical jotting in verse, is an imitation of part of Chapter One of Pushkin's 'Evgenii Onegin', using his rhyme scheme and metre, and reflecting - more vaguely - his narrative structure.