

▶ TRANSLATION ▶

Three Poems on Imprisonment And Freedom

(1821-1827)

Alexander Pushkin

THIS YEAR IS THE Pushkin Year, the bicentennial of the birth of Russia's great poet, language-maker, dramatist, and historian—Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin. He lived from May 26 (Old Style), 1799, to Jan. 29, 1837, his death from wounds suffered in a duel being an irreparable loss to the Russian nation and the culture of all mankind.

"Patriot and world citizen," as Schiller would say, Pushkin is the central genius of the Russian language and its literature. When he died, his friend Prince Odoyevsky lamented the loss of "the sun of our poetry." The poet Aleksei Koltsov exclaimed: "The sun has been shot!"

Pushkin wrote sparkling gems of verse in Russian, and a clear prose—in his stories, as well as in historical researches—that opened up a new era for the Russian language, in a period when not only aristocratic ladies, but even many Russian diplomats, spoke French better than their mother tongue. Pushkin's lucid and flexible Russian drew upon every part of his heritage: his family traditions (his father and uncle were men of letters from an old noble family, while his mother's grandfather was an Ethiopian prince, kidnapped and given to Tsar Peter the Great, for whom he then worked as a military engineer); his own education at the Tsarskoye Selo Lycée; with its Classical



Alexander Pushkin

Corbis/Bettmann

curriculum; the special-sounding Old Church Slavonic domain of Russian vocabulary; world literature from antiquity to his contemporaries; and the fairy tales of his nursemaid, Arina Rodionovna. As Dante had done with the Italian language five hundred years earlier, Pushkin transformed the Russian vernacular into a language capable of expressing profound and impassioned ideas.

Later this year, Fidelio will feature works celebrating the universal genius of Pushkin. In honor of his birthday, we now publish translations of three of

Pushkin's many poems on the theme of freedom.

"The Little Bird" ("Ptichka") dates from 1822, when the young Pushkin, Baron Anton Delvig, and other poet friends contrived a poetic contest—"a sort of wager, or a steeple-chase, by our young poets," as Countess Yevdoksya Rostopchina later noted down the recollection of Pushkin's brother—on the theme of "the little bird, set free." The image came, as Pushkin wrote in a letter to Nikolai Gnedich, from "the Russian peasant's touching custom of setting free a little bird on Easter."

"The Prisoner" ("Uznik") was written the previous year. From April 1820 until July 1823, Pushkin lived in quasi-exile as a foreign ministry employee in

Kishinyov (Chisinau, today the capital of Moldova), where he was sent by administrative transfer after being interrogated about certain political poems.

“In far Siberia’s deepest soil . . .” (“Vo glubine sibirskikh rud . . .”) is a later poem. Several participants in the Decembrist revolt of Dec. 14, 1825, when young army officers staged an armed uprising in St. Petersburg, demanding a constitution for Russia, were friends of Pushkin. Five of the ring-leaders were hanged, and the other Decembrists were exiled to Siberia for life. Pushkin’s poetic message to them was

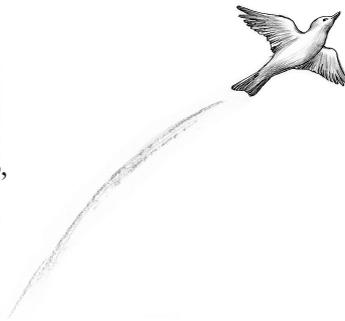
written in early 1827, when, visiting a friend’s house in Moscow, he learned that the wife of one of the Decembrists was about to follow her husband to Siberia. He improvised the verses, which were sent and received, and answered by several of the exiles, in verse. “Vo glubine sibirskikh rud . . .” was not published in full inside Russia until 1876.

These translations by Rachel Douglas are dedicated to her incarcerated friends, Michael Billington, Paul and Anita Gallagher, and Laurence Hecht, and brother, Frederic Berthoff.

The Little Bird

Abroad, I piously obey
The custom of my native land:
At Springtime’s radiant holiday,
A little bird I free by hand.

Thus have I taken consolation;
‘Gainst God I cannot grumble so,
If on one being of His creation
I could its liberty bestow.



The Prisoner

I sit behind bars in the dankest of blocks.
A captive young eagle, the king of the hawks,
My sorry companion here, lifting his wings,
Pecks bloody food by the sill, pecks and flings,

And looks out the window, away, away off,
As if he, with me, fell to thinking one thought.
He summons me now with his look and his cry,
And wants to speak plainly, aloud: “Let us fly!

“We’re free birds in truth; it is time, brother, time!
To go, where o’er clouds, the high mountains are white,
To go, where the sea realm’s as blue as the sky,
To go, where the wind alone wanders . . . and I!”

Vo glubine sibirskikh rud . . .

In far Siberia’s deepest soil,
Preserve your proud, unflagging patience;
They won’t be lost—your bitter toil,
And striving, lofty meditations.

The faithful sister to all woe,
Hope, in your subterranean houses,
Courage and gaiety soon arouses;
The hoped-for time will come, e’en so:

Then love and friendship will cut through
The gloomy bolts of your seclusion,
As into jail-holes this intrusion
Of my free voice now reaches you.

Then heavy chains fall by the board,
Then dungeons crack—and freedom’s voices
Will greet you at the gate, rejoicing,
And brothers hand to you a sword.