

## **Byron as Hero of a Dramatic Episode in Russian History**

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In 1944 a young Russian lady, offspring of the famous translator of Homer's Iliad, Tatiana Gnedich, was arrested for "treason and espionage". Imprisoned in the most notorious of Leningrad (St. Petersburg) prisons, sadly known as "Big House", she had been undergoing a long and painful interrogation when she was suddenly asked: "How is it that all these months you never asked for a book in the prison library? I had the impression you were a reader!" Miss Gnedich answered: "I have no time for reading, I am otherwise engaged" - "Are you? May I ask you what exactly it is you are doing?" - "I am translating Byron's Don Juan, she said. In reply to his amazement she explained that she knew two cantos by heart and was almost through with the first but had no paper to put it down. Most amiably the interrogator gave her a copy of the questions she had been asked during the inquest. On the other side of the copy Miss Gnedich, using the tiniest letters conceivable, put down her Russian version of hundreds of stanzas of Don Juan. (The man was kind enough to allow her to keep it and ten years later I had the honour of seeing it with my own eyes). When he had read it, he shook his head and after a long silence said: "There is only one thing I can do for you. Your sentence is ten years of concentration camp. If you feel like it, I shall persuade the prison authorities to let you stay a year or so in solitary confinement in Leningrad until you have done with the whole of the text and then you will complete the ten years in a concentration camp."

Tatiana Gnedich naturally agreed and asked only for three things more: the complete English text of Byron's poem, an English-Russian dictionary and lots of paper, to say nothing of pens to write with. She was granted these privileges and in 14 months got to the end of her translation. She was allowed to keep it and spent the remaining years in one of the numerous concentration camps of Siberia, working at the prison library, for she was quite unfit for physical work.

In 1954 Mrs. Gnedich returned to Leningrad and presented her translation to the best literary authorities: professors M. Alexeev and A. Smirnov, the poet-translator M. Lozinsky; their verdict was unanimous approval stating the obvious advantages of the new version when compared to preceding ones. Unfortunately, the lack of proper dictionaries and any comments to the text had led to a great many misunderstandings, slips, and misinterpretations.

Two editors, Professor A. Smirnov and myself worked for more than two years together with the translator until the poem reached the state that would have satisfied Lord Byron himself.

It took the well-known scholar and rebel Professor Efim Etkind two years to persuade the authorities of Leningrad (St. Petersburg) to publish the new translation. It immediately became an object of admiration and studies, a fine specimen of serious and light verse, an event in the history of Russian culture.

The first edition was published in 1959 and was followed by numerous re-  
editions usually quickly sold out to satisfy the interests of Russians for foreign culture. Byron became a well-known and much-appreciated Hero of new times, a moral and intellectual influence.

In the last days of 2008 a book entitled "T.G. Gnedich. Years of Captivity and Years of Glory" was published by her devoted disciple Galina Usova. Inspired by Gnedich's activities as enlightener and trainer of young adventurers in the field of poetic translation Usova composed a book containing both a brief story of her teacher's life and hundreds of pages presenting her lyrical poetry (hardly published before) and numerous translations - all but the already well-known Don Juan.

The latter appears in the book only in Mrs. Gnedich's own tale of her painful work as translator - and in the enthusiastic reviews of scholars. Mrs. Usova's analysis of Mrs. Gnedich's art of translation is subtle and fair. The book includes a moving description of T.G. Gnedich's funeral attended by hundreds of people, and glorified by recitals of her poems, including her versions of Don Juan.

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