*Note*

I know well that “’Tatiana’s Letter’ is peculiarly untranslatable, and also that *Eugen Onegin* is an organic whole which should not be served up in fragments. My reason for including the letter is that when I first read Russian literature my curiosity was roused by finding so many allusions to it, and I hope that some of my readers may have felt the same.

*Eugen Onegin* is a long narrative written in the stanza of Byron’s *Don Juan*. Tatiana has been described as the typical Russian woman of all times; certainly she and Onegin are the spiritual ancestors of many of the characters in the great Russian novels. After a brilliant description of Onegin’s upbringing and gay metropolitan youth, the story tells how he goes to stay with a friend in the depths of the country, and is introduced to Tatiana, the seventeen-year old daughter of neighbouring gentlefolk. Tatiana at once falls violently in love with him, and after many hesitations obeys an irresistible impulse to write and tell him what has happened to her. She writes in French, as Pushkin tells us, because ‘like all our girljs’ she could not express herself well in Russian; neither did she read much Russian, but mostly such books as *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, *The Sorrows of Werther*, and *Sir Charles Grandison*⎯already old-fashioned when Pushkin wrote⎯with whose heroines and heroes she identified herself and Onegin. Pushkin shows, with tenderly amused affection, how her integrity of spirit, her innocence and passion, shine through the borrowed conventional phrases and romantic attitudes. In line 34 she breaks, unconsciously it seems, into the familiar ‘thou’ and ‘thee’. Next morning Onegin comes to her in the garden and lectures he on the rashness of her letter. He admits that he is charmed by her sincerity; but it is not his destiny to be a husband; he would only be an unkind one. Soon he departs to travel abroad, and Tatiana pines. At last she is taken by her family to Moscow, and persuaded to marry an elderly grandee. She becomes a great and distinguished lady, mistress of a salon. Onegin returns to Moscow, and falls passionately in love with her. It is now his turn to write a letter. She does not reply, but one day he comes upon her reading it to herself, in tragic grief. ‘Seeing her thus, anyone would know that the old Tatiana was alive in her.’ She answers with a beautiful dignity. She will not pretend that she dose not love him, or that she has not always loved him; but now the time has come when he must be rebuked by her. Finally, she tells him that she will always be faithful to her husband, and leaves him alone, stunned by the realization of his loss.

*Tatiana’s Letter*

That I should write to you, will tell

Far more than I have words to say⎯

Will give you power, I know too well,

With scorn my boldness to repay.

But surely if your heart has got

Even one drop of pity, you will not

Leave me alone to my unhappy lot.

Silence seemed best when first you came;

You never would have known by shame,

If I had hoped I only might

Just see you sometimes⎯once a week,

And say one word and hear you speak;

Then, till next time, enjoy the right

To think about you day and night.

But you’re unsociable, they say;

What pleasure can this place afford?

With country mice like us you’re bored,

Though we rejoiced that you should stay.

Oh, could you not have kept away

From one forgotten village? Then

I never should have seen your face;

My heart had never felt this pain.

I might⎯who knows?⎯have found the grace

To teach my inexperienced soul

These restless longings to control,

And with some friend to have shared my life,

And have been a mother and a faithful wife. . . .

To someone else? That could not be!

Yours only is this heart of mine;

High councils ruled our destiny,

And I am yours by ordinance divine.

I see my whole life hitherto

An earnest of your coming, you

Were surely sent by God on high

To be my guardian angel till I die.

You came into my dreaming; so

I loved the face I did not know;

Your eyes, before I felt their fire,

Filled me with wonder and desire,

And my soul heard you speaking long ago.

But here was not a dream. You came⎯

You just came in. At once I knew,

All stupefied and all aflame,

Yes, this is he, and this is true!

Was it not you, whose voice I thought

I though in stillness as I brought

To some poor cottager relief,

Or when, with too much pain distraught,

I prayed for solace in my grief?

Beloved vision, is it you,

Seen the transparent darkness through,

This moment leaning down to me

Over my pillow, silently?

Oh, tell me, was it you I heard

Who spoke to me a whispered word

Of love and comfort? Who are you?

My guardian angel all life through,

Or my insidious tempter? Who?

I am bewildered. Tell me true.

Or is it all a dream? The whole

A figment of an inexperienced soul,

And are we both destined for another role?

But be that as it may; from now

I trust you with my fate. I bow

With tears before your feet. I sue

For your protection. Think of me

Alone with nobody at hand

To help, no soul to understand!

My reason fails. Oh, listen you,

Or I must perish utterly.

Oh, give me, friend for whom I wait,

Some hope before it grows too late,

Or help to make this nightmare pass

With a rebuke, deserved, alas!

I close, afraid to read this through,

Such fear, such shame it brings to me,

Yet trusting utterly to you,

Your honour my security.

Translated by Frances Cornford and E[sther] [S]Polianowsky Salaman. In their *Poems from the Russian*, pages 16-20. London: Faber and Faber, 1943.