

TOSKA

I still haven't forgiven Natasha for marrying Pierre,
not actually for marrying him but for being happy with him.

How could she, after Prince Andrei? I know, I know,
life must go on, but I want something finer for her,

beyond wiping snotty noses and hanging on his every word.
Not a modern epilogue with everyone dead or bitterly unhappy

or both, but something else, a sense of longing or ache
for which there is no word in English. In Russian

there is the word *toska*, which describes an undefined desire,
a sense that what you need and want most is elsewhere

or doesn't exist at all. English wouldn't have a word for
such a feeling, for ours is a language of materialism first,

a language in which ideally everything you need is obtainable
because everything is tangible. French is another language which

would probably not have a word like *toska* though there is the
conditionnel antérieur, or the tense of regret, yet regret is not

what I want Natasha to feel nor melancholy. The French word
ennui is better than our *boredom* but still not quite right.

At the Tower of Babel when God first gave us languages,
what was it like? Everyone jabbering like crazy, trying to find

someone who understood what he was saying and then sorting
themselves out? Or was it like being struck by lightning—

nothing the same, bricklayers contemplating their mortar
and not knowing what it was for, much less what it was called?

This seems more likely. I can see people wandering off—
befuddled husbands knowing their wives but not knowing them
at the same time, and friends passing each other and remembering
that they are friends but not knowing what a friend is.

How wonderful it had been for a time, planning the tower,
deciding on its diameter and circumference, the philosophy
of it all. There had even been a delegation whose entire function
was composing a speech to be delivered when they finally
came face to face with God. Alas, these poor pundits
later migrated to a land just north of the Alps and developed
a maddening portmanteau language that, when faced with a miracle
such as the Assumption of the Virgin into heaven on a cloud
of angels, came up with *Himmelfahrt Maria* which, though not
precisely untrue, reveals no sense of God as a patriarchal vacuum
or the shock of the Apostles below and their desolation at losing
her. “Desolation” is a good word, but not what I want for Natasha,
nor is it *toska*, because what she most needed existed once but is
gone, as is that sweet if naive inclination to converse with God.