Victor Hugo: "L'expiation"
Selection: The Moscow Campaign

Hugo’s long poem was written after his exile because of the coup d’état of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, Napoleon’s nephew, who would become Emperor Napoleon III. It is punctuated by Napoleon I’s refrain, “Est-ce le châtiment?” (Is [my defeat] the punishment?), to which a voice repeatedly answers “No”, until the historical narrative reaches Napoleon the III. Hugo portrays Napoleon I heroically in order to paint an unfavorable contrast with his descendant, whom he vilified.

It was snowing. We were defeated by his conquest.
For the first time the eagle was lowering its head.
Dark days! The emperor returned slowly,
Leaving Moscow behind him burning, smoking.
It was snowing. The bitter winter tumbled on us like an avalanche.
After one white plain yet another white plain.
We could no longer make out either leaders or flag.
Yesterday the great army, now the flock [troupeau].
One could no longer tell the flanks from the middle.
It was snowing. The wounded took shelter in the entrails
Of dead horses; on the threshold of desolate bivouacs
One could see the clarions frozen at their posts,
Standing upright, mute in the saddle, white with frost,
Their mouths frozen to their trumpets of brass.
Bullets, volleys, shells mixed with white flakes,
All rained down; the grenadiers, surprised at their own trembling,
Marched pensively, their grey moustaches covered with ice.
It was snowing, always it was snowing. The cold wind
Whistled; on the ice, in unknown places,
There was no bread, one went barefooted.
These were no longer living hearts or men of war:
They were a vague dream, wandering in the fog, a mystery,
A procession of shades under the black sky.
The vast solitude, frightening to see,
Appeared everywhere, a silent avenger,
While the sky, in the stillness, sewed from the thick snow
An immense shroud for this immense army.
And each, feeling himself die, was alone ... (1852)

Translation: S. Walton