

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 châtimeur?" (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)

Il neigeait. On était vaincu par sa conquête.
Pour la première fois l'aigle baissait la tête.
Sombres jours ! l'empereur revenait lentement,
Laisant derrière lui brûler Moscou fumant.
Il neigeait. L'âpre hiver fondait en avalanche.
Après la plaine blanche une autre plaine blanche.
On ne connaissait plus les chefs ni le drapeau.
Hier la grande armée, et maintenant troupeau.
On ne distinguait plus les ailes ni le centre.
Il neigeait. Les blessés s'abritaient dans le ventre
Des chevaux morts ; au seuil des bivouacs désolés
On voyait des clairons à leur poste gelés,
Restés debout, en selle et muets, blancs de givre,
Collant leur bouche en pierre aux trompettes de cuivre.
Boulets, mitraille, obus, mêlés aux flocons blancs,
Pleuvaient ; les grenadiers, surpris d'être tremblants,
Marchaient pensifs, la glace à leur moustache grise.
Il neigeait, il neigeait toujours ! La froide bise
Sifflait ; sur le verglas, dans des lieux inconnus,
On n'avait pas de pain et l'on allait pieds nus.
Ce n'étaient plus des cœurs vivants, des gens de guerre :
C'était un rêve errant dans la brume, un mystère,
Une procession d'ombres sous le ciel noir.
La solitude vaste, épouvantable à voir,
Partout apparaissait, muette vengeresse.
Le ciel faisait sans bruit avec la neige épaisse
Pour cette immense armée un immense linceul.
Et chacun se sentant mourir, on était seul.

Translation: S. Walton