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Translation Of "Though Poverty's No Stain" By A. P. Bunina

A. P. Bunina

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◆ ANNA BUNINA ◆

The facts of Bunina's early childhood were much as she states them in 'Though poverty's no stain'. She was born in 1774 on her father's estate in Ryazan province, but was packed off to live with various relatives after her mother's death; on reaching adulthood, she went to live in St Petersburg, where she moved in literary circles, attracting the sponsorship of Aleksandr Shishkov, the leader of the traditionalist 'Archaist' movement. Besides poetry, Bunina's works included short stories and a manual of versification for young women. In the 1820s, she became ill with breast cancer, which was eventually to kill her in 1829; this illness was to be the subject of her moving poem 'The Sick Woman's May Outing'. Bunina was perhaps the first genuine woman poet in Russian literature, but her reputation has suffered unfairly from the sneers of the 1820s Romantics, particularly Pushkin, who (partly because of their hostility to Shishkov, and partly for misogynist reasons) cited Bunina's work as a crying example of the worthlessness of poetry before Romanticism.

(Russian text p. 399)

Though poverty's no stain
 On those who have a brain,
 Still, everyone sees shame therein,
 Concealing it as if it were a sin.

Drop in on one man's luncheon to enquire: 5
 He's dining by the fire,
 Some turnips in his bowl:
 A little dish of cress,
 Some water in a glass.

When you ask why, he'll say, 'Old chap, to save my soul! 10
 It's Wednesday, I must fast!
 One blames the cooks for all
 The dry food he must eat;
 A second says, 'After a little I'm replete!'
 A third man says, 'I cannot stomach meat! 15
 'My doctor has prescribed a special diet.'

Not one will say, 'There's not a copeck in the house!'
They all try somehow to deny it.

Each one of us, no doubt,
Knows all about 20
The source of this odd habit.
So it will be, has always been:
The moneybag's a thing we all conceal.

And so I beg you not to leap to anger!
If someone who has naught to make a meal 25
Feels shame still stronger
Than all his pangs of hunger,
Then how may I, by feigning penury,
Do rightful honour to my parents' memory?
They knew nothing of such disasters, 30
But lived the life of wealthy masters!
Houses with wings stood on the entailed estate;
The demesne was ringed by walls of stone;
One corner held our bait—
Swings, the children's own— 35
The other held all sorts of little towers,
And toadstools built of wood,
And other decorations no less good;
Lemon and peach trees, tulips, lily flowers
In flowerbeds or in pots, 40
Blooming or bearing fruits,
At my papa's were common as the weeds!
Pine nuts and almonds too,
Everything was our own! We never even needed
To send away for prunes 45
In winter time!
It all grew round about, despite the hostile clime.
(The Province of Ryazan, Ryazhsk city was nearby.)
Pears, apples . . . thick as stars up in the sky!
And juicy all, as if in sugar steeped; 50
And even sweetmeats of our own;
For there were bees, you know—
Two or three swarms arrived upon one day alone!

The servants ran to catch them in their coats!
 Darlings! I look at these sweet bees, 55
 And the bees of long ago fly back to me!
 A beauty flies! as if made all of gold!
 With honey in her two back legs she wings;
 First from the linden, then the rose she drinks,
 Honey is in her mouth—her front leg up she brings, 60
 And hands it to her back to hold.
 Sometimes I see a crowd of the dear things,
 And every last one sings!
 And, lending an ear beside the branches,
 I'd learn to buzz from them, 65
 And then, in imitation,
 Cluck like a broody hen!
 I'd think, 'I've copied them just right!' and smile.
 I was a child!
 But still, that childish game has been of use to me: 70
 For even in my later years, from bees
 I've learned to sweeten labour with a song,
 To work and sing along,
 To sing until my grief is gone.
 Once, I recall, I went to pick a leaf 75
 That had a little bee hid underneath:
 She stung my finger, just like that!
 I started wailing like a little fool...
 Nurse dabbed some mud on, nice and cool,
 And offered me a piece of gingerbread. 80
 An infant's wit is not too great, be sure:
 For grief, for illness—gingerbread's the universal cure!
 And to this day my wits are not much grown:
 It's hardly decent, all the yarns I've spun,
 Straying ever farther off the track! 85
 It's my ill luck. Forgive me, please,
 For this untimely flight of little bees!
 Now I shall lead you back
 To the first subject of our conversation!
 My father and grandfather, 90
 And great-grandfather, and all my relations
 Lived not as I live now. But rather,

By God's all-powerful will
 It was their fate to live in ampleness!
 For they had grain aplenty in the fields
 To feed themselves, their servants, and their guests. 95

Three brothers had I, of sisters I made three,
 And I was the most small.
 My mother died when she was having me;
 And so I was considered least of all.
 They nicknamed me 'plain Jane'! 100
 My father felt such pain
 He sent us all to live with relatives.
 My two big sisters lived
 Life at their whim—freedom without reserve!
 But I, like a domestic serf, 105
 Was parcelled to nine houses through the years,
 I took on in turn their different ways,
 And knew naught at all of play;
 Led by the fate to which I had been born
 Along a path of pricking thorns 110
 Weeping salt tears!
 The whole wide world grew tedious to me!
 After attaining my majority,
 I asked my brothers for my share of the estate
 So as to live at my own will's dictate. 115
 But then the Muses motioned their fair hands!
 Since knowledge and sciences were my soul's delight,
 To Petropolis, their capital, I hied!
 In place of cavaliers and dandies,
 I summon the pedantic, 120
 And model myself upon their manners.
 But alas! The sciences love silver here!
 My little purse was quickly emptied!
 Since I was paying dear
 For each period of play, 125
 Each movement of the lips,
 For logic's reasoned words,
 For all the quirks of physics,
 And for my room and board,

I soon grew short of funds, 130
And I could hardly sing those songs
That satisfied your taste.
There, now my sin's confess'd!

I still possess my meadows in the air,
But my feet would be bare, 135
Were it not for our good Sovereign,
Who, like to the radiant sun,
In slender rays descends,
From grass to grain of sand,
Infusing lively strength 140
In all, from lap-dogs to elephants.
Even so does he my strength restore;
And the dear Muses favour me once more!

[29 February 1813]

Translated by Sibelan Forrester