

IVAN FRANKO

Ivan Vyshensky

Translated from the Ukrainian by Adam Hnidj

I

Like a pyramid of verdure
on a wavy field of blueness,
on a plain azure entire,
like a giant emerald —

thus awash in matchless waters,
under cloudless, mild heavens,
rises, proud in natural splendor
sleeps, the famous Athos Mount.

Sleeps? But no; for Mother Nature,
active in incessant toil,
Showers beauty, showers pleasure
on her own most favored child.

Down below, whence walls of granite
proudly range straight up to heaven,
from the boiling depths emerging :
walls, colossal shapes, and pillars —

down below, the wild music
offers not a moment's silence :
waves of surf crash on the boulders ;
waves of silver foamsplash up.

And above : the mountain ranges
overgrown with ancient forests
sing a quiet song eternal,
meditating endlessly.

Yet the rock's wrapped up in slumber ;
days and nights pass on above it,
like a cloud, all pink and weightless ;
there's no noise or hum at all.

And although, like snakes, across it,
little pathways creep all over,

yet they never are enlivened
by gay laughter, speech, or song.

And although on all the hillsides,
in the woods and rocks and valleys,
on the lovely woodland clearings,
homes and settlements abound,

a deep silence reigns despite them,
covers every human settlement,
and the seal of silence covers
hundreds of old men's grey lips.

All is quiet, all is silent,
grey the garb, the movement measured,
and the faces drawn and somber,
the gaze sleepy, unaware.

Only thrice across the mountains
rolls the sound of bells, resounding
like the city of wondrous cygnets
passing over these green hills;

and the bells give plaintive utterance
to reproachful accusations
of the people who have deadened
this delightful nook on earth.

So this seat of lofty thinking,
so this school of bold endeavors —
perch of eagles — was converted
to a prison for sad souls.

II

On the Athos bells are ringing
on the Sunday after vespers:
the great Prot leads in the chiming,
in response calls Vatoped.

Cries of pain from Esfigmenou,
then the boom Ksenopotamou's,
then Zografou's and then Paulou's,
keeps vibrating Everon.

The metallic sobs keep rolling
over every hill and valley,
drawing echoes from each cliffside,
every vale and hermitage.

And deep sighs the ringing follows,
men's thin hands make crossing motions,
and a whisper rises quietly :
"May he find rest with the saints!"

The metallic sobs, the notice
that someone has left the planet,
cause no alarm there whatever:
it's a daily-known event.

Did a hermit, in his cavern,
die alone, as he had lived,
and his quiet, peaceful passing
was discovered after days —

was discovered, for the hermit
had not visited his cloister,
had not turned in work completed,
had not claimed his share of beans?

Did a monk die in his cloister
while copying the Scriptures,
lives of saints, illuminating
capitals with cinnabar?

Or had died a humble menial,
once a lord or duke or soldier,
but known here for quite a while
as the cloister's kitchen boy?

Or perhaps a dignitary
died — an archpriest or an abbot —
here they all get equal honors :
"May he find rest with the saints!"

Or perhaps someone still living,
on his final step descending,
is deserting this world's freedom
for a cave, to bide his end?

Look: up on the sheerest cliffsides,
in the steep walls made of granite,
hanging over surging waters —
do the swallows have their nests?

No, it's only warrens
inaccessible dark hollows,
caves hacked out of rocky cliffsides,
perhaps shelters for the gulls.

Those are hermits' hollow caverns ;
 it's the "final step", an effort,
 irreversible achievement :
 entrance to eternity.

He who's served well as a novice,
 known the cloister's rigid rulings
 and the difficult, mute toil
 in the quiet hermitage ;

he who wishes for achievement
 of ascetic highest rigor,
 days of lonely, silent fasting,
 harking only to his soul ;

he, whose worldly ties are broken,
 whose flesh harbors no desires,
 who feels strong enough and willing
 to confront eternity ;

with superiors' permission,
 he will pick himself a cavern,
 he will pick himself a coffin,
 from where can be no return.

Then the bells will ring a-sobbing,
 then all over the Mount Athos
 old men's lips will gently whisper :
 "May he find rest with the saints !"

III

On the Athos bells are ringing
 on the Sunday after vespers :
 the great Prot leads in the chiming,
 in response calls Vatoped.

Cries of pain from Esfigmenou,
 then the boom Xenopotamou's
 then Zografou's, and then Paulou's,
 keeps vibrating Everon.

The metallic sobs are rolling
 over every hill and valley,
 drawing echoes from each cliffside,
 every vale and hermitage.

The bells ceased, yet their ringing
 out long yet kept the air a-tremble ;

in the cloister of Zografou
heavy ropes began to creak.

The dark gates were slowly opened
and, emerging from the courtyard,
issued now a church procession,
to the tune of simple chants.

In the wind wave red church banners,
like some flashing tongues of fire,
at the head, progressing slowly,
leads the way a wooden cross.

Bearded monks step right behind it :
their chasubles are purple ;
other monks are also bearded,
barefoot, robed in rough dark cloth.

Amidst them a bent grandfather,
wrinkle-skinned, his long beard grizzled,
naked skin with burlap covered,
in his hands a birchen cross.

A cross of birch, with bark still covered ;
and the breezes, landward blowing,
with his white hair gently cover
the white birch bark playfully.

And the old man's voice outmingles
with the monks' monotonous chanting,
which so sadly emphasizes :
"May he find rest with the saints!"

And along a winding pathway
moves along this church procession,
through the meadows, through the forest,
heading for the roaring sea.

In luxuriant vegetation
echoes funeral singing ;
in the fragrance of the evening
smoke from incense rises up.

The procession has now halted
on a crag above the water,
over an abyss horrendous :
you look down, and freeze with fear.

Like a giant wall of granite,
from the waters' thousand fathoms,

into the azure high above them,
rises up the sheerest rock.

Look down! a sailboat
near the rocky wall at mooring
much resembles a white cygnet,
floating-rocking on the waves.

Observed from below, the people
over the precipice assembled
much a herd of lambs resemble
grazing peacefully on the rocks.

From below one also notices
a rectangular black opening,
like a giant stamp impressed
midway up the granite wall.

To the grave it is the entrance,
to the hermit's hollow cavern;
God knows who first had dug it,
for what purpose, and for whom.

It cannot on foot be entered
or climbed into on a ladder;
one can only swing in, birdlike fashion,
dangling from a piece of rope.

In the ridge atop the mountain
there's a groove cut by the hawsers —
an unfailing indicator
where to find the cavern's door.

The procession here has halted
and the funeral chants resounded.
Where's the body to be buried?
Where's the blessed anchorite?

IV

Finally the chants are ended,
and the present monks and hermits
offer their final prayers
for the hermit, on their knees.

First to rise was their abbot,
one by one arose the others,
and deep silence fell around them,
but the sea roared on below.

And the abbot spoke, addressing
the old man who stood in silence
in the covey of his brethren,
clinging to his wooden cross.

Abbot

“Brother Ivan, I exhort you
in the name of God Almighty
and before the Cross Most Holy,
in the face of the bright sun.

“Tell us honestly and truly :
whether of your free volition,
after a mature decision,
you go to the cave ?”

Old Man

“I do.”

Abbot

“Does your heart no longer harbor
any worldly inclinations
or attachments to your dear ones,
thoughts and wishes of this world ?

“Have you really quite forsaken
everything that leads the spirit
away from the one desire
of eternal rest ?”

Old Man

“I have.”

Abbot

“Have you thought about the burden
of existence solitary,
irreversible decisions,
and temptations’ daily dread ?

“Have you thought about regretting
and its bitterness, appearing
with self pity, that can poison
your exploit here ?”

Old Man

"Yes, I have."

Abbot

"May the Lord be praised forever,
Who has this in you inspired!
May He give you His assistance
as you tread on this last road.

"Up to now, among the living,
You have been Ivan Vyshensky;
from now on, your name's deleted
from the rolls of life on earth.

"Thus embark upon your voyage!
And the cross that you are holding
is from us the only present;
other would be of no use!

"What you'll need to feed your body,
once a week, our Brother Purser,
on a rope, within a basket,
shall hence lower it to you.

"Fare thee well! And may I give thee
my last kiss in final parting,
and may God grant us to meet soon
in His glory's brilliant shine!"

And the abbot kissed the old man;
other monks as well, in silence,
with their kisses his hands covered
and the skirts of his rough coat.

Then the youngest ones among them
tied a rope around his body,
under arms they wound it firmly,
held the end in their hands.

Having crossed himself, the old man
to the very edge came boldly,
sat down there, and started sinking
into the abysmal void.

From the sea blew lively breezes,
his white beard and hair entangling,
and the old man, the cross pressing
to his body, vanished fast.

V

“Greetings, thou my domicile,
after storms my quiet haven!
Toward you incessant longing
I have felt a long, long time.

“Rocky walls are all around me :
it’s my faith indomitable,
it’s my home, it is my refuge,
it’s my pillow, covers, too.

“This cross here is my companion,
confidant in days of sadness,
my defense against temptation,
and the prop in time of death.

“The blue sky that through the opening
looks into my humble cavern
is the hope that on this highway
my soul too shall ride one day.

“The bright sun that on his rising
in my quarters, for a while,
covers all with gold and rubies
is the spirit — great, divine —

“that for happy, blessed moments
sinful, suffering human natures
illumines with gifts of endless
paradisical delights.

“And the yonder azure waters
warming in the rays of sunshine
and against the boulders shattering,
splashing in a roar of foam,

“truly shows life’s furtive image:
bright and quiet and attractive
when surveyed from ample distance ;
bitter, dreadful seen close up.

“It’s my world. All variation
is no more. The shouts are muted,
and the noises of life’s battles
cannot reach me in this place.

“Gone are trivial things and painful
that stir up men’s souls’ emotions
and divert mankind’s attention
from the noblest Being on high.

“There remain the constant values,
only things of peace and grandeur;
peace and grandeur are the subjects
of your meditation, Soul!”

To himself thus talked the Old One,
sitting in his hollow cavern,
who once was Ivan Vyshensky,
and today dead to the world.

When he spoke, his lips were silent;
for he had long ago forgotten
to employ his speaking organs:
he could hear his spirit's voice.

In the corner of his cavern
he sat down upon a boulder,
leaned his back on the cold granite,
dropped his head upon his chest.

His head was of large dimensions
and his neck so thin and sinewy
that the head drooped, imitating
a big melon on the vine.

On his chest his chin supporting,
at one point his eyes directing,
he sat thus without a motion,
as if sleeping, a long time.

First, all seemed to fade in darkness
before him; a spell of shivering
overran the gaunt old body
and the senses went to sleep.

Then a wave of warmth descended
and spread out throughout his body,
something sweet, so softly, softly,
playing 'round the hermits neck.

Through his soul flashed his own mother;
when he was a little baby,
how his chin she used to tickle,
and he heartily laughed and laughed.

Then his hearing was awakened:
like a thread all made of diamonds,
lovely, joyful, conger stretching
ran a new and wondrous tone.

Like a butterfly, his spirit
flies, the lovely tone pursuing,
but the tones increase in number,
and they also gain in strength.

The whole harmony, so mighty,
flows along like a blue river,
the luxuriant tones embracing,
seemingly, the universe.

And the spirit of the hermit
rides upon the waves of music,
like a swan upon the waters
of the sea, now up, now down.

In between the earth and heavens,
soaring up and down enraptured,
trembles the spirit of the hermit,
faster, faster, in delight.

And the harmony, the mighty,
flares up grandiose, all violet,
then becomes azure in color,
then turns purple wondrously.

Lo! and from the waves of purple
a gold ray at once exploded,
a volcano burst out fiery,
streams of light poured out therefrom.

And an endless sea of color
flooded all with rays bright-golden,
flooded all with rays green-golden,
then with light as white as snow.

Luminous cascades are playing,
and the wheels of great dimensions,
of all colors of the rainbow,
roll upon the heavenly sphere.

From a hand unseen, there issue
many strands of various colors,
issue tones of mighty music,
span the world from end to end.

The hand issues, the hand orders,
and collects them, and comingles;
the whole world performs before him,
like a huge kaleidoscope.

So man's soul finds full immersion
 in this sea of many colors,
 like a child's, in fascination,
 in delight — he falls asleep.

VI

Days in regular succession
 pass, like waves, after each other,
 passing in a shoreless ocean,
 like the clouds up in the sky.

In his cavern, the old hermit,
 on a boulder, immobile,
 still reposes, his eyes resting
 on the blue dome of the sky.

Suddenly an animate being
 moved before him! On a cobweb,
 from the rock came down a spider,
 right across his cavern's door.

With bated breath, the hermit
 watched the spider's every motion
 as though viewing a strange wonder,
 a guest from another world.

And the spider, very quickly,
 spun his threads from top to bottom
 in the doorway of the cavern;
 now he climbed toward the top.

Dilligent, he did his spinning,
 pulling through, whole patches weaving,
 in no time at all, the webbing
 closed the doorway to the cell.

Thought the hermit: "Earthly living
 still its messengers dispatches,
 probably to keep surveillance
 over me, anxious to discover.

"if perhaps a strand of cobweb
 still maintains a frail connection
 with my spirit, so to pull me
 by this strand to earthly life.

"It's a foe, perhaps, this spider,
 who spreads out his treacherous network,

to ensnare in it my vision,
my own dreams, my very thoughts?"

And he raised his hand already
to rip up the spider's cobweb,
when another thought flashed suddenly
through the hermit's aged mind.

"Seven brothers, once escaping
from the infidels' pursuit, found shelter
in a cave, where in exhaustion,
soundly, they all fell asleep.

"And a spider, in like manner,
built a cobweb in the entrance,
from pursuit the brothers rescued,
saved them for the glory of God.

"Sealed thus by the spider's network,
slept the brothers in the hollow
years three hundred, till Almighty
called them up as witnesses.

"By the Lord's word thus awakened
they were proof of immortality,
showing that the term of centuries
is a moment for the Lord.

"Perhaps by Divine volition
works the spider on his cobweb;
perhaps I, too, have been chosen
to bear witness to God's deeds?"

Suddenly a tiny trembling
shook the cobweb: a black insect
trapped itself in cobweb's network,
buzzing, trying to break loose.

And the spider then came rushing
and began to weave his webbing,
quickly tying up the insect's
legs and wings in tightest bond.

Once he runs to bite the insect,
once runs back to wrap him tightly,
and the insect fights back strongly,
and he trembles, and he squeals.

"You bloodsucker, thing of evil",
said the hermit, "To my refuge

you have come, so that here also
you may kill a living thing?"

And his hand moved very quickly
to rip cobwebs all asunder,
to give freedom to the insect —
but a thought then stopped him cold.

"Without our Lord's permission
this small insect cannot perish;
God has given to this spider
all the talent that he has.

"By what right may I deprive him
of the meal that he is holding,
which he has, in his own manner,
earned by working very hard?"

To the ground his forehead bowing,
he recited fervent prayers;
but, thus praying, he heard plainly
how the insect, like a child,

in the cobweb's trap was straining,
buzzing, whimpering, and crying.
The old hermit's heart was breaking,
but he did not raise his hand.

VII

"All night long the storm continued,
howling on the toothy cliffsides;
the sea roared and kept on pounding:
tried to gnaw the stony shore.

"All night long the dreadful coldness
penetrated to the marrow,
and I trembled, my teeth chattering,
as one would on Judgment Day.

"In the corner of the cavern
I hid quaking, and fear dreadful
penetrated me, and prayer
did not waken in my soul.

"And I thought myself all helpless,
pitiful and sick and lonely,
like a child completely orphaned,
motherless and fatherless.

"It appeared : the earth was lifeless,
all the people died upon it,
and to face this dreadful horror
was the least survivor — I.

"It appeared that God in Heaven
died, and only a black demon
was the lord of Earth and Heaven,
and he raved, and kept roaring.

"And I was a speck, forgotten,
lost from universal order,
about whom could care less no one :
devils, humans, even God.

"Now the sun shines down upon it,
midnight's demons all have vanished,
raving winds have died down ; softly,
warming breezes waft about.

"Warmth my body penetrated,
resurrected its own spirit,
its own God the soul has recovered,
found a prayer in it, too.

"Through what kind of tortuous byways,
crooked alleys, my mind wanders ?
Does a bit of warmth elicit
in my body its own soul ?

"Thus a strike upon a flintstone
from the flint a spark elicits ;
and the spark — a conflagration :
heat and light and warmth and life.

"Just a little warmth and brightness,
in the body, in the dead one,
wakes the soul, and there can never
be a soul without this warmth.

"Life and warmth and light and fire,
side by side with death and ruin ;
a new life and immortality —
they are God, a cosmic soul.

"In the soul it fosters brightness,
faith, ambition — without warmth,
Faith, itself can not exist,
nor is brightness in the soul.

"And this faith is wonder-working;
it creates the greatest miracles,
the supreme, the highest wonder:
for us it discovers God.

"God reveals himself — O wonder!
He reveals himself in daylight,
in the warm and pleasant climates,
in the lightning, fire, and light.

"When winds howl in pitch-black darkness,
on the ice, in gripping snow storms,
He reveals himself to no one.
God is light, and God is warmth.

"God made all of it, however;
He created warmth and brightness.
Has he frost and ice created?
The Writ's silent on this point.

"The warmth, at a moment's notice,
souls creates in lifeless bodies,
in the souls belief promoting,
and God from belief springs forth.

"Couldn't one incline to wonder
if the soul, its faith entire,
God himself — be all creations
of this little bit of warmth?

"God, perhaps such thoughts are sinful!
But Thou sentest us to fathom
the whole truth. Without your will
thoughts can never cross my mind."

Thus the Old Man painfully struggled
with his thoughts and prayed and suffered,
but the former times' enlightenment
to his soul would not return.

And he wept: "Is this the purpose
of my having left the convent's
quiet cell, to end my journey
in the shackles of deep doubt?"

VIII

"What guests extraordinary
have strayed quietly to my cavern?"

Whose ambassadors, and wherefrom
have they been brought by the wind?

“These delightful snow-white petals,
are they snow? They are not melting!
They exude a wondrous fragrance.
Cherry blossoms! O my God!

“Cherry blossoms on these cliffsides?
Are there cherries on Mount Athos?
Tell me, please, mysterious strangers,
tell me, please, where are you from?

“Your aroma, so enchanting,
penetrates my very being,
fills my soul with utter pleasure,
wafts with something near and dear.

“Do you come from Ukraina,
from the dearest far off settlements,
which right now with cherry blossoms
are bedecked abundantly?

“As I sense the dearest perfume,
my old heart revives with vigor
in my breast. O, God Almighty,
has the memory survived?

“Could it be that Ukraina,
flowery, joyful, paradisal,
dreadful, bloody, and infernal,
is not wholly strange to me?

“Is she my concern? The struggle
she must carry on with Jesuits
and the Poles is a great burden,
but my struggle is hard also.

“Truly, I have my own struggle,
of the kind which every human
must against himself wage boldly,
ere he help his fellow men.

“Did I not put in her service
my best feelings, thoughts, and efforts,
to support her, to defend her
in this great, this difficult war.

“Was I not her good advisor
when she faced her hard dilemma?

Did I not imbue with courage
her worn out, despondent host?

“Was I not so sorely wounded
in my heart by their disdainful
lack of gratitude and chaos
and dull, stubborn ignorance?

“Did I not feel deep revulsion
at their scornful lack of confidence?
Did I not brush off forever
their dust from my own boots?

“Why, then, have you strayed, my dearest,
my white guests, by storms here driven,
bringing with you your own fragrance
to my cavern in the rock?

“Not for me your subtle perfume!
Not for me are now those distant
memories of Ukraina —
for her I have long been dead!

“Dead! But why the heart is racing,
why the pulse of blood is quickening,
the thoughts cruising, like a plover,
over the orchards of our towns?

“Songs of birds, the grass, the flowers...
Cherry trees with milky blossoms...
Willow trees, like strange green hayricks...
Smoke arising from thatched roofs...

“Nightingales in the viburnum
warm the heart with their singing...
Children playing... In the orchard
girls are singing there somewhere...

“Go away, you far off visitors!
You have brought me, to my haven
of quiet repose, disquiet;
to my grave, the hum of life.”

IX

Dusk is falling. A great shadow
of the rock the sea has darkened,
and far off, the finest ripples
flare with gold and purple light.

From his rocky nest, the Old Man
quietly surveys the water :
from these waves of gold and purple,
builds a highway to somewhere.

To a distant land he builds it,
through the mountains, through the valleys ;
to his native Ukraina
sends his thoughts along this road.

He dispatches heartfelt greetings,
all his love, and all his yearning,
which, it seemed, all had been buried
such a long, long time ago.

Lo! along this sunny highway,
a bark slowly is approaching ;
from the oars and from the rudder,
gold and purple waves splash out.

The warm breezes of the evening
spread the white sail out and billow,
and the bark floats swanlike, heading
straight toward the Athos Mount.

Are those monks who are returning
from far lands where they went begging
for alms for their monasteries ?
Or mere peddlers with their wares ?

Are those people pious pilgrims,
devout orthodox believers,
coming here to pay their homage ?
To the Prot on a mission ?

The Old Man's eyes followed closely
the bark, till from view it vanished,
entering the island's harbor ;
then the hermit heaved a sigh.

Doubtless it was an illusion
that the men who rode as passengers
in the bark were dressed as Cossacks ;
yes, it was a fantasy.

X

Night came ; then relief from daylight,
time for prayers, genuflections ;

the Old Man's heart felt but anguish;
doubt, distress dwelt in his mind.

Suddenly, he heard a knocking :
up above, as was the custom,
someone knocked against the granite;
the Old Man returned the knock.

On a rope began descending
his provisions in a basket;
white upon the basket's bottom
lay a letter with a seal.

"To Ivan, the honored hermit,
who, secluded on Mount Athos,
treads the difficult narrow pathway,
on the road shown us by Christ.

"We, Orthodox Ukrainians,
in the town of Lutsk assembled,
send our greetings and implore him
to give brotherly advice.

"We thank our Lord Almighty :
He forgets us not a moment
and most difficult temptations
sends on us for our own good.

"His hard blows on us, we know it,
harden us, the same as iron,
all impurities removing;
temper us like unto steel.

"We thank our Lord Almighty
and those men who offer prayers,
who have taken on their shoulders,
for us all, the heavy cross.

"Through the prayers of the pious
and Almighty's holy mercy,
in our faith we still stand firmly
and do not abandon hope.

"Our adversaries strike us
in the open or in secret;
treason, lies, and provocations
undermine us and divide.

"The world's mighty, dukes and nobles,
have abandoned us completely :

their Christian flocks deserting,
they have entered Mammon's camp.

"Our own spiritual shepherds,
like wolves, have now turned upon us,
clawing at their Christian brethren,
pouring poison in their souls.

"Like a hungry mountain lion,
our enemies' derision
roars at us in our sorrow :
'Where's your God? Where is your strength?'

"Therefore we, a tiny vessel
on the waves of stormy waters,
have assembled, tearful, praying,
to decide what must be done.

"Mindful of Christ's words that only
hard work gains the Heavenly Kingdom,
and that only those who labor
may win entry into it;

"Mindful also of your teaching
that in case of a betrayal
by our shepherds, we must promptly
take good care to save ourselves;

"We debated various measures
how against this storm to shelter,
with at least a tiny bulwark,
our holy Mother Church.

"We've decided to assemble
all our power in one center,
to promote and develop
our noble common cause.

"Thus we send out our brethren
to you, Sir, our honored Father,
to convey to you our prayers :
be the pilot of our boat.

"Return to our Ukraina,
with your word warm our spirits,
be among us as a bonfire
for us shepherds to watch 'round.

"A bonfire warms the freezing,
at night gives illumination,

frightens off ferocious creatures,
and gives cheer to living souls.

“Please be our spiritual father,
set us all a lofty standard;
be the object of our prayers,
be our rallying battle cry.

“And consider: constant failures
rancor breed in our spirits;
and continuing derision
seals most eloquent of lips.

“And consider: lies, injustice,
like a she-wolf in her lair,
in her evil-smelling brown,
breed ferocious wolf cubs.

“Mind: hypocrisy, betrayals
destroy truth in all expression;
he, whose heart is full of poison,
only poison can emit.

“Father, Father! Bitter troubles
have warped many a soul among us;
little wolf cubs, although toothless,
crawl already in our midst!

“Father, Father! From the hard blows,
our backs are bent, our foreheads lowered,
in our souls a dreadful poison
seethes and fills them to the brim.

“Show yourself among us, Father,
as an old knight, undefeated!
The first sight of you will straighten
our bent backs and give us strength.

“Hark! Your native Ukraina,
our old Mater Dolorosa,
with a plaintive voice is calling
her dear infant to her side.

“Evil days portends the future,
she shall soon stand on the crossroads,
and who is to show her whither
she ought to direct her steps?

“Don't disdain our entreaty!
Hasten to defend your Mother!

Your voice and your mind may turn yet
defeat into victory.

"We shall wait until tomorrow
for your answer", said the postscript,
on the letter's upper corner,
"then up on the rock we'll be."

XI

Pacing up and down his cavern,
the Old Man his prayers whispers;
to his breast he hugs the crucifix,
trying to forget the writ.

"The Cross's the only good I long for;
the Cross's the only hope that's extant;
the Cross's my suffering solitary,
the only fatherland I have.

"All outside it is deception,
diabolical temptation;
there's one path to salvation,
the only true road — the Cross.

"What's this voice, and what's this letter?
Sent to whom? To hermit Ivan.
The monk Ivan is no longer;
he is dead for everyone.

"Worry about Ukraina?
Let her seek her own salvation;
my concern is to make certain
that I save myself for Christ.

"For I'm weak, and I'm a sinner —
no great star, and no Messiah;
I can't save them from perdition;
I may perish, too, to boot.

"No, I won't betray my Savior,
I won't break the pledge I've given,
and the Cross' heavy burden
I will carry to my grave.

"The time's nigh. That's why the breakers
roll at me the final impact;
for this reason, the road's end is
full of hardships, full of pain.

“Not much time left. God Almighty!
 Help me : lighten my last burden!
 Illumine the path I'm treading,
 now uncertain in the mist.”

All night long the Old Man suffered,
 prayed, and washed his face with teardrops,
 to the cross he pressed his old breast,
 as a child his mother hugs.

He wept, whispered, called, but darkness
 all enveloped in its blanket;
 his soul also filled with darkness,
 and enlightenment would not come.

When the sun the darkness conquered,
 he sat there in apprehension,
 waiting for the stone to hammer,
 for the voices from above.

There : the dull knock on the granite;
 the Man started at the knocking,
 but his hand moved not to action,
 to the knock did not respond.

“Father Ivan! Father Ivan!”
 calls the voice, its timbre sounding
 like a cry of pain and anguish,
 like someone who begs for help.

“Father Ivan! Father Ivan!
 We're the men from Ukraina.
 We're your unfortunate children!
 Father Ivan, answer us!”

His breath bated, the man listened,
 his ear eagerly enjoying
 the loved sounds of Ukrainian,
 but he did not answer back.

“Father Ivan, Father Ivan!”
 long thus called the deputation;
 down below the waters pounded,
 and Ivan did not reply.

XII

Dusk is falling. Like a dove-grey
 carped, shadows deck the water;

rays of sunshine, at an angle,
fall obliquely in the sea.

A gold highway stretched out evenly
from the ripples of the water
to the highest point on Athos;
the surf surged on at the rock.

In the cavern's very entrance
sat the hermit, bending over,
reading many times the letter,
sprinkling it with bitter tears.

"Hark! Your native Ukraina,
our old Mater Dolorosa,
with a plaintive voice is calling
her dear infant to her side."

"Her dear infant! Aptly spoken:
one who at the darkest hour,
in a terrible bleak crisis,
leaves his mother in a lurch!

"One, who in his senseless blindness,
only wants his own salvation,
leaving his distressed, poor brethren
without succor and advice.

"By what right may you aspire,
you half-broken little shepherd
to seek personal salvation,
when a million could die?

"Think of what Christ said about it:
'A good shepherd will give gladly
for his flock his life.' Consider:
are you not their shepherd, too?

"Think of what Christ said about it:
'He who says I love God dearly
but neglects to help his brother
weights his conscience with a lie.'

"After all, for all the people
who'll give up in desperation,
whom you could have helped with courage
God shall ask you to account.

"After all, your proud monastic
dreams of personal salvation,

here, away from all temptation —
are temptation, a mortal sin.

“You’re not treading on God’s pathway;
you’re in fact the Devil’s servant,
who wished in his pride to equal
his Creator, the great God.

“This is not God’s way! If somehow
you contrived to go to Heaven,
and your native land and people
perished here without your help.

“Heaven should for you turn into
Hell! The very thought ‘I could have
helped them when my help was needed’
would turn Heaven into Hell!”

Mortal fear descended on him,
gripped the Old Man’s heart with terror;
he could hardly breathe; a cold sweat
suddenly covered his whole face.

He looked out upon the water,
where the outline of the Mountain
on the blue was trimmed with golden
edging of the setting sun.

Lo! down in the Athos harbor
a bark slowly is departing,
heading for the sunlit region,
leaving now the harbor’s shade.

A Turk’s steering the small vessel,
men in Cossack coats his riders,
their hats are topped with red cloth,
gold is spraying from the oars.

Those are men from Ukraina!
The Old Man’s heart started pounding,
in alarm and in confusion,
he stretched out his thin old arms.

“Halt! Halt! Turn around, I beg you!
I am still alive. As always,
I love our Ukraina;
I’ll give my last days for her!”

“Halt! Halt! Turn around, I beg you!”
But in vain! They cannot hear him.

On the golden waves, the vessel
floats away, away, away.

The Man wrings his hands and presses
his old aching heart; descending,
on his knees upon the granite,
he speaks to his wooden cross.

“Jesus, Thou hast left the highest
principle for us to follow :
first of all to love our brethren,
to defend them with our lives.

“Jesus, look at me, have mercy!
Don't allow me here to perish!
Please grant me once more to visit
my beloved native land!

“Look, this is the thread that ties me
to my work, the last incentive;
don't allow it to be broken;
turn the vessel back to me!

“Cause the wind to blow adversely!
Raise the sea in giant breakers!
Or allow me to fly downward
from the rock, like any bird.

“Thou art merciful, almighty!
And if all my labors, prayers,
all my silent meditations,
my achievements, my fasts,

“even had a grain of merit,
a mere speck of dust of import,
then I'll gladly, O Lord Jesus,
give it up without regret.

“I'll surrender all; I'm willing
to boil in hot pitch forever;
only now cause me a miracle :
bring the vessel back to port.

“Or allow me, birdlike fashion,
to reach the bark by flying,
or let me walk down toward it
on the gold rays of the sun.

“Thou didst also, as an urchin
run on sun rays from the temple;

in a storm, Thou didst walk also
on the sea, as if on land.

"Grant me, grant me, this one miracle!
Only once, this very minute!
Do not leave me thus despairing,
like an infant in distress!"

Thus prayed our Ivan Vyshensky,
hugged the cross with all his power;
and he felt, all of a sudden,
from his anguish strange relief.

He became completely tranquil,
wild distress he felt no longer,
clear assurance spread out over
his renewed and freshened soul.

He was sure that God had granted
all he'd asked for in his prayers;
that the moment of the miracle
and enlightenment had come.

That which he so long had hoped for
was around him, like light breezes,
like harmonious cosmic music,
paradise holy scent.

And he rose with joyous feelings,
thrice he crossed himself, and blessings
he bestowed upon the sun rays
that obliquely touched the sea.

Now the hermit noticed nothing,
save the golden rays of sunlight
leading to the bark, far yonder;
he stepped forward and then passed from sight.

In the hollow cave lay only
the white cross, of all illusions
skeleton, of dreams and yearning;
and the sea roared on below.