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Toska

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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.