

ALEXANDER PUSHKIN

EUGENE ONEGIN

and four tales from Russia's southern frontier

A prisoner in the Caucasus; The fountain
of Bahchisaráy; Gypsies; Poltáva



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Eugene Onégin

&

Four tales from Russia's southern frontier:

A prisoner in the Caucasus

The fountain of Bahchisaráy

Gypsies

Poltáva

by Alexander Pushkin

Translated into English prose with an

Introduction and Commentary

by Roger Clarke



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INTRODUCTION

I. Overview

This book is for you who read English and not Russian. For you, inevitably, the word-music of Pushkin's Russian verse is out of earshot. But no matter: there is much, much else in Pushkin to enjoy, and my wish is that this volume will enable you at last to enjoy it. So here I offer you, translated for the first time into a natural, modern – but still I hope musical – English, prose five of Pushkin's verse stories hitherto, alas, too little known and appreciated outside Russia. I have expanded on why, and how, I have translated these works into prose in Part 4 of this introduction.

First after this introduction comes Pushkin's novel *Eugene Onégin*, a masterwork of European literature. In Part 2 of this introduction you will find a detailed description of the work and its qualities.

Eugene Onégin is immediately followed (as is customary) by the fragmentary descriptive stanzas known as *Onégin's journey* – material Pushkin originally prepared for inclusion in the novel, but then rejected and published as an annex to it.

Onégin's journey, with its descriptions of the Caucasus and the Crimea, leads naturally on to the rest of the translations, the four of Pushkin's shorter verse stories that I have grouped as *Tales from Russia's southern frontier* – *A prisoner in the Caucasus*, *The fountain of Bahchisaráy*, *Gypsies*, and *Poltáva*. There is a discussion of the *Tales* in Part 3 of this introduction.

Between *A prisoner in the Caucasus* and *The fountain of Bahchisaráy* I have interposed four documents on Travels in the Caucasus and the Crimea that will, I hope, add to the interest and enjoyment of those tales: there are two of Pushkin's letters giving an account of his travels in those parts in 1820; an extract from a travelogue by another Russian writer giving a contemporary description of the

palace of Bahchisaráy; and a note of a visit I made to the Crimea in 2001. I offer these to the reader partly as interesting background to the principal works and partly because of the insight they provide into Pushkin's creative processes.

After *Poltáva* comes a detailed commentary on all the translations. Those of you coming to Pushkin for the first time may prefer simply to enjoy the stories without much reference to these notes; but if you want to study Pushkin more intensively – as I hope many of you will – I believe you will find much information here to interest you and deepen your appreciation of his artistry.

Those of you who wish to read *Onégin* and the four *Tales* in the context of Pushkin's life will find some information in the selective biographical note that follows the commentary. Those who are interested in the historical background to the *Tales*, and especially to *Poltáva*, will find it in the historical note that follows that. At the end of the historical note you will find two maps.

At the back of the volume there is a list of books for further reading and an index.

2. Eugene Onégin

Russians regard Pushkin as their greatest writer, and *Eugene Onégin* as his greatest work. Moreover, as one Russian writer has put it, *Onégin* 'has long been recognised as the parent of the Russian novel, the source to which the full stream of Russian fiction must be traced'.¹ For these reasons *Onégin* ought to occupy a pre-eminent place in the literature not only of Russia, but of the wider world too.

Yet outside Russia, certainly among the English-speaking peoples, *Onégin* is little read and little known. I touch on why this should be in my remarks in 'Why translations in prose?' in Part 4 of this introduction. My purpose here is to describe what *Onégin* is and why it deserves to be read, and enjoyed, by you who do not know Russian.

What is Eugene Onégin?

This question is less simple to answer than you might expect. The

1 Avrahm Yarmolinsky, page 10 of introduction to translation of *Eugene Onégin* published by Penguin Classics in 1964

work has a uniqueness that defies categorisation. Pushkin himself describes the work as a 'novel-in-verse'.

This translation does not attempt to reproduce the verse. But in order to give the reader some impression of Pushkin's original, I begin with a short description of the verse form. The work consists of 366 regular stanzas, grouped into eight chapters.² Each stanza has 14 rhyming lines (like a sonnet); the lines are iambic tetrameters (ie they have 8 or 9 syllables with the stress falling on the even-numbered syllables); and the rhymes follow the pattern –

a b a b e e c c i d d i f f

where the vowels represent feminine rhymes (the 2-syllable rhymes at the end of 9-syllable lines) and the consonants represent masculine rhymes (the 1-syllable rhymes at the end of 8-syllable lines). The structure of this complex stanza (which Pushkin created specifically for *Onégin*) is easier to grasp from an example. Here is a lighthearted stanza composed by Vladímir Nabokov to illustrate the rhythm and rhyme scheme of an 'Onégin stanza':³

'What is translation? On a platter
a poet's pale and glaring head,
a parrot's screech, a monkey's chatter,
and profanation of the dead.
The parasites you were so hard on
are pardoned if I have your pardon,
O Pushkin, for my stratagem.
I travelled down your secret stem,
and reached the root, and fed upon it;
then, in a language newly learned,
I grew another stalk and turned
your stanza, patterned on a sonnet,
into my honest roadside prose –
all thorn, but cousin to your rose.'

– though Nabokov's idiosyncratic translation is hardly 'roadside prose'.

² This excludes the 20-odd stanzas of *Onégin's journey*.

³ Pushkin, Aleksandr, *Eugene Onégin* © 1964 Bollingen, 1975 revised edition PUP, 1992 renewed, 2003 renewed PUP. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

In addition to the regular stanzas, there are –

- a 17-line opening Dedication,
 - two letters – Tatyána's letter (79 lines) in Chapter 3 and Onégin's letter (60 lines) in Chapter 8
- all these in the same metre, but with an irregular sequence of rhymes not arranged in stanzas, and
- an 18-line peasant girls' song near the end of Chapter 3 with a quite different metre and rhyme pattern.

So *Onégin* is 'in verse'.

And it is 'a novel'. It tells a story, like any other good novel, of imagined but believable characters leading believable lives, experiencing believable emotions, reacting to believable situations.

If it were just a *novel-in-verse*, *Onégin* would already have the makings of an original, interesting and charming composition. But what gives the work even more originality, interest and charm is the rich concoction of other ingredients that are blended in with the novel.

One ingredient is the *part Pushkin himself plays* in *Onégin*. Not only does Pushkin include himself as one of the minor characters in the work, but he provides us with much autobiographical information about his own life, writings, friends, opinions, and attitudes; and he comments irrepressibly to us about the social, educational, literary and philosophical background of his day. (He would no doubt have been glad to comment on the political background too if that had not been ruled out by the oppressive imperial censorship.) Pushkin also uses this autobiographical dimension to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, with two effects: the fictional story and characters take on for the reader an enhanced realism; and, paradoxically, the reader is made unusually conscious of the word-skills that Pushkin uses to create this illusion of reality.

The *structure* that Pushkin builds into *Onégin* – the shape of each chapter, the links between chapters, the parallels and symmetricalities of the work as a whole – is an ingredient that gives the work a further æsthetic fascination. And there is the rich ingredient of *poetry*, in the broad sense of vivid and evocative word pictures – either as descriptions that enrich the background of the narrative, or as imagery that gives the narrative itself added

colour and impact. And there is Pushkin's inimitable *style* of writing.

I deal more fully with each of these ingredients below.

Why does Eugene Onégin deserve to be read?

Again, for completeness, a brief word first about Pushkin's *verse-writing*. There is no dispute among Russians and students of Russian that the quality of Pushkin's verse-writing in *Onégin* (as in his other verse works) is superb. The spontaneity and aptness of rhythms and rhymes, the matching of words to metre and of sentences to stanzas, the combination of sounds to enhance meaning or entrance the ear through such devices as onomatopœia, alliteration or assonance – all these bring the verse-writing in *Onégin* to a level that is invariably excellent and is often as near to perfection as it is humanly possible to get. But this word-music is inherent in the Russian language of the original, accessible only to those who know Russian. To reproduce Pushkin's word-music in a foreign language is simply impossible. The best we translators can do, whether in verse or prose, is to try to compose an alternative word-music of our own to accompany Pushkin's narrative. Whether we succeed or fail in this, the end product is ours, not Pushkin's, and is not a valid ground for our recommending *Pushkin's* work to English readers.

But the other elements of *Onégin* I identified above, the novel itself, the author's involvement, the structure, the poetry, the style – these *can* be reproduced in English, and these do amply provide grounds for recommending a translation of Pushkin's work to English readers. So let us look at these elements in more detail.

The novel: story and characters The story of *Onégin* is set in the St Petersburg, the Moscow, and the Russian countryside of Pushkin's own day, between the years 1819 and 1825. This setting is one that we can observe independently through other accounts by Pushkin himself and his contemporaries. The human behaviour it depicts in Russia's new and ancient capitals and on the country estates of Russian landowners – the way the characters, major and minor, pass their time in learning, reading, talking, writing, working, idling, eating and drinking, dancing and playing, loving, quarrelling, travelling, marrying, worrying, decaying, dying and being laid finally to rest – is all recognisable, not only as behaviour credible

for the early 1820s, but also, with allowance for changing circumstances, as behaviour credible today. As with any other good novel, it validates itself not only against what we know historically of human behaviour at the time it portrays, but also against what we know intuitively from our own experience to be credible human behaviour in our own time. Thus, Onégin's selfish interest in the hoped for death of his uncle at the beginning of the novel resonates with the self-interest in our own natures, just as his unselfish, if clumsy, treatment of the innocent, trusting and impulsive Tatyána in Chapter 4 resonates with our own more sympathetic and unselfish instincts, awkwardly though they may sometimes be expressed. And we can recognise within ourselves both Onégin's flippant vindictiveness towards Lénsky over the Lárins' uncongenial party in Chapter 5, and the depth of his remorse at its terrible consequence in Chapter 6. In the same way, all the movements of the plot, all the motivations of the characters, ring true against what we know of human nature from what we have ourselves read, seen and felt. The novel, like any good novel, informs us, and reminds us, of ourselves.

Pushkin understands people so well. The characters in *Onégin* are drawn with originality, subtlety, humour and truth. Though 'extras', like the guests at the Lárins' nameday party, are often little more than entertaining satirisations, even those minor characters that have a role in the plot come over as real human beings – like Tatyána's loyal, if slow-witted, old nurse in Chapter 3, or the pedantic busybody Zarétsky in Chapter 6, or Mrs Lárin's ailing but effusive cousin, Princess Alína, in Chapter 7.

Pushkin treats most of the characters in the book with a detached irony, sometimes gently mocking, though rarely unsympathetic. His picture of the attractive but shallow Olga Lárin is an excellent example of Pushkinian irony – and perceptiveness:

'Olga was always unassuming, always submissive, always as cheerful as the morning, as simple-hearted as Lénsky's own nature, as sweet as a lover's kiss. Eyes blue as the sky, bright smile, flaxen curls, graceful movements, a pleasant voice, a dainty figure – Olga had them all. Take any novel: you'll be sure to find her portrait – and very nice it is. I liked it once myself, but I've become so tired of it . . . '

(Ch. 2: 23)

Lénsky, too, is portrayed throughout in ironic, even mocking tones, with his sheltered and idyllic upbringing in the country; his saturation in German idealistic philosophy; his vapidly romantic verses, which Pushkin parodied so well; his uncritical infatuation with Olga; and his fatal oversensitivity that caused the final breach with Onégin. Nonetheless, inadequate though Lénsky has been as a thinker, writer, lover and friend, Pushkin causes us to feel to the full the tragic waste of his early death. The pathos is even increased by our consciousness of Lénsky's weaknesses: through them we feel Lénsky's life to be more human, and his death more unnecessary, than if he had been drawn as a more heroic figure.

Pushkin treats the two main characters with more overt seriousness. Tatyána he frankly idealises, calling her explicitly 'my ideal of perfection'. This is in fact Pushkin's most committed characterisation in the whole novel: there is no trace of irony in Pushkin's picture of Tatyána, save possibly in her choice of books. Clearly Pushkin believes in her, fervently, and succeeds in getting us to do so too. But nonetheless one senses that his (and therefore our) belief in Tatyána (unlike the other characters) is a belief founded less on the observations of a realist than on the hopes and longings of a romantic.

Onégin's is the most interesting characterisation of all. This is partly because Pushkin here presents us with two alternative characterisations, and leaves the choice tantalisingly to us. On the one hand Pushkin allows us to see him as a flip, superficial, idle young man who has driven himself to insensitivity and exhaustion through a frantic search for pleasure in St Petersburg's playhouses and casinos, restaurants and salons, ballrooms and boudoirs. Bored with the capital, and unexpectedly enriched by his uncle's inheritance, he goes to the country, where he alienates his neighbours by his boorish behaviour and ill-considered reforms. He patronisingly rebuffs the advances of a shy young girl who has imprudently fallen for him. His only friend – young Lénsky – he deliberately and gratuitously provokes by flirting with his fiancée, and in the ensuing duel coldbloodedly kills him. Exposed as –

'just an imitation, an empty illusion, just a man from Moscow masquerading as Childe Harold, an encyclopædia of other people's oddities, a dictionary of the latest clichés . . . ' (Ch 7: 24)

in short, as an empty poser, he travels abroad for several years. On his return, having met the girl he had disdained years before and who is now well married in St Petersburg society, he allows himself to fall for her and tries selfishly – and ineffectually – to entice her from her husband.

Against this unattractive but plausible portrait, Pushkin presents us with a different interpretation of Onégin⁴. Onégin is more to be pitied than criticised. He is not alone in having misspent his youth – and in having lived to regret it. His disillusion with society is due, at least in part, to the malice he has suffered from others and to the stifling conventions of the day. He could have seduced the local girl who fell for him in the country, but instead he lets her down gently and gives her sensible advice. His friendship with Lénsky is good for both of them until the overenthusiastic youngster badgers Onégin against his better judgement into attending the sort of local gathering he hates. Onégin bitterly regrets the resultant quarrel and duel, the outcome of which will haunt him for the rest of his life. On his return to St Petersburg he realises the mistake he has made in rejecting the country girl who had fallen for him years before; since she still loves him, he tries vainly to persuade her that it would be best for them both even now to seek happiness together.

Throughout the novel Pushkin builds up these alternative (or complementary?) interpretations of Onégin's personality. Pushkin carefully never delivers his own verdict on his hero, and he leaves us free to decide on ours. This deliberate ambivalence of characterisation (which applies too in a less developed way to several of the other characters such as Lénsky, Olga and Mrs Lárin) is one of the most fascinating features of the work.

We have omitted mention of one minor character in the novel – the author himself. Pushkin, as well as narrating the story, gives himself a role in the plot as a St Petersburg friend of Onégin's. This enables Pushkin to develop Onégin's character by comparison and contrast. In Chapter 1, for example, having likened Onégin's premature disillusion with St Petersburg society to his own, Pushkin then takes an opportunity to contrast Onégin's boredom in the countryside with his own love of it. This gives him the cue to point

4 Pushkin's most impassioned defence of Onégin is in Ch. 8: 9–12

out that he is not following Byron in drawing the hero of his novel in his own image.

The author's involvement: autobiography and comment But Pushkin's presence with us as we read *Onégin* is much more pervasive even than as the author-narrator and as a character in the story. He is constantly acting as autobiographer reminiscing to us about his own life and activities, and as commentator on this or that subject of interest. As autobiographer, he talks to us about his upbringing, his early life in St Petersburg, his exile and travels in the Russian south, his life under restriction in his family estate in the country, and his eventual release; he mentions his daily routine, his writings, his love affairs, his friendships, his taste in wines, his aspirations. As commentator he chats away to us about education, language, the theatre, literature, history, philosophy, the transport system, the natural world, people, life and death. If we approach *Onégin* as simply a novel, we may be irritated by the author's constant interruption of his narrative with other material. But that is to miss an important part of the charm and artistry of the work. Pushkin is indeed an affecting and amusing storyteller, but he also has a gift for talking interestingly and entertainingly to us on a whole variety of topics. In the digressions, as in the narrative, we can enjoy the company of a fascinating and inexhaustible conversationalist.

Reality and fiction This author's involvement of himself (and of some of his real-life friends)⁵ in the action has one more effect. Because we come to know Pushkin as our own friend as well as a personal friend of Onégin's, and because Pushkin keeps dividing his attention between us and his real-life friends and the characters in the story, the boundary between reality and fiction becomes blurred; we begin to think of Pushkin's narrative, not as a creation of his imagination, but as remembered fact. Pushkin shows us documents his characters have produced: their handwritten letters, poems, and entries in autograph albums. Again, at the beginning of the last chapter he leads us via a stylised account of his own personal and literary development into the very St Petersburg salon

5 eg Kavérin (Ch. 1: 16), Vyázemsky (Ch. 7: 49)

where Onégin, after years of travelling, is about to renew his acquaintance with Tatyána. By these devices Pushkin brings his story to life in the same way as a baroque sculptor brings his subjects to life by having them step out to us beyond their architectural frame.

There are other ways in which Pushkin tries to destroy our consciousness of the boundary between reality and fiction. The action of the novel is set in the real world of Pushkin and his friends, amid the streets, palaces, theatres and restaurants of St Petersburg and Moscow with which his first readers would have been familiar, and in the sort of country estates in rural Russia that they would have immediately recognised. The work contains numerous references to books – to the poetry, novels and other works of Russian and Western European literature that Pushkin's contemporaries would have read, or at least would have seen collecting the dust on their bookshelves. Pushkin portrays several of his principal characters as avid readers of the same books. Indeed, the characters of Tatyána and her mother, of Lénsky, and even of Onégin himself, are obviously much influenced by the books they have chosen to read. This coexistence in a common physical environment, this awareness of the same authors and exposure to the influence of the same books, gave Pushkin's first readers, and can still give us to a lesser degree, the impression of sharing a common reality with the characters of the novel.

Structure It may seem surprising even to consider the *structure* of a work which occupied the author off and on for over seven years. Pushkin admits himself that 'young Tatyána and Onégin first appeared to me in a muddled dream and I had yet to pick out clearly in my crystal ball the remoter features of this impromptu novel' (Ch. 8: 50); and we know that for a time Pushkin contemplated a novel of nine chapters grouped in threes instead of the eight that finally emerged. And yet the finished work has an undeniable symmetry and proportion that are underpinned by a complex, if artfully concealed, substructure.

Let us look first at a single chapter – chapter 1 – by itself. We shall see that it has a centrepiece and a framework, as follows:

CHAPTER I

Centrepiece: Onégin's crowded social round in St Petersburg
(15-36)

Inner frame: before: Onégin's upbringing and early love affairs
(3-12)

after: Onégin's disenchantment with love, learning
and youth (37-48)

Outer frame: before: Onégin's journey to the country (1,2)

after: Onégin's journey to the country (52-54)

(The last 6 stanzas 55-60 are a Pushkinian coda of entirely autobiographical material.)

There is not the space here to analyse each chapter separately like this; but the example illustrates the kind of structure that one may expect to find within the artistic unit of each chapter.

As Nabokov pointed out, Pushkin also provided links from each chapter to the next. Chapter 1 ends with Onégin's arrival in the country and with some observations of Pushkin's on country life. This prepares the way for the countryside setting of Chapter 2. Chapter 2 introduces the Lárin family and a mention of novels and romance, which provide the major theme of Chapter 3. Chapter 3 ends with Tatyána's encounter with Onégin in the park, which leads to the description of that encounter and its sequel in Chapter 4. Chapter 4 ends with a portrayal of the onset of winter and with Lénsky persuading Onégin to attend the nameday party at the Lárins'; both winter and the party are described more fully in the course of Chapter 5. The end of Chapter 5 tells of the quarrel between Lénsky and Onégin, the consequence of which forms the main subject of Chapter 6. Lénsky's grave provides the link between Chapters 6 and 7. Chapter 7 ends with a return to city life, which becomes the setting for Chapter 8. These links provide a smooth and natural transition from chapter to chapter through the novel.

If one looks at the work as a whole, a broader pattern can be discerned. There is a circular motion through the novel. For nearly the whole of Chapter 1 the action is in the polished, superficial world of St Petersburg's high society. For Chapter 2 it moves to the country, with a side-glance at Moscow and Mrs Lárin's family there; and it remains in the country till halfway through Chapter 7,

when it shifts in earnest to Moscow and Mrs Lárin's family, before coming back to the high society of St Petersburg for nearly the whole of the last chapter.

This circular motion is underscored by other parallels between Chapters 1 and 8. We meet Onégin abruptly at the very beginning of Chapter 1, and we part from him abruptly at the end of Chapter 8. The early stanzas of Chapter 1 contain an account of Onégin's schooling and early youth; Chapter 8 begins with six stanzas that relate to Pushkin's schooling and early youth. Chapter 1 near the end tells of Onégin's departure from St Petersburg; and Chapter 8 near the beginning tells of his return there. The autobiographical material both in Chapters 1 and 8 contains references to two of Pushkin's earlier narrative poems. Early in Chapter 1 we learn of Onégin's successes in seducing married women he does not love; near the end of Chapter 8 we read of his failure to seduce one married woman he does love. Onégin is joined in both chapters by his friend Pushkin. In both chapters Onégin tries to take up reading and writing as pastimes, in both cases unsuccessfully.

There are similar parallels between the next two chapters moving inwards, Chapters 2 and 7. I have already mentioned the balancing references to Moscow and to Mrs Lárin's family. Chapter 2 ends by a country grave; Chapter 7 begins by one; in both cases we read the inscription on the tombstone. One could continue.

Let us now look at the opposite side of the circle that begins with Chapter 1 and ends with Chapter 8. Geometrically, the opposite side of the circle is the beginning of Chapter 5 (Nabokov tells us that Ch. 5: 5 contains the exact centre of the novel, equidistant from the beginning and the end). Here we find ourselves at the diametrically opposite pole from Chapters 1 and 8. Instead of being among the sophisticates of the Russian capital's aristocratic society, we find ourselves momentarily surrounded by rural peasantry. And instead of the cold or cynical rationality of St Petersburg conversation we hear the excited gasps of housemaids telling fortunes and discussing omens. We have arrived in a world of folk magic, superstition and nightmare, as far distant as can be imagined from where we began or from where we shall end. Pushkin tackles the subject with his usual lightness, and we are ready to giggle with the girls about the silly prophecies of 'soldier husbands and a war' for

both Olga and Tatyána; it is only later when we get to Chapters 7 and 8 that we realise with a frisson that for both of them the 'silly prophecies' are well on their way to fulfilment. The forecasts of 'wealth and fame', and of a loss, in Tatyána's divination song also come true. No doubt the reason why Pushkin never tells us the name of Tatyána's husband is to keep us guessing whether it was 'Agafón' (see Ch. 5: 9). In relating to us all these strange goings-on Pushkin, I am sure, remains tongue-in-cheek; but by including them where he does at the start of Chapter 5 he allows them to cast a deeper shadow over the drama that plays itself out in the second half of the novel.

There is another, more obvious way of analysing the structure of *Onégin*. If we split the novel in the middle – between Chapters 4 and 5 – we can observe a different parallelism between the two halves. Both Chapters 1 and 5 contain scenes of socialising, feasting and dancing, albeit in a rather different class of company and décor. This parallel is underlined by Pushkin's recollection in Ch. 5: 40 of his digression in Chapter 1 about women's feet. Chapter 2 marks the entry of Lénsky into the narrative and leaves him standing in a country graveyard meditating on death. Chapter 6 marks the exit of Lénsky from the narrative and leaves him lying in a country grave, dead. In Chapter 3 Tatyána is reading her own novels, which mislead her into falling in love with Onégin; in Chapter 7 she reads Onégin's books, which lead her into a truer estimation of him. The close of Chapter 3 finds Tatyána standing forlorn and silent among the trees of the park, nervously face-to-face with Onégin; the close of Chapter 7 finds her standing forlorn and silent among the pillars of the Assembly of Nobility in Moscow exchanging nervous looks with her future husband. In Chapters 3 and 4 Tatyána, infatuated with Onégin, writes him a letter which Pushkin allows us to read; there is no written reply; later she tries to avoid meeting with Onégin by rushing out into the park, where Onégin eventually finds her and delivers her, by word of mouth, a cool rejection. In Chapter 8 Onégin, now infatuated with Tatyána, writes her a letter which Pushkin allows us to read; there is no written reply; later he tries to see her by rushing across St Petersburg to her mansion, where she delivers him, by word of mouth, a cool rejection. Chapter 4 ends with a kind of affirmation of marriage in the form of

Lénsky's anticipation of his imminent wedding to Olga; Chapter 8 ends with a kind of affirmation of marriage in the form of Tatyána's decision to remain faithful to her husband despite Onégin's advances.

One can only wonder at Pushkin's skill in building such a complex structure of links, parallels, counterparallels and circularities beneath the artless surface of his novel. It is scarcely credible that he did so consciously when we know that its gestation was spread over such a long period and when he had already published the early chapters before he could have had any clear idea of what the later ones would contain – indeed, before he even knew how many later chapters there would be. And yet these structural features are too numerous and significant to be fortuitous. It is these devices, well concealed as they mostly are, that help to give the work the indefinable balance, proportion and symmetry that the reader senses in spite of Pushkin's apparent spontaneity.

Poetry: description and imagery The next element of *Onégin* that we identified earlier was poetry – poetry in description, and poetry in imagery.

There are so many memorable descriptions in each chapter. In the middle of the first chapter alone we have Onégin's visit to the theatre; his dressing room; his arrival at a ball; his drive home through St Petersburg early on a bright winter's morning; and this evocative account of a summer night in the same city:

'Many a time in summer, when the night sky above the Nevá was transparent and bright and the smiling river's glassy waters showed no reflection of the moon, we used silently to drink our fill of the gentle night air . . . Eugene would be standing deep in thought, his arms resting on the stone parapet, his heart full of regrets . . . All was quiet. Only the sentries of the night watch could be heard calling to each other; and the distant rattle of a carriage would suddenly reach us from Milyónnaya Street. Only a small boat, with oars swinging, would float down the dreamy river; and the faraway sound of a horn or a jaunty song would catch our ears . . .'

(Ch. I: 47, 48)

A wonderful picture of the luminous calm of the 'white nights' of northerly St Petersburg in midsummer, when the sun hardly sets.