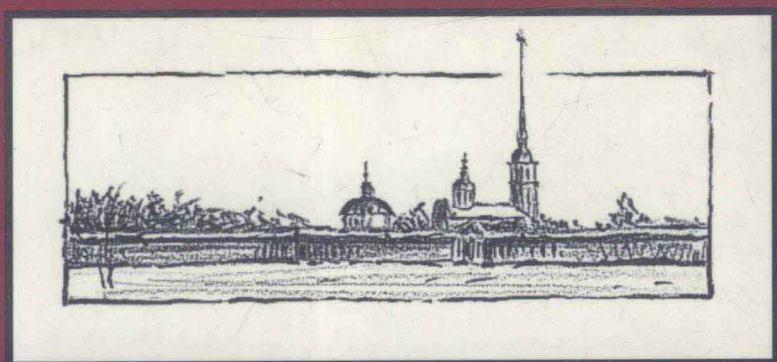


# *Eugene Onegin*

A NOVEL IN VERSE

BY ALEXANDER SERGEEVICH PUSHKIN



A NOVEL VERSIFICATION BY

DOUGLAS HOFSTADTER

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*by Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin*

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*With sketches by Achille Varzi  
and chapter heads by the translator*

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Not aiming to amuse the folk in  
Nabókov's *monde*, but just my friends,  
I'd hoped to tender you a token,  
Dear Falens, worthier of the blends  
That make your souls so rich and precious,  
So rife with sacred dreams, and with  
Poetic lines that e'er refresh us,  
And lofty thoughts, and charm and pith;  
Oh, well... Take what will henceforth mesh us:  
This suite of chapters, one through eight —  
Half-droll, half-sad, sometimes romantic,  
But down-to-earth and ne'er pedantic,  
The careless fruit I've born of late —  
The tossing, turning inspirations  
From greener and from grayer years:  
My mind's chilled white-wine decantations,  
My heart's red wines, distilled from tears.

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# Translator's Preface

## Six Words Go Out, Six Others Come Back

MY UNCLE, awkward, ski-jump start will, in the end, be resolved and cleared up, and will (I can hope!) even coax a quick smile. But for now, well... Onward, onward, speeds my story — a strange one, perhaps, but then, so are many.

We may as well begin on a blustery October eve, as my stalwart buddy Greg Huber and I are trudging westward, straight into the biting wind, along Saint Petersburg's Petrovskaya Embankment; with us is a young Russian acquaintance, Natasha, a friend of a friend of Greg's, whom we've met only once before. She is about 21, bright, open, and pretty, and has told us she teaches English to children in a small school in town. As we walk, with the sun still bouncing a few feeble rays off clouds in the west, night seems reluctant to take over from the purplish dusk. All three of us suddenly shiver as a specially sharp gust comes whipping through, and I turn to Natasha and utter a few words that have just popped into my head: *Vot séver, túchi nagonyáya, dokhnúl, zavyl* ("Here's the north, clouds a-chasing; it blew, it howled"). She flicks me a little smile and throws in a few words of her own: *I vot samá idyót volshébnitsa zimá* ("And here comes winter herself, the sorceress").

I'm pleased, but this is a mundane event, so mundane that I let it pass without a word. We cross the Troitskii Bridge, turn right, pass the imposing Admiralty, find our restaurant as night settles, and at dinner talk, laugh, talk. But for some reason, over the next few days, this symmetric little exchange — six words sent out, six words received — keeps reverberating in my mind, and slowly it dawns on me that what transpired that blustery purple evening — and precisely *because* it was so ordinary, so mundane — was in fact an extraordinary, magical event, filled with hidden meaning.

The words I had spoken, though they'd popped spontaneously into my head at that moment, were not of my own invention: my command of Russian is, so sad to say, not nearly that good. They were lifted from a sonnet written by Alexander Pushkin in the late 1820's — line 12 and half of line 13 of the sonnet, to be specific. Nor were Natasha's words invented by her, for they were the remainder of line 13, plus the sonnet's concluding line. Here are those lines, as they appear in the poem:

Вот север, тучи нагоняя,  
Дохнул, завыл — и вот сама  
Идёт волшебница зима.

And so Natasha and I had swapped successive pieces of a poem with each other. That's cute, but what's so extraordinary in it? Indeed, the truth of the matter is that when I threw my six words

at her, I was almost *expecting* something of the sort. What I was thinking was roughly this: "Russians know their Pushkin; here's a snippet of Pushkin that describes this scene right now; she'll of course recognize these words, and she'll like the fact that an American knows them." And my hunch was right; accordingly, I was not astonished, just pleased, whence the lack of comment.

What was it, then, that made my perception of this event flip so dramatically? In a word, it was its sheer randomness. Firstly, my six-word phrase was by no means the Russian counterpart of a famous opening nugget like "To be or not to be" or "Fourscore and seven years ago" — it lies buried inside the fairly arbitrary stanza 29 of Chapter VII of Pushkin's eight-chapter novel in verse *Eugene Onegin*, which consists of nearly 400 stanzas, almost all of them tetrameter sonnets in the purest of iambic meter. Secondly, Natasha was not a literary scholar, or even a student of Russian literature — she was a fairly typical product of the modern Russian educational system. And yet out of some 5,300 lines of *Eugene Onegin*, she had instantly and effortlessly recognized my few words — but not just that, without even blinking, she had instantly and effortlessly completed the stanza.

I knew well, from prior conversations with Russian friends, that many Russians know a great deal of *Eugene Onegin* by heart, and people had occasionally said to me, "I used to know it all, when I was in high school." At first I had been incredulous, and thought they must be pulling my leg. Even when I realized they were not joking, I was skeptical. How could anyone memorize 5,300 lines of poetry? I myself had never memorized more than about 100 lines of poetry — a long speech by Cyrano in Edmond Rostand's drama in verse *Cyrano de Bergerac*, when I was in high school — and doing that had felt like a huge *tour de force* to me.

Nonetheless, having heard so many similar claims, I had slowly come to believe that educated Russians were very familiar with a lot of this novel, and that's why I confidently quoted a few lines to Natasha. She, in turn, had confirmed my expectations. But what she did with such ease really made the Russian love for Pushkin's novel hit home, because the stanza I had quoted is neither central nor celebrated — it does not stand out from the whole in any way. In effect, I had closed my eyes, thrown a dart at the novel, and hit it in a random line, and then, without my intending it as such, that line had played the role of a spot-check of her knowledge, which she passed with flying colors. And in a certain sense, Natasha herself had been selected from the Russian population by the throw of another dart. The upshot was that a tiny exchange of twelve words constituted an amazing demonstration of just how profoundly Alexander Pushkin's novel in verse pervades the minds of his compatriots nearly 170 years after its completion.

## An Opera or a Novel?

When, sometime in my dim past, I first heard the words "Eugene Onegin", it was as the title of a Tchaikovsky opera. The name "Alexander Pushkin" was nowhere in sight, nor was the idea of poetry. And in recent years I have found, over and over again, that my experience is pretty typical, outside of Russia. To the

average culturally-inclined adult in a western land such as ours, the two words "Eugene Onegin" (properly pronounced, by the way, "Onn-yay-ghin", so as to rhyme, approximately, with "Ron Reagan") tend to bring to mind an opera but little else, while the name "Pushkin" coaxes up a vaguish image of some nineteenth-century literary figure but seldom any specific work.

In Russia, by contrast, Pushkin is a universal hero — not the musty equivalent of Wordsworth or Longfellow, nor even of the bright star of Shakespeare; Pushkin is much closer to the common people than any of those. He is seen as the founder of Russian literature, as the prototypical symbol of Russia's cultural greatness, and as a vivid and lovable though flawed human being. To speak Pushkin's name is to evoke an aura inseparable from the beauty of the Russian language. Even nonintellectuals revere him and know some of his poems by heart. The closest counterpart that I can come up with is the role played by Frédéric Chopin in the hearts of Poles.

Of all of Pushkin's output, which is sizable despite his death in a senseless duel at 37, the most revered is without question this novel, *Eugene Onegin*. Although we outside of Russia tend to think of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* or Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as the top icons of Russian literature, within Russia *Eugene Onegin* knows no rival. Wherefore, then, the relatively low level of appreciation abroad? It's hard to say for sure, but one factor must be that *Eugene Onegin*, being as it is in verse, is considerably harder to translate into other languages than most novels are. Another factor might be the work's compactness — it is very slender. Perhaps another quality that makes this poetic novel seem strange or, well, *foreign* to some readers is its unprecedented manner of intermingling lightness and seriousness — that is, its uniquely contrapuntal character, on which I'll now say a little.

Those who have seen the Tchaikovsky opera will remember it as a lugubrious story of star-crossed lovers, of anger, jealousy, and tragic death. And yet, although that is indeed the "plot line" of the novel, it is but one facet of the work. What makes Pushkin's book so marvelously alluring is not its sad plot line (which is fine as far as it goes), but the way in which that line, like a single line in a piece by Bach, weaves its way in and out of the focus, yielding the floor to other lines of quite different character.

Above all, the novel's counterpoint involves an intricate, unpredictable bouncing back and forth between the characters in the story and Pushkin's own droll, sardonic observations about life, about himself, about poetry, about women's legs, about friendship, about wine, about truncated lives, about nature, about each of the seasons, about foreign words used in Russian, about hypocrisy, and on and on. All of this is executed in graceful, sparkling, yet mostly colloquial language that is nearly always pellucid to a native speaker of Russian, even today. Altogether, reading *Eugene Onegin* provides as tingling and keen a jolt to the lively mind as the stark Finnish habit of jumping back and forth between sauna and snowbank does to the healthy body.

Tchaikovsky's opera, whatever its merits as drama or music might be, conveys little if any of this exquisite polyphonic charm, since voices other than the plot are totally lacking. Moreover,



despite the fact that many stanzas from the original poem have been set to music, the linguistic charm is also largely missing. For nonspeakers of Russian, the reason is, of course, that the poetry is completely inaudible as such, even on a phonetic level — but this lack extends also to native speakers, oddly enough. It is hard to hear the arias' lyrics as verse, in part because, as any opera-goer knows, words, even when sung in one's own language, are often hard to make out, and in part because the natural poetic beat is overridden by the musical beat. And so... with the polyphony missing and the poetry missing, the opera is but the feeblest, faintest trace of the novel.

For the opera to have supplanted its sparkling source, in the eyes of the non-Russian world, as the chief referent of the term "Eugene Onegin" is, in my opinion, a sad development, and for that reason, I must say, it would be a source of great pleasure to me if the appearance of my "novel versification" of Pushkin's novel in verse in 1999, the poet's bicentennial year, contributed in some way to the reversal of this trend, and helped to restore the place of honor to *Eugene Onegin* the novel, as opposed to *Eugene Onegin* the opera.

## A Nonspeaker of Russian Encounters *Eugene Onegin*

It will not have escaped notice of readers of this preface that on its first page, I commented that my spoken Russian is rather poor. How in the world, then, could I have even considered getting involved in such a project, let alone have had the hubris to think I could do a decent job of it? A good question, and the story is, I think, of some interest.

In 1986, I read the novel *The Golden Gate* by Vikram Seth, and was bowled over by its lilt and grace, as well as its plot and characterizations. Never had I imagined a novel in verse, and Seth's work impressed me enormously. I so much enjoyed it, in fact, that I wrote a letter to Seth and suggested we get together next time I was in his neck of the woods. Not too many weeks passed before we were sharing a leisurely Californian coffee, and in the course of our chat he pointed out something that somehow had failed to register on me in my first reading — namely, three stanzas in his Chapter 5 that explicitly declare that his inspiration had been British diplomat Charles Johnston's "luminous translation" into English of Pushkin's novel in verse. This was an eye-opener for me. I knew next to nothing about Pushkin or his works, but Seth, in a generous gesture, bought me a copy of the Johnston version of *Onegin*, and in so doing opened wide a gate through which I might easily pass into the golden land of Pushkin. And yet, though I peered through it, I did not walk through Seth's golden gate. Instead, I left Johnston sitting on my bookshelf for five or six years, utterly uncracked.

Then one day in late 1992, by lucky chance, I ran across another English *Onegin*, this one from the pen of James Falen, professor of Russian at the University of Tennessee. I riffled through it, and since, at least on the surface, it looked as if it



wasn't half-bad, I purchased it, more or less on a whim. Soon Falen's version was sitting right next to Johnston's on my dusty shelf, both of them now relegated to the same sad literary limbo.

But as the weeks passed, the lonely pair beckoned and nagged at me, and one day in the spring of 1993, knowing how my wife Carol and I got a kick out of reading to each other, I pulled them down and asked Carol what she thought of the idea of our reading them *both* out loud together. She was game, and thus began a little evening ritual in which, our children having been duly storied and cuddled and now drifting off into golden dreams, we would climb into our own bed, plump our pillows till they were right, and then plunge into our double-barreled *Onegin*. One of us would read a Falen stanza, then the other would read the "same" Johnston stanza, then we'd comment on them, after which we'd read the same stanzas out loud once more, make more comments, then move on to the next stanza.

In this plodding but pleasing manner, Carol and I got to know both translators' styles, got to know the structure and characters of *Eugene Onegin*, and got to know something of Alexander Pushkin, to boot. We even felt we could get a slight taste of the Russian poetry itself, for between the two translators' ways of phrasing things, details of the original in a certain sense showed through. Although we were impressed by both translators, we soon came to the mutual conclusion that Falen's translation, despite Seth's lavish praise for Johnston, was smoother, more graceful, and far clearer.

Some two years later — a nightmare period during which, out of the blue, Carol succumbed to an unsuspected brain cancer and our small family was turned upside down by the loss — I was slowly trying to regain some vague semblance of normalcy, and I recalled one special, though now most poignant, source of sanity: the joy of reading *Onegin*. I wondered what other translations might exist and how they might sound, so I went to the library and got a hold of several. A few were pretty wretched, but two of them seemed decent — one by Walter Arndt, and the other by Oliver Elton, later revised by A. D. P. Briggs. I carefully perused both of them, comparing stanza after stanza with those by Falen and Johnston, and in this manner came to have a clear sense for all four verse translations still in print. I still liked Falen's the best, but saw virtues in all of them. And at that point, I wrote a comparative review of the four translations for *The New York Times*, which subsequently, and greatly expanded, became two chapters of my book *Le Ton beau de Marot*.

In the spring semester of 1997, just as *Le Ton beau de Marot* was about to appear, I offered a seminar on verse translation at Indiana University, and among the many works we were looking at, *Eugene Onegin* — in these four highly diverse anglicizations — featured prominently. I felt the best way to compare the four approaches was to ask each student to concentrate on one stanza, studying it carefully in all four translations, making notes about prominent merits or defects, and then coming to class and performing the four rival stanzas out loud with as much skill as they could muster, after which a class-wide discussion would take place. I decided to focus on Chapter III, and from it selected a

section that included the most famous part of the novel — Tatyana's letter to Onegin. As a lark, I treated myself as a student along with the other dozen and, wearing that lowly hat, I was assigned by our demanding professor to discuss a series of twenty-five successive lines in the middle of Tatyana's letter (one of just three parts of the novel that are not in sonnet form).

As I was preparing my presentation, it occurred to me that my students, only one or two of whom knew any Russian, would probably benefit from hearing how at least a few lines sound in their original tongue, and so, having studied a little Russian some twenty-five years earlier, I got out my copy of the authentic text (which I had also purchased, just for fun) and sounded out the words in my portion very slowly. I found it rough going, and in quest of smoothness, I read this short section out loud to myself at least thirty times, and then contacted a Russian friend and asked her to critique me. It turned out I had a good long way to go in mastery of Russian phonetics, but Ariadna's careful coaching was of enormous help to me, and encouraged me to redouble my efforts at accuracy. And so I kept on reading my lines out loud over and over to myself, and after another thirty or forty readings, I realized they were getting pretty familiar. Of all things, could I perhaps *memorize* this stretch of Russian poetry? Well, why not? It seemed an odd thing to do, given my track record at poetry memorization, but it appealed to me.

## Fascination Turns to Passion

How vividly I recalled a conversation in which Carol's and my old friend Marina had nonplussed us by nonchalantly remarking, "I used to know the whole book by heart — and so did many of my friends." In light of such heroic feats, it seemed to me only reasonable that I, too, should memorize at least a *little* of this novel. But how crazy, were I to follow that route, to be able to recite merely the middle third of Tatyana's letter! And so I bravely decided to expand my self-challenge to include all 79 lines of that celebrated epistle.

The long and the short of it is that within a couple of weeks, I finally got the whole letter under my belt, and my students were amused when I came to class and told them that that morning while in the shower, I'd repeated it to myself in eight minutes; then a couple of days later I proudly reported I'd got it down to four minutes; and the following week I finally attained my goal of three minutes. They thought my concern with speed was silly, but to me it was crucial that the lines flow extremely easily, which essentially required my being able to say them in my sleep.

Needless to say, all this was quite an odd twist in my growing involvement with *Eugene Onegin*, for heretofore I had dealt exclusively with various translations, while now I was dealing with the real McCoy. I decided that, as a kind of icing on the cake, I would also memorize the stanza that introduces Tatyana's letter, because it had always been a favorite. But truth to tell, I had lots of favorite stanzas, and so one little addition like this followed another, and pretty soon I had memorized stanzas scattered through all eight chapters, in total amounting to over twice the

length of Tatyana's letter. No doubt about it — I was hooked on this off-the-wall new mental sport.

Unfortunately, I was no great shakes at memorizing, and to get a stanza really ingrained in my memory so that I could recite it smoothly even when starting cold, I found I needed somewhere in the neighborhood of 300 to 400 mental rehearsals. To reach such large numbers, I found myself exploiting my twenty-minute showers, my three-mile runs, various and sundry car rides, plane rides, doctors' waiting rooms, children's soccer games, and so on — in short, any and every moment of spare time — in repeating one stanza or another to myself.

One of the weirder aspects of all this was that I was committing to memory dozens of lines in which one, two, or more words were completely novel to me. Although of course I looked each one up and knew its rough meaning, these words were nonetheless in some sense little more than rote sounds to me. But any time a word appeared in two or three different stanzas, in quite different contexts, it started picking up its own flavor and started being imbued with more of a true meaning. So through memorization, my vocabulary began growing, although not in anything like the order in which one acquires words in a class. Ironical though it seemed, here I was, cutting my Russian-language baby teeth on the most hallowed work of Russian literature!

In early September of 1997, six months or so into this odyssey, I had committed between thirty and forty stanzas to memory and was working on the first three stanzas of Chapter VII, which I found deeply moving, when one morning a friend happened to put on a recording of Ella Fitzgerald singing the melancholy song "Spring Is Here", by Rodgers and Hart. All at once, I was struck by a remarkable resonance between Pushkin's lines and Hart's lyrics, both in subject matter and in tone. Both poets were dealing with a spring whose return is anything but joyous, and I marveled at how an American popular song from the 1930's and some Russian sonnets from the 1820's could overlap so greatly.

Alone in the house that afternoon, I played the song again, and as Ella's mellifluous voice intoned the sad words in English, I recited stanzas VII.2 and VII.3 out loud in a deep, despairing voice, thus baldly superimposing male voice onto female, Russian poetry onto American song, the 1820's onto the 1930's, and "high culture" onto "pop culture". I found myself strangely moved by this stark juxtaposition, and as soon as the song was over, I played it again and recited the Pushkin again. I did this at least a dozen times before having to stop so I could pick up my kids at school.

That evening, so engrossed in those stanzas, I found myself wanting to "possess" them even more profoundly and personally, much as one wishes to possess a beloved as profoundly as possible, and the only more intimate kind of involvement I could imagine was to try translating them to my mother tongue — making them truly my own poetry. I still had no thought whatsoever of doing the whole book; I merely wanted to see if translating a few isolated stanzas was within my reach, or if I would make a fool of myself in trying. Although Falen's versions of these stanzas had touched me deeply when I'd read them, luckily his lines weren't so fresh in my mind as to crowd out my own ideas. This gave me hope that I

wouldn't have to constantly check my lines to make sure that I wasn't unconsciously rewriting Falen. Thus, in a daring mood, I simply closed my eyes and took the plunge with VII.1.

I found that it took me a couple of hours to get a first draft, and then I spent two or three further hours just making small adjustments here and there, in order to polish the result ever more. And so the next day, I had an Onegin stanza of my very own — and then, two days later, *mirabile dictu*, I had all three at the start of Chapter VII. And yet, somehow, I still did not see the handwriting on the wall.

## The Crystalline Building Blocks of this Novel in Verse

Perhaps at this point an interlude is needed to explain the nature of the so-called “Onegin stanza”, for without a crystal-clear understanding of its building blocks, one cannot fully appreciate the novel’s artistry. Pushkin, influenced by Byron, decided to try his hand at writing a novel in verse, but he chose a very different structure in which to pack all his ideas. Basically, Pushkin’s crystal vessel was a sonnet, but a very special form of sonnet. In the first place, each of its lines was composed in uncompromising iambic tetrameter — stresses falling always on even-numbered syllables. In the second place, all stanzas shared exactly the same rhyme scheme: ABAB, CCDD, EFFEGG. And thirdly — and this is the touch that, at least for me, really gives these stanzas their distinct flavor — he chose an elegant and catchy quasi-alternating pattern of *feminine* and *masculine* rhymes.

This distinction is not that well known in English, so I will explain it here. A masculine rhyme involves *one* stressed syllable at the end of each line, such as “turn” and “burn”, whereas a feminine rhyme involves *two* syllables, the second of which is unstressed, as in “turning” and “burning”. Note that in the example, the unstressed syllables, rather than rhyming with each other, are simply identical. Most feminine rhymes are that way: stressed syllables rhyme, unstressed syllables coincide. However, to my ear at least, it is also acceptable for the unstressed syllables to rhyme (an example of this sort that I use in Chapter VI is “rock’s doze” and “cock’s crows”). In any case, Pushkin decided that feminine rhymes would always occur on the A, C, and E lines of each stanza. Thus the fixed pattern of masculine lines and feminine lines is this: FMFM, FFMM, FMMFMM.

One of the effects of using feminine rhymes in iambic tetrameter is that each feminine line has nine syllables, all five of whose odd-numbered beats are unstressed, whereas masculine lines have just eight syllables, and just four unstressed beats. There is thus a slight metric irregularity to the Onegin stanza: 9898, 9988, 988988, to spell out the syllable-counts explicitly. This, to me, is the key to much of the charm of the Pushkinian crystal that pervades these pages.

Although my commas in the pattern “ABAB, CCDD, EFFEGG” seem to suggest that each stanza breaks up naturally into two quatrains and a sextet, this is not at all the case. Pushkin often

expresses ideas that do not break cleanly at quatrain boundaries, nor indeed, even at line boundaries. There are even cases where a sentence will start near the end of one stanza and jump right across into the next stanza.

Many commentators have pointed out that the first twelve lines of the Onegin stanza neatly display all three possible rhyme patterns for a quatrain — namely, ABAB (interleaved), CCDD (separated), and EFFE (sandwich-style) — and they are then complemented by a closing couplet, GG. But though many stanzas do end in couplets that have a “zinger” quality to them, having a stand-alone couplet at the end is certainly not *de rigueur*, and indeed it would be most misleading to suggest that there is any fixed pattern at all of how semantic chunks are distributed among the fourteen lines. Quite to the contrary, Pushkin plays very free and easy with the flow of thoughts among his lines, and a great deal of the charm of his poetry emanates precisely from the manner in which unpredictability and irregularity coexist with an overarching, rigid formal structure.

## The Handwriting on the Wall is Finally Seen

I'll pick up now on my personal saga. The memorizing continued apace throughout the fall of 1997, and several weeks later another stanza in Chapter VII took hold of me so strongly that I again felt the urge to try converting it to English. This time something utterly unexpected happened. I'd done what I thought was a fine job of anglicization and was admiring my own handiwork when my eye lit on a strange semi-pattern at the lines' beginnings: nine out of the fourteen capital letters were, for some odd reason, “T”. I looked at those “T”'s and thought, “How curious! A pattern crying out for completion!”

Other people might perhaps not have reacted that way, but it seems to me that it's just a question of how one is tuned. Thus I find it hard to imagine *anyone* who, upon noticing that a sonnet just penned had all but *one* of its lines beginning with “T”, would not feel at least a little tempted to try to make them *all* do so. What if all but *two* started with “T”? All but three? All but five? Different people will have different thresholds, and mine might be lower than some, but I daresay that virtually everyone would tilt in the direction I tilted in, provided the quasi-pattern were sufficiently blatant. In any case, my personal threshold had been easily met, and so I started dismantling and rebuilding lines that only moments earlier I'd been most pleased with.

It was with surprising ease that I got twelve out of the fourteen lines to start with “T”, and then another half hour or so turned the trick of the remaining two, and *voilà* — an Onegin stanza had just been born whose left edge obeyed a tight visual constraint and whose right edge obeyed a tight sonic constraint (not to mention the rhythmic constraint that pervaded each line, from left edge to right). At first, I had mixed feelings about this extra level of pattern that I'd added, feeling that it might reek of exhibitionism, but one stark fact convinced me that I should leave it in the new form: the anglicized stanza had, beyond any shadow of a doubt, been *improved* by the pattern-inspired modifications!



At this point, I'd done four out of about 400 stanzas, but still wasn't dreaming of tackling the whole book. To be sure, some people would see the beckoning pattern already at just 4/400, while for others, it might require having completed 350/400 before it would occur to them that they might as well go for broke... I, in any case, didn't yet see my destiny looming between the lines of what I'd done so far.

Another couple of months passed, and my mind was getting ever more loaded with new stanzas. At Christmas vacation, my mother, my sister's family, and my children and I all went to Hawaii for ten days, and there I was once again overcome by the beauty of certain stanzas — this time the trio with which Chapter VI concludes — and was once again invaded by the irresistible desire to "possess" them via translation. I did the first two of them while there, and when we returned to the mainland, I noticed a blank book that I had been given several months earlier, sitting untouched in some random pile of papers and books. Staring at it, I was all of a sudden hit by the thought: "That blank book has about 400 pages; *Eugene Onegin* has about 400 stanzas. Just think: one stanza on each page!"

The thought seemed quite ridiculous: me, with such sparse knowledge of Russian, hoping to clamber up this formidable Everest of translation, a book often said to be next to untranslatable, and square at the center of the inner circle of Russian literature! Yet it couldn't be denied that I'd *already* done six stanzas and, by George, they weren't all that bad! Who says you need to be a fluent speaker of Russian? My mind toyed with this idea. How long would it take? How much of my life would I have to devote to this preposterous endeavor? Could I afford the time? Why on earth would I want to do such a thing?

But the answer to the last question was simple: *love, sheer love*. And indeed, that answer was enough to override all other doubts, and in no time flat I was riffling the pages of that heretofore totally boring blank book and envisioning some future day when each one of those white sheets would be covered with black ink, with good lines, bad lines, crossings-out galore — and there was my future, beckoning me, staring me in the face, pulling me forward. My fate was sealed.

## Lolling in Bed Sweet Bed with My Sultry Feminine Rhymes

From this crazy challenge there was clearly going to emerge one goal that I had dreamt of for decades — namely, I was going to learn a *lot* of Russian. Since I'd already done four stanzas of Chapter VII, I decided, quite arbitrarily, that that chapter was where I would begin, and in early January, I plunged in with ardor. It so happened that during the previous months my mood had been slipping gradually down a long slope, and by early January, I was in a state of great agitation and sadness. Life seemed nearly devoid of joy, and all felt bleak — all, that is, but my little stanzas. But now that I'd decided to tackle the whole book, things started looking up enormously. I found new

strength and peace, even occasional exhilaration, when I was working on this task, and somehow *Eugene Onegin* pulled me right up out of one of my life's deepest pits.

Each morning, after getting my children up and off to school, I would return home and fix myself a cup of hazelnut coffee, pour some milk and a small boatload of sugar into it, carry it upstairs, and cozy up with the Russian text in bed — or as Carol used to call it, “bed sweet bed”. At some point it crossed my mind that this cozy spot in which I was creating my own stanzas was exactly the spot where Carol and I had first read Johnston's and Falen's stanzas to each other with such delight, a realization that lent a double-edged poignancy to my toil.

Sipping my pseudo-coffee, I would start hunting for feminine rhymes to use in lines 1 and 3. It was always with a search for feminine rhymes that my work would have to start because, given how much more elusive they are than masculine rhymes, it's around their scaffolding that all else must be built. I'd think and think, pause for a little drink, think and think some more, now and then scribble down a list of potential rhymes or rough synonyms, and then, every so often, some exquisite feminine rhyme would come wafting into my mind from out of nowhere, solving a problem that had been plaguing me for a half hour or more, and for a few brief moments, I would know ecstasy.

Yes, strange to say, of all the pleasures I've known in life, those countless mornings spent lolling in bed sweet bed with my beautiful, elusive, sultry, seductive feminine rhymes, converting Pushkin's lilting *Onegin* stanzas into my own strange brand of poetry, rank close to the top. For various reasons of my own, I wound up doing first all the odd-numbered chapters in the order 7-1-3-5, and then tackled the even ones in the order 2-4-6-8. And day after day, I would flip the pages of my once-blank book and say to myself, “Twenty down, 358 to go!” Or else, “Finally I'm into three digits!” Or even better, “Fifty percent!” — a most memorable moment, which came on June 5.

My pace was very irregular. On lucky days, a good first draft of a full stanza would come within a mere hour, while on rough days, it could take three, possibly even four hours. But then the act of polishing, scattered in random episodes over the next few days or even weeks, added much more time. Nonetheless, there started to emerge a fairly clear pace: about 1.3 completed stanzas per day, on the average. To my delight, I could almost predict that sometime in the early fall of 1998, I would be done!

In order not to slow my pace at all, I made sure that every day, without exception, I worked on *Onegin*. Stanzas were thus done on vacations, on work-related trips, on countless airplane trips, in the car while I was driving one place or another, while I was sitting on the deck while the kids splashed away in friends' pools, while I was hiking with friends and family among remote lakes in the high Sierras, and on and on. Indeed, I'm always struck when I enumerate the widely-spread-out locales in which this translation was worked on: California, Hawaii, Indiana, Tennessee, Illinois, France, Switzerland, Italy, Bulgaria, Sweden... In my memory, each of these spots glows warmly with the special aura of the particular stanzas that I translated in it.



## Pushkin's Last Stanza

But the most unexpected, the most glowing site of all was saved for the very last. In mid-summer 1998, I went to Sofia, Bulgaria, for a conference in cognitive science, and while there I found myself strangely drawn by the Slavic faces all around, and, reading signs in Bulgarian everywhere with surprising ease, I was tantalized by the sense of closeness to that other Slavic tongue with which I was now so intimately bound up. Almost inevitably, my thoughts jumped from Bulgaria to Russia, and a wild idea sprang unbidden into my head. I had a sabbatical year coming up very soon, in fact overlapping with Pushkin's bicentennial year — and so why not spend it in his own land, indeed in his own beloved city of Saint Petersburg?

Never had I set foot in Russia. The idea of spending a full year there, though deeply enticing, was also fraught with complexity, especially with respect to my children. For me, I envisioned a stint at the State University of Saint Petersburg, centered somehow on my involvement with Pushkin and translation, but for the kids? I couldn't just jump into such a situation blindly, and so once I was back in the United States, I set out planning an exploratory week-long jaunt to Petersburg, and the most natural date — in fact, the only workable date for me — was in mid-October. It did not escape me that with this timing, my trip would come close to coinciding with the date I foresaw for the completion of my *Onegin*, at which point the whole trip took on a certain eerie feeling of predestination.

Not long after I'd purchased my air ticket, the sudden terrible landslide of the ruble's value started, and what up till then had seemed an idyllic prospect for a sabbatical year started taking on ominous tones. I tried to keep an open mind, but making an exploratory visit seemed far more critical now. In any case, as my trip drew closer, I started counting days and stanzas very carefully, parceling out the latter in such a way as to ensure that I would have precisely three left to do when I arrived in Petersburg.

And then occurred a strange twist of fate. Ten months earlier, just before our Hawaiian vacation, at a gala fund-raiser in California to support a bicentennial Pushkin jubilee, I'd met a distant American relative of the Russian poet — Kenneth Pushkin, a man of most honest principles, an art dealer, a friendly fellow who was in fact dutifully respecting his name — pushing his kin, that is to say — by spearheading the bicentennial celebration in America. The two of us hit it off, and over the following months remained in contact. I knew Kenneth did much business in Russia, so in early September, a month or so before taking off, I tried phoning him at home in Albuquerque in order to get some hints about hotels and contact people in Petersburg, only to find out that just that day he himself had taken off for Petersburg for a month, and I got his phone number there. This was a stroke of luck for me, partly because during the next few weeks I was able to call Kenneth up frequently to get a first-hand sense of all the turmoil I was reading about in the papers. But Kenneth also happened to be placed in the most strategic imaginable way to help me in my visit: he was in daily contact with key people at the

All-Russia Pushkin Museum, and thus through him, in the twinkling of an eye, I had a link to people as involved as anyone in Russia in preserving Pushkin's legacy.

Given this fortuitous link, I couldn't resist the temptation to ask whether, during my brief October visit, I might not be able to give a small reading somewhere of selections from my translation. Within a day or two, the answer came back from the Museum's director, Sergei Nekrasov: he proposed I give one in a series of readings called "Poets from Around the World", as part of a traditional October literary festival in the idyllic rural town now called Pushkin, formerly called Tsarskoe Selo — "the czar's village" — where Pushkin had gone to a special, elite boarding school in his adolescence. I was very gratified by this unusually warm reception, and of course accepted without delay.

Egged on by success, I upped my level of chutzpah one more notch, and inquired whether, a day or two before my reading, I might be granted the privilege of translating the very last stanza of *Eugene Onegin* in Pushkin's apartment along the Moika Canal in Petersburg. This time, the response took a little longer in coming back, but to my great joy, it too was positive: the day before my Tsarskoe Selo reading, I would be given a couple of hours to "commune with Pushkin" alone in his apartment, and to do the final stanza. Since for me, this had always been one of the most affecting of all the stanzas in the book, and since in it, the poet bids a final farewell to his novel and his beloved Tanya and Eugene, it seemed the perfect way for me, too, to bid farewell to my translation and to all the multiple meanings with which it of late had so graced my life.

And thus, at 5:00 in the evening of Friday, October 16, 1998, I found myself being ushered into the elegant book-lined drawing room of Alexander Pushkin's hallowed apartment — in fact, into the very *stanza* in which Pushkin died from wounds received in his duel — and there I was left in solitude, so that I could calmly spread out all my working materials on a dark wooden table and make myself comfortable on a couch just below a large portrait of the poet. Aside from a clock somewhere, I was immersed in total silence, and the last stanza's familiar words looked up at me from the novel's last page.

It was hard to believe that only a year and a half earlier, I hadn't read a single stanza of *Eugene Onegin* in Russian, while now I knew nearly fifty of them by heart and had translated nearly 400 of them into English, and now here I was, alone in Saint Petersburg with Pushkin's spirit — or at least with his portrait — just about to tackle the novel's very last fourteen-line crystal. And I'd been allotted precisely two hours to carry out this crowning task, and there was that clock, ticking softly away. Time to stop musing and set to work.

As was the case with every stanza, my opponent's opening gambit was the first pair of feminine rhymes — lines 1 and 3. What was my move? In my usual way, I thought and thought about the first quatrain and how it could be reworded in rhyming English, but nothing came, and tick tick tick, the game clock kept ticking away. I read and reread the Russian lines, even though I could say them in my sleep. Nothing I thought of worked.