





## EUGENE ONEGIN

ALEXANDER SERGEYEVICH PUSHKIN was born in Moscow in 1799. He was liberally educated and left school in 1817. Given a sinecure in the Foreign Office, he spent three dissipated years in St Petersburg writing light, erotic and highly polished verse. He flirted with several pre-Decembrist societies, composing the mildly revolutionary verses which led to his disgrace and exile in 1820. After travelling through the Caucasus and the Crimea, he was sent to Bessarabia, where he wrote *The Captive of the Caucasus* and *The Fountain at Bakhchisaray*, and began *Eugene Onegin*. His work took an increasingly serious turn during the last year of his southern exile, in Odessa. In 1824 he was transferred to his parents' estate at Mikhailovskoe in north-west Russia, where he spent two solitary but fruitful years during which he wrote his historical drama *Boris Godunov*, continued *Eugene Onegin* and finished *The Gipsies*. After the failure of the Decembrist Revolt in 1825 and the succession of a new tsar, Pushkin was granted conditional freedom in 1826. During the next three years he wandered restlessly between St Petersburg and Moscow. He wrote an epic poem, *Poltava*, but little else. In 1829 he went with the Russian army to Transcaucasia, and the following year, stranded by a cholera outbreak at the small family estate of Boldino, he wrote his experimental *Little Tragedies* in blank verse and *The Tales of Belkin* in prose, and virtually completed *Eugene Onegin*. In 1831 he married the beautiful Natalya Goncharova. The rest of his life was soured by debts and the malice of his enemies. Although his literary output slackened, he produced his major prose works *The Queen of Spades* and *The Captain's Daughter*, his masterpiece in verse, *The Bronze Horseman*, important lyrics and fairy tales, including *The Tale of the Golden Cockerel*. Towards the end of 1836 anonymous letters goaded

Pushkin into challenging a troublesome admirer of his wife to a duel. He was mortally wounded and died in January 1837.

STANLEY MITCHELL was born in 1932 in London. He read Modern Languages (French, German and Russian) at Oxford. He taught at various universities – Birmingham, Essex, Sussex, San Diego California, McGill Montreal, Dar es Salaam Tanzania, Derby, University College London and Camberwell School of Art. Subjects included Russian literature and art, comparative literature, art history and cultural studies. He retired from Derby as Emeritus Professor of Aesthetics and was made an Honorary Senior Research Fellow in the Art History Department of UCL. He has translated Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin, written a variety of articles and reviews, and given numerous lectures and talks.

ALEXANDER PUSHKIN

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# Eugene Onegin

*A Novel in Verse*

*Translated with an Introduction and Notes by*

STANLEY MITCHELL

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I thank the following for their warm support throughout my work on *Onegin*: Antony Wood, Natalia Mikhailova (Deputy Director of the Pushkin Museum, Moscow), Nicholas Jacobs, Dmitry Gutov (Moscow) and Gina Barker. Above all, I am indebted more than I can say to Barbara Rosenbaum for her love of the poem and her unstinting efforts to ensure that my translation was poetic. Whether it is or not is my responsibility not hers.

Stanley Mitchell



# Chronology

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- 1799 26 May** Born in Moscow. Father of ancient Muscovite aristocratic lineage; mother a granddaughter of Abyssinian General Abram Gannibal (hero of Pushkin's unfinished novel *The Negro of Peter the Great*).
- 1811–17** Educated at newly opened Imperial Lycée at Tsarskoe Selo. First poetry (earliest publication 1814).
- 1817–20** Nominal government appointment in Foreign Office, St Petersburg. Life of dissipation. 'Free-thinking' acquaintances (future Decembrists).
- 1820** Completed first major narrative poem, *Ruslan and Lyudmila*. Exiled to south for a handful of 'liberal' verses on freedom, serfdom and autocracy.
- 1820–24** 'Southern exile' (via Caucasus and Crimea to Kishinev and, from July 1823, Odessa). 'Byronic' narrative poems, including *The Captive of the Caucasus* and *The Fountain at Bakhchisaray*. Began *Eugene Onegin* (1823). Recognition as leading poet of his generation.
- 1824–6** After misdemeanours in Odessa, exile continued in greater isolation of parental estate of Mikhailovskoe. *The Gipsies* (1824); *Count Nulin*; *Boris Godunov* (1825). Misses Decembrist Revolt of 1825, ruthlessly suppressed by new emperor, Nicholas I.
- 1826** September Summoned to Moscow by Nicholas I. Freed from exile, with tsar as personal censor; subject thereafter to 'surveillance, guidance and counselling' of Count Benkendorf, Head of the Third Section (Secret Police). Resumed life in Moscow and St Petersburg; restlessness, search for stability.
- 1828** *Poltava* (narrative poem on Peter the Great and Mazeppa).

Four-month visit to Transcaucasia. Witnessed Russian army in action against the Turks.

**1830** Proposed to Natalya Goncharova (1812–63). In September – November stranded by cholera epidemic at new estate of Boldino: first and most productive ‘Boldino autumn’ (*Onegin*; lyrics; *Little Tragedies*; *Tales of Belkin*; *The Little House in Kolomna*).

**1831** Married in February. Settled in St Petersburg. Completed *Onegin*.

**1833** Historical research. Travelled to Urals. Second Boldino autumn (*The Bronze Horseman*; work on *The Queen of Spades*).

**1833–6** Unhappy period in St Petersburg: humiliations at court (with requests for retirement from government service refused), mounting debts and marital insecurity. Relatively little creative work: *The Captain’s Daughter* (completed 1836) and some outstanding lyrics.

**1837 27 January** Provoked into duel with Baron D’Anthès, adopted son of Dutch ambassador, and shot in stomach. Died two days later. ‘Secret’ burial decreed to avoid expressions of public sympathy.

# Introduction

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## 1

Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837) is by the common consent of his compatriots Russia's greatest writer. He is to Russia what Shakespeare is to England, Goethe to Germany and Dante to Italy. He lived at the springtime of Russian literature, which had gained its independent language only some fifty years before his birth. There was no unified language before Mikhail Lomonosov formulated it in his famous grammar of 1755. Before that, Church Slavonic coexisted with the disparate dialects of the civil service and the business community. With the growth of a centralized state a national language appeared.

In this new period Russian writers leaned heavily on Western models, and the nobility, to which Pushkin belonged, spoke French before it did Russian. French phraseology, often in its more flowery form, left its stamp on dramatists, novelists and poets during the reign of the German Empress Catherine the Great (1762–96), who loved all things French, corresponded with Voltaire and invited Diderot to St Petersburg. She freed the nobility from the service imposed on them by Peter the Great (1672–1725) and encouraged them to use their leisure in the pursuit of literature and the arts, as long as they didn't question the fundamentals of the Russian state, in particular serfdom. Enlightenment figures at home were imprisoned or sent to Siberia.

While it would be wrong to say that Pushkin was the first authentically Russian writer, since predecessors like the fabulist Ivan Krylov and the playwright Denis Fonvizin were already incorporating the vernacular in their work, nevertheless he was the first to treat the major events of Russian history and society in an accessible way. He borrowed themes and styles from Western

literature only to give them new twists from a Russian perspective. Although he tried his hand at most genres, he was essentially a poet. The new literary language had blossomed into a poetic culture in the generation preceding him, dominated by the Romantic Vasily Zhukovsky and the more classical Konstantin Batyushkov. Zhukovsky gave the language a new expressiveness and musicality, Batyushkov a fresh clarity and precision. Pushkin learned from them both. In his own generation a cluster of poets appeared – Yazykov, Delvig, Baratynsky – who became known as the Pushkin pleiad and appear as minor characters in *Eugene Onegin*. As elsewhere in contemporary Europe this poetic heyday was short-lived, superseded by the prose novel – Gogol, Turgenev – with which Western readers are more familiar. Pushkin himself went on to produce an historical novel, *The Captain's Daughter* (1836), and other works of prose. His poetry reflected a time of hope among the younger members of the nobility, epitomized by two dates – 1812 and 1825.

In 1812, Russia's armies defeated Napoleon. Yet on reaching Paris their younger officers were drawn to the ideals of the Enlightenment and the Revolution. Back in Russia, they were keen to introduce reforms – abolition of serfdom, a constitutional monarchy, even a republic. Having no influence on the increasingly reactionary Tsar Alexander I (1777–1825), who headed the Holy Alliance, they began forming secret societies on the model of the Western Carbonari<sup>1</sup> movements, aimed at overturning the government. Pushkin, then aged thirteen, befriended some of these officers when they were quartered in the grounds of his *lycée*. Several of his close schoolfriends would later join the secret societies. For the liberal nobility 1812 was a wake-up call. Officers were impressed by the courage of their serf soldiers. Soon, on leaving the *lycée*, Pushkin was writing poems deploring serfdom. Circulating all over Russia, they earned him th

honour of becoming the Tsar's first political victim, exiled in 1820  
The years of hope came to an end when the young revolutionaries attempted an ill-organized *coup d'état* on the death of Alexander, which was mercilessly crushed by the new Tsar, Nicholas I (1825–55). The date of the revolt, 14 December 1825, gave the participants the name 'Decembrists'.

Pushkin was still in exile at the time. During the previous years he had met the conspirators, but was not admitted to their ranks because of his volatility and indiscretion. However, when the new Tsar called him to Moscow and asked him what he would have done had he been present at the attempted revolt, Pushkin replied that he would have stood with his friends on the Senate Square in St Petersburg, the chosen place of the insurrection. Nicholas played a cat-and-mouse game with him, revoking his exile and promising to be his personal protector and censor. In fact, the task fell to the chief of the secret police. Pushkin married the beautiful Natalia Goncharova in 1831, who had no interest in his work and was happy only at court functions, which Pushkin hated, particularly after having been assigned a demeaning rank by the Tsar out of keeping with his age. Nor was he, either as a small landowner or a professional writer, able to pay for his wife's expensive tastes.

From this moment Pushkin was trapped by the court until his death in a duel with a French émigré officer, the Baron D' Anthès, who was paying attentions to his wife. Pushkin was thirty-seven. Later, the symbolist poet Alexander Blok remarked that it was not D' Anthès's bullet that killed Pushkin, but 'lack of air' in the court environment.

Although the Pushkin age was short-lived, and Pushkin himself died at thirty-seven, his work provided the seeds for the later Russian novel and several operas. *Eugene Onegin* inaugurated a lineage of superfluous men and self-sacrificing women in the

novels of Mikhail Lermontov, Alexander Herzen and Ivan Turgenev, and in Tchaikovsky's opera version of Pushkin's novel-in-verse. Pushkin suggested the plots of *Dead Souls* and *The Inspector General* to Nikolai Gogol, appreciating the latter's gifts for the grotesque that were outside his more classical bent. Leo Tolstoy emulated Pushkin's storytelling manner, comparing it with Homer's, and his novel *Anna Karenina* describes what might have happened to Tatiana had she given in to Onegin. With Fyodor Dostoevsky, who condemned the Onegin type as a Western intrusion and glorified Tatiana as the exemplar of Russian womanhood, a nationalist cult of Pushkin began that has not ceased. Radicals and conservatives fought over Pushkin's characters as if they were real people. Opponents of Tsarism saw Onegin, Lensky and Tatiana as kindred victims of feudal Russia.

By birth Pushkin was deeply embedded in Russian history. On his father's side he could boast a 600-year lineage as a nobleman. On his mother's he was the great-grandson of an African princeling, stolen from the harem at Constantinople for Peter the Great, under whose tutelage he rose to the rank of general. The features of Gannibal, as he was called, still showed in his great-grandson, whose African roots gave him the romantic feeling of an outsider wanting to get back to his native land (Chapter I, stanza 50). But Pushkin was equally attached to Peter, who played a dominant part in his outlook and work (see *The Bronze Horseman* (1833) and *Poltava* (1828–9)). At the same time he was envious of the new aristocracy who owed their advancement to Peter (and then to Catherine), ousting the older nobility to which his family, on his father's side, belonged. Unloved as a child, he found a new family in his *lycée*, where he made lasting friendships. He was famed for his love poetry, but friendship nevertheless remained his chief value, as *Onegin* attests, where friends form an invisible audience or enter directly into the novel.

On 4 November 1823 Pushkin wrote to a friend, Prince Vyazemsky, from Odessa: ‘I am writing now not a novel, but a novel in verse – the devil of a difference. Something like Don Juan – there’s no point in thinking about publication; I’m writing whatever comes into my head.’<sup>2</sup> Odessa was Pushkin’s second place of exile after Kishinev, in Bessarabia. In Odessa he was in the employ of the Governor Count Vorontsov, who had little appreciation for his poetry, calling him ‘a weak imitator of a writer whose usefulness may be said to be very slight – Lord Byron’.<sup>3</sup> The zest with which Pushkin wrote his new work reflected a hectic life that included an affair with the Governor’s wife.

In 1825, he was removed from Odessa, at the request of Vorontsov, to Mikhailovskoye, the Pushkin family estate in north-west Russia, which was to be his third and final place of exile. From there, in a letter to another friend, Alexander Bestuzhev, Pushkin wrote, in a different vein, about *Onegin* and *Don Juan*:

No one respects Don Juan more than I do... but it hasn’t anything in common with Onegin. You compare the satire of the Englishman Byron with mine, and demand the same thing of me! No, my dear fellow, you are asking a lot. Where is my satire? There’s not a hint of it in Eugene Onegin. The foundations of Petersburg would crack if I touched satire. – The very word ‘satirical’ should not have entered the preface. Wait for the other cantos... Canto One is merely a rapid introduction.<sup>4</sup>

Bestuzhev, himself a writer, was also a Decembrist. Many Decembrists were literary men, who, like Bestuzhev, saw their craft as a means of political struggle against autocracy and serfdom and were puzzled by Pushkin’s apparent departure from the radical poems that had sent him into exile. Why was Russia’s foremost poet, they asked, wasting his talent on the trivial lives of the gentry? In 1824, four years into exile, Pushkin declared in response to the most significant of Decembrist works, Kondraty



Ryleyev's *Dumy (Reflections)*, that the aim of poetry was poetry. In a series of poems Ryleyev had evoked heroic figures from the past as models to be followed in the present. Pushkin questioned the accuracy of Ryleyev's work, claiming that he was on the contrary projecting present ideals into the past.

Pushkin spent the first three years of his exile (1820–23) in what he called the 'accursed town' of Kishinev, capital of Bessarabia, serving in the office of General Inzov, Administrator for New Colonies in the South. By 1823, when the Decembrist movement was gathering steam, Pushkin had disavowed his earlier idealism. In 'The Sower of Freedom in the Desert', a poem written in Odessa, he scorns himself for philanthropy and the people for passivity. Indirectly, the poem targets the Carbonari and their followers in Western Europe (1820–23), crushed by the Holy Alliance. Pushkin writes to a friend that he is parodying the parable from the Matthew and Luke gospels that tells of Christ going out to sow. In Pushkin's incarnation the saviour is 'a moderate democrat' who sows in vain. The Decembrists were, like the Carbonari, largely a military organization, operating through secret societies and equally disconnected from the people they wished to liberate. Pushkin's sympathies for the Greek insurgents, whom he met in Kishinev and Odessa, likewise vanished. Could these dregs, he asked, be the descendants of Themistocles and Pericles?

Exile brought Pushkin into closer contact with his own countrymen, learning of their folklore from his beloved serf nurse, Arina Rodionovna, who appears as Filipevna, Tatiana's nurse, in *Eugene Onegin*. Her songs about the seventeenth-century rebel Sten'ka Razin inspired Pushkin's own songs about him (1826). In a letter to his brother (1824) he called him 'the only poetic figure in Russian history'.<sup>5</sup> The magnetic Emelyan Pugachov (1740?-75), who led a massive peasant revolt against Catherine the Great, dominates *The Captain's Daughter*. These rebellions were popular,



not directed by another class. Smaller peasant revolts were innumerable during the entire period of serfdom. Where the Decembrists wished to import Western constitutional models into Russia, Pushkin delved ever more deeply into Russian history to seek political answers for his own time. On the eve of the Decembrist revolt he completed his Shakespearean drama *Boris Godunov*, set in the so-called Time of Troubles (1604–13), the interregnum between the Riurik and the Romanov dynasties. Here the people, who take centre stage, appear by turn passive, fickle, savage, murderous and finally mortified by the assassination of the deceased Boris's family, to which they have been party. Their horrified silence at the end, when asked by the Boyars to applaud yet another Pretender, passes judgement not only on their time, but on ruling-class manipulation in every age. The centrality of the people in *Boris Godunov* goes beyond any of Pushkin's Shakespearean models. But the play is Shakespearean in the sense that no one is the victor other than history. With this lesson in mind Pushkin writes to a friend, on hearing of the Decembrist defeat, that they should look upon it through Shakespearean eyes.

### 3

*Eugene Onegin* is certainly about the life of the nobility down to the niceties of Onegin's toiletry. But the popular element is very strong there and even decisive. Filipevna, based on Pushkin's nurse, is also storyteller to Tatiana, who is rooted in peasant superstition and the Russian countryside. Of course, she also reads French and English novels and writes Russian with extreme difficulty. Her declaration of love for Onegin has to be translated by Pushkin into Russian. Nevertheless, it is clear where her roots are when, as the Princess whom Onegin is courting in Chapter VIII, she repudiates the aristocratic flummery that surrounds her and expresses her

longing for the countryside and her nurse, now dead.

The language of the novel, although largely the idiom of the nobility, extends into popular speech, for which Pushkin was often taken to task at the time by conservative critics. Surpassing previous writers in this respect, Pushkin took his Russian directly from the streets, the market-places and the country estates. In *Onegin* he honours his Decembrist friend Pavel Katenin for translating Corneille's *Le Cid* (Chapter I, stanza 18). French neo-classicism and its heroic language were a model for the revolutionary nobility. Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, by contrast, abounds with ordinary speech, as does his historical novel *The Captain's Daughter*. 'Vulgar' expressions enter into the most intimate of Pushkin's lyrics. By and large, writers came from the gentry, that is the minor nobility, and shared on their estates a common culture with their serfs, as the Larin family does in *Onegin*, despite differences in status and education. The Larin family is not wealthy. It does not employ foreign tutors or governesses. The Westernized *Onegin*, by contrast, grows up, handed from one to another. Only the serf nurse looks after the two sisters.

As early as Chapter III of *Onegin* Pushkin announces that he might give up poetry for prose. At this moment in the story he is responding to the harmful effect of Western novels and tales upon Tatiana. In the place of these he proposes to write an idyllic novel about innocent love and the ancient ways of Russia, but does no such thing, instantly returning to his heroine's romantic agony. Towards the end of Chapter VI, as he contemplates his passing youth, he considers again the abandonment of poetry:

To Spartan prose the years are turning,  
Coquettish rhyme the years are spurning;  
And I – I with a sigh confess –  
I'm running after her much less.

The novel-in-verse, as Pushkin chose to call his poem, is a workshop out of which his later prose fiction emerges. His *Dedication* to his publisher, written after he had completed five chapters, pinpoints the character of his new work:

Accept these chapters and their rhymes,  
Half-comic and half-melancholic,  
Ideal and down-to-earth bucolic...  
The intellect's cold observations,  
The heart's impressions marked in tears.

Pushkin prefaced his first chapter, which he published on its own in 1825, with 'A Conversation Between a Bookseller and a Poet', in which the poet argues the rights of poetry against the requirements of the market. After a flood of Romantic protestation the poet suddenly accepts the bookseller's case, abandons his verse and negotiates the sale of his manuscript in three short sentences of prose: 'You're perfectly right. Here's my manuscript. Let's come to terms.'

What Pushkin calls his 'descent' to prose is, however, more than a matter of using ordinary language. The death of the poet Lensky in Chapter VI not only sounds the knell of Pushkin's youth, too, but questions the future of his own poetry in a world that kills imagination:

Let not a poet's soul be frozen,  
Made rough and hard, reduced to bone  
And finally be turned to stone  
In that benumbing world he goes in,  
In that intoxicating slough  
Where, friends, we bathe together now.

From now on the tone of the novel changes. Pushkin completed Chapter VI about four months after the five Decembrist leaders were hanged. Repeatedly, in his manuscripts he draws sketches of his friends on the gallows, in one case adding 'this might have been me'. In an omitted stanza he suggests that Lensky, too, had he lived, could have swung from the gallows like the Decembrist poet Ryleyev, who was also Pushkin's acquaintance. Pushkin's distancing from the Decembrists was part of his 'descent' to prose, yet the executions of his friends haunted him for the rest of his life as they do the pages of *Onegin*.

Chapters VII and VIII present a post-Decembrist world full of nonentities with the exception of his poet friend Vyazemsky, who comforts an unhappy Tatiana on her entry into the *monde* – the same Vyazemsky from whom the epigraph to Chapter I is taken. Both Tatiana and Onegin are hopelessly isolated in this new milieu despite the former's well-schooled endeavours to behave *comme il faut*, which, as she confesses to Onegin, are a pretence. The term 'prose' refers not only to language, but to the prosaic world of Russia at all its levels. In *Onegin* Pushkin turned this prose into a new kind of poetry.

Pushkin belongs to a European shift from poetry to prose that Edmund Wilson characterizes in his excellent essay 'In Honour of Pushkin' (1937):

It was as if in those generations where Byron, Shelley, Keats, Leopardi, and Poe were dead in their twenties or thirties or barely reached forty, where Coleridge and Wordsworth and Beddoes and Musset burned out while still alive, where Lermontov, like Pushkin, was killed in a duel, before he was twenty seven – it was as if in that great age of the bourgeois ascendancy – and even in still feudal Russia – it were impossible for a poet to survive.

He adds:

There was for the man of imagination and moral passion a basic maladjustment to society in which only the student of society – the social philosopher, the historian, the

novelist – could find himself and learn to function. And to deal with the affairs of society, he had to learn to speak its language, he had – as Goethe and Hugo did, as Pushkin did just before he died – to train himself to write in prose.<sup>6</sup>

A heroic age had come to an end that began with the French Revolution and of which the Decembrist revolt was Europe's last echo. In poems of 1821 and 1824 Pushkin mourned the death of the epoch's giants, Napoleon and Byron, despite his fluctuating attitudes to them. (*Onegin's* study is adorned with a portrait of Byron and a statuette of Napoleon.) Pushkin was already concerning himself with the role of prose in 1822, at the height of his Romantic period, a decade before he embarked on prose fiction, insisting on the need for 'precision and brevity', as well as 'thought and more thought'. While poetry, he acknowledged, was different, it, too, he declared, would benefit from 'a larger stock of ideas', adding: 'Our literature won't get very far on memories of vanished youth.'<sup>7</sup>

Pushkin is referring here to elegiac poetry, including his own, which prevailed in his day. *Onegin* is, of course, full of 'memories of vanished youth', largely in the digressions. An ironic seesaw turns between 'remembrance of things past' and the narrative demands of the present. Recidivist memories are quenched by a brisk couplet, allowing the story to continue, as in the 'little feet' digression from Chapter I:

Their charming words and glances cheat  
As surely as... their little feet.  
(Stanza 34)

Or a digressive stanza tunes back into the narrative, as when Pushkin, having mourned the absence of ballerinas he has known in the past, whisks his hero into the theatre of today:

My goddesses! Where now? Forsaken?  
Oh hearken to my call, I rue:  
Are you the same? Have others taken

Your place without replacing you?

---

When shall I listen to your chorus,  
Behold in soul-filled flight before us  
Russia's Terpsichore again?...

The house is full; the boxes brilliant...

(Chapter I, stanzas 19–20)

The digressions are slower in pace than the narrative, more insistent, impassioned, full of questions. The language is more archaic, more 'poetical'. Pushkin's narrative in general is precise, brief and straightforward. Rarely is a noun accompanied by more than one adjective. But Pushkin's recourse to the past is more than a question of 'vanished memories'. It is also an attachment to past values, traditions, institutions, sometimes ironically expressed, but not always. In a world dominated by Western fashions Pushkin likes to return to the 'good, old days'. He is constantly calling his generation 'light', that is, without depth, not rooted. The digressions refer either to the past or the future, to 'vanished memories' or future hopes. Tatiana and Onegin are likewise immersed in their past, while Lensky thinks only of a happy or heroic future. Nevertheless, the narrative takes place in the present, although told mostly in the past tense. Here is the real world which Pushkin describes with a mixture of realism and irony – from the benevolent evocations of country customs to the repugnant chatter of the *monde*. The most Romantic episode in the novel, Tatiana's dream, is firmly based in folklore. The digressions remain the locus of romanticism, but they are always tempered with irony, as in the examples given above, and they get fewer towards the end of the novel. Romanticism and realism contrast most starkly in the Narrative between Lensky's elegiac poem written on the eve of the duel and Pushkin's meticulous account of the duel itself. Where Lensky writes:

Whether I'm piercèd by an arrow

Or whether it should miss – all's well:

A predetermined hour will tell

If we're to wake or sleep tomorrow

(Chapter VI, stanza 21)

Pushkin describes, as if from a manual, the loading of pistols:

The pistols glistened; soon the mallets

Resoundingly on ramrods flicked,

Through cut-steel barrels went the bullets,

The cock has for the first time clicked.

(Chapter VI, stanza 29)

Irony bridges the several, often contradictory planes of the novel – linguistic, stylistic, cultural, social. There is scarcely anything in *Onegin*, from characters to environment, from convictions to sentiment, that is not touched by it. The one exception is Pushkin's description of nature. *Onegin* reflects a world in flux. Some commentators have compared his irony with that of the German Romantics. This is wrong. The latter conceived the world as an illusion to be ironically punctured, not in favour of the real world, but a primordial chaos. Postmodernists have interpreted Pushkin in a similar way. Like the Romantics, Pushkin uses irony to remove illusion, but this makes his fictional world more rather than less real, which is how it was taken to be by his contemporaries and the generations that followed them.

Of Lensky and Onegin, for example, Alexander Herzen, exiled revolutionary of the decade succeeding Pushkin, wrote:

Between these two types – between the dedicated enthusiast and poet and, on the other hand, the weary, embittered and useless man, between Lensky's grave and Onegin's boredom – stretched the deep and muddy river of civilized Russia, with its aristocrats, bureaucrats, officers, gendarmes, grand-dukes and emperor – a dumb and formless mass of baseness, obsequiousness, bestiality and envy, a formless mass which draws in and engulfs everything.<sup>8</sup>

Or, as Pushkin puts it, that 'slough/Where, friends, we bathe together now' (Chapter VI, stanza 46). I have already referred to Dostoyevsky's praise for Tatiana as the epitome of Russian womanhood.

Nevertheless, the characters are not of the kind we find in a realist prose novel. They are silhouettes. The encounters between Onegin and Tatiana are few, and the decisive ones are the responses to letters. There is a simple symmetry about their relationship: Tatiana falls in love with Onegin and is rejected; Onegin falls in love with her and is rejected. It is the symmetry of a mathematical equation or a chemical formula of the kind that Goethe pursues in his novel *The Elective Affinities* (1809). It gives the relationship between hero and heroine a spare objectivity that is consolidated by the central preoccupations of the novel – the nature of passion, romantic love, romantic literature, libertinage, marriage, the position of women, morality. Neither Onegin nor Tatiana develops slowly; they jump from situation to situation like film cuts. Pushkin agreed with his friend Katenin that the result of omitting the former Chapter VIII (Onegin's Journey) was to make 'the transition from Tatiana the provincial miss to Tatiana the grande dame... too unexpected and unexplained' (Foreword to Fragments of Onegin's Journey). But it is not just a question of excising a chapter. The characters are not the 'independent' actors of prose fiction. They are half-lyrical, half-novelistic. This is obvious in Chapter I, where Pushkin enters the story as Onegin's friend, sharing the same discontent. They cross one another's path twice again in the novel, in Onegin's Journey (stanza 10), when Onegin traverses the same route in the Caucasus that Pushkin had taken at the beginning of his exile, and in a variant, when they meet face to face in Odessa. Yet Pushkin is quick to disclaim identification with him. What we see in Chapter I is a fusion of poet and hero, followed by their parting, when Onegin is invited to



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