

Roses in the Snow: The Meaning of *Eugene Onegin*

When human actions are formed to make an art work, the form that is made can never be divorced from the human meanings, including the moral judgements, that are implicit whenever human beings act. (Wayne Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 397)

When one surveys the critical literature, some of it brilliant, which has been produced on *Onegin*, one is, ultimately, left dissatisfied. The levels of complexity of the work, its technical feats, its repleteness with literary allusion, and its ironies are so complex that any critic who feels that he has unravelled even some of them is likely to be seduced by a sense of achievement into not pursuing the final question of the meaning of the work. One is inclined to believe that this is not an accident. Because of its 'battle with the critics' mode, because of the careful veiling of detail about the author-narrator, because of the contradictory ironies which are made to resonate, it appears as if the author has deliberately - or perhaps because of the circumstances of the creation of *Onegin* - tried to defend himself against any ultimate judgment about the meaning of it all.

This is not to say that some have not ventured to express themselves on the subject. Among Western scholars, Shaw and Bayley have offered insightful interpretations that do attempt the problem of the overall meaning of the work. In Russian criticism, the attempts to tackle what appear to be central questions are few and far between: rather we find isolated modifications of the view in one aspect or another. Some examples stand out, however. We have seen, for example, the definition by Ivanov-Razumnik of the joyful, Mozartian tone of the work. There *is* indeed a delightful grace to the verse, to much of the structure, with its repetition of themes, its musicality, the fugue-like intonation of

the stanzas and the echoing of themes and motifs from place to place. The formal delight evoked by the poem is stressed, not surprisingly, by Nabokov: "This "classical" regularity of proportions is beautifully relieved by the "romantic" device of prolonging or replaying a structural theme in the chapter following the one introducing it" (Nabokov, I, 17). Yet such an 'aesthetic' response is too one-sided, too oriented towards the perfection of the formal categories, for us to accept it as the last - or the only - word.

Some attempts have been made to approach the problem of meaning through the categories of 'comedy' and 'tragedy.' There is in *Onegin* a deep melancholy that leads some to speak of tragedy. Others, e.g., Hoisington and Shklovskii, would see *Onegin* as a comic work. Chumakov tries to resolve the paradox by speaking of the double note of melancholy at the end of Chapter Eight, balanced by the joy of poetic return to the world of youth in Odessa in the Journey. His comment would appear to be as close to a definition of the tone as we could reasonably expect to get. Yet - it is only a definition of tone, which is to say that to accept it as all one can say on the subject is to beg a number of important questions which Pushkin's work poses directly or indirectly and which therefore deserve to be answered.

Perhaps one should begin by discussing the irony, since it is the directedness of it, and the bracketing-off of any characters and emotions that are proof against it, that may tell us where to seek the central kernel of positive experience. As Shaw points out, there are certain experiences which Pushkin recalls with enjoyment and which distinguish him from Onegin (who is the centre of the irony): the theatre, Italian music, the Russian countryside, the Russian language (albeit with a French accent). A good part of the aesthetic pleasure of reading *Onegin* derives from the description of these, but mostly it comes from the sheer joy of the Russian verse, its musicality and vitality, which tell us of them. The poem is the celebration of certain pleasures - not all, and not necessarily, Russian, we note - which are, for Pushkin, equated with or serve as metaphors for poetry. More than that, however, it is the power of poetry - to transfix, to compel, to recreate life in memory and imagination - that lies at the heart of the work. Pushkin makes it clear from the stanzas in Eight where Onegin is smitten by love for Tat'iana that for him poetry *is* morality, it is remorse, and it is the overcoming of the formal automatization of life. The ball, the duel, the seduction, the empty and malicious rituals by which humans control and destroy each other - these are the outward forms imposed on life which must be broken through if one is to be truly alive. Poetry is the force which can do this.

The dichotomy of imposed form and life is therefore something that is central to *Onegin*: whether it be in the prose/poetry opposition which I discussed above (in chapter two), or in the behaviour of Onegin with his reverses from natural behaviour to the automatic, or in Tat'iana at the end - loving one man, married to another. The dichotomy is made emblem in the contrast of red and white, flush and pallor, passion and chastity, warmth and cold, south and north, which runs through the work to such an extent that we must consider it a leitmotiv. Lenskii's blood in the snow is emblematic of life petrified-by death, the rose on a girl's cheek bitten by frost, Italy exiled to Russia, perhaps even the mix of African and Russian blood in Pushkin's veins.

Beyond these minor manifestations of the categories of opposites which inform *Onegin*, there is one figure who is Pushkin's inspiration in the work, namely Tat'iana (whose opposite is, of course, the eponymous hero). Tat'iana is the personification of the poetic for Pushkin: closely related to the muse-figure, she is Russia, she is constancy, she is the nymph of the birch forests and the lakes. The real drama of the poem is, I would suggest, not Onegin's and Tat'iana's love for each other, but Pushkin's love for Tat'iana - a secret, undemanding love, nurtured from afar. It is Tat'iana who is his 'true ideal.' She overcomes the corrosive negativeness of Onegin and triumphs, although that triumph is a pyrrhic one, for her relationship to it at the end is the analogue of the opposition of Pushkin's poetry and the demonic keeping it at bay but far from vanquished.

In addition, Tat'iana is the antidote for Pushkin to the visions of the faithless female, the Helen, the adultress whose waywardness destroys her husband. Pushkin, we recall, was switching roles precisely at the time when the last chapter was being written - from young philanderer and seducer of other people's wives to the husband of the beautiful young Natal'ia Goncharova and potential cuckold. Tat'iana is an attempt to realize in concrete form the ideal of womanhood - an ideal in whose existence Pushkin had to believe if he were to survive. Yet Pushkin is curiously reticent about Tat'iana. As I have said, she is an ideal whom he admires from afar, and becomes, after all, the wife of N, not of the poet. The career of Prince N, likewise, is very different from that of the poet and is treated half-ironically, half-enviously as the paradigm of success. The final situation of N and Tat'iana suggests the isolation and exclusion of the poet (and, we might add, of his creation Onegin) - an isolation which is made only more profound by the mention of missing friends.

Ultimately, if one leaves aside the ephemeral pleasures of friendship, wine, the opera, and the theatre, the poet appears as a figure for whom

existential happiness is unattainable save in his poetry. The message of the poem is a pessimistic one: love, that chimaera of the poet's world, is in reality either impossible or at best brings not fulfilment but unhappiness. The poetry that makes life so meaningful for Pushkin is likewise that which separates him from so much of it. It is Tat'iana who manages the impossible - to survive in society and yet retain her soul, a feat which seems beyond the poet in a world he so clearly detests. Here the figure of Tat'iana seems to be 'wish fulfilment' on the part of the poet; that is to say, the imposition of an ideal on a less than happy reality. Is such a purity as hers really possible - or desirable? Is it truly possible for Tat'iana to remain free of all the corruptions that surround her? In my reading the Tat'iana of Chapter Eight remains the Madonna, the angel of Pushkin's lyrical symbolism, and the enigmatic qualities that permit her to exist at all in the novel are never really motivated.

A remarkable aspect of *Onegin* is the fact that the poet has been able to weave his narrative out of something so insubstantial. If we were to resume the plot of the novel in a sentence, it would be: 'two people meet and nothing happens.' If we were to imagine ourselves into the position of an outside observer, a frequenter of society gatherings, perhaps, then we would know nothing at all of Onegin's encounters with Tat'iana. We would know that the beautiful Princess N had married, perhaps also that Onegin had killed someone in a duel over her sister, and we might even realize, if we were perspicacious, that Onegin was one of her many admirers. We would know nothing of the inner drama that takes place in the hearts of the two individuals. It is this inner drama, a drama in which nothing happens (but everything happens), that forms the stuff of the novelistic plot. The situation is more than a little reminiscent of David Lean's film *Brief Encounter*, which is equally a film about nothing. Where in the film the camera is the observer, registering the expression on the heroine's face as the express races past, so in *Onegin* Pushkin is our ghostly viewing-piece as he secretly admires her from afar. In this way Tat'iana serves as a metaphor for the intimacy of Pushkin's poetry - the simple external appearance belies the complex inner content. Among other things, the inner drama is suggestive of the poet's own rejection of the search for fame (*slava*) (which had been, we recall, the goal of Lenskii), in favour of a quasi-Horatian withdrawal.

On the question of death and life hereafter, Pushkin seems unequivocal- if we are to seek any fulfilment, then it must be in this world. The oblivion which swallows Lenskii (and which, the author tells us

in the last stanza of Eight, we must be ready to embrace without fear) is as total as that nothingness which surrounds the few sketchily drawn episodes of *Onegin*. The brevity and incompleteness of *Onegin* thus serve as a kind of metaphor for Pushkin's vision of human existence. Piety, when it exists, is a female quality which Tania finds in her nurse, but Pushkin insists on the importance of morality, which is 'in the nature of things' (to quote the epigraph) and is inherent in Pushkin's notion of the noble life. To ignore it is to court eternal confusion, the state in which Onegin is left at the end of Eight.

There remains the vexed question of the extent to which we may trace in *Onegin* Pushkin's political stance in the years after the Decembrist uprising. The contrast between public appearances and private emotions is clearly important here, but so is the attitude of Tat'iana towards Onegin at the end, for in her refusal of Onegin and her decision to remain faithful to her husband it is possible to read" as Belinskii did, a metaphor of the acceptance or acquiescence by Pushkin in the political realities of Russia under Nicholas I. Such an interpretation has not been current in Soviet criticism since the publication of the number of *Literary Heritage* (*Literaturnoe nasledstvo*) devoted to Pushkin, in 1934. Public acquiescence by Pushkin, private sympathies with the Decembrists, but a view that all that is past, and moreover, that to revolt against authority - symbolized here, as Belinskii thought, by the institution of marriage - is immoral, a quasi-Napoleonic act of selfaggrandizement: all these can be traced in *Onegin* and serve to shape its final outcome in Chapter Eight. Pushkin was the scion of a declining family of nobility, a man poised between his impatience with the regime and the petty humiliations that it inflicted upon him as a writer and a person, and his patriotic feelings towards his country. Pushkin does not find, and does not offer, a solution to these contradictions. They are enshrined in the final scene between Onegin and Tat'iana: the predicament of the demon in love with the angel. No outcome is possible. The demon is petrified into immobility. Similarly, the Pushkin of the 1830s was an individual petrified by the contradictions of his social and existential circumstances, contradictions that proved unresolvable by any other outcome than death. I would argue that we must read *On egin* , like a lyrical poem, as a sort of map of Pushkin's existential predicament, and, beyond tl).at, as a symbolic representation of the dilemma of his whole class - forced to acquiesce in a system to which they owed their privileges yet which exacted a heavy price for them in terms of the abasement of that individualism and self-assertion which they imbibed from Western European culture.

This ideological clash, between the individualistic values of bourgeois Europe, with its stress on personal happiness and the right of the individual to fulfilment, and the traditional, autocratic, collectivist values of Russia runs through every page of *Onegin*. Pushkin is forced to live the paradox of trying to describe and measure his native land with the values and yardsticks of Western Europe. It is this paradox that explains the bizarre, hybrid genre of *Onegin* - a genre expressive of Pushkin's position between two cultures. Pushkin's own ambivalence towards Western European values - seduced by them, yet tugged by atavistic instincts back towards a grudging acceptance of Russian realities - is perhaps his most Russian attribute. In his dilemma Russians recognize their own position in the half-way house between European individualism and Russian (or should one say 'Asiatic?') collectivism and authoritarianism. Significantly, for Pushkin the final choice falls, reluctantly, on the latter.

In this sense *Onegin* can be seen as the first statement in a vast cultural effort on the part of nineteenth-century Russia to understand and assimilate the values of Western European individualism (just as Russian society in the second half of the century attempted to adopt capitalism). The rejection by Tat'iana of Onegin can thus be read in a much wider sense as a metaphor for the ultimate rejection by Russia of those values in favour of a return to the authoritarian, collectivist model. Although clearly the claims made by Grigor'ev and Dostoevskii for Pushkin as a prophet and visionary are far-fetched, it seems to me that in *Onegin* Pushkin, with his poet's instinct, catches and expresses the nature of Russia's love/hate relationship with Western values which led, in the fullness of time, to their rejection in the October revolution.

This is not to say, of course, that Pushkin was a revolutionary - on the contrary, for Pushkin the notion of revolution, symbolized by the figure of Napoleon, is consciously rejected (just as the historical Napoleon was made unwelcome by Moscow). The autocratic regime with which he was forced to come to terms was a reactionary one that derived its support from the nobility, of which Pushkin was, after all, a proud member. The regime that was created in October 1917 was equally autocratic and in many ways reactionary, and had a collectivist base too (i.e., it, like the tsarist regime that preceded it, was hostile to the notions of the primacy of the individual before the state), but its power base was that other enemy of middle-class, bourgeois values (and of capitalism), the working classes. The October revolution signalled the end of the attempt by Russia to adopt the Western model (which went as far as a half-hearted attempt at parliamentary democ

racy after 1905). These bourgeois, Western institutions were swept away with the Russian middle class when Russia reverted to her atavistic structures and values.

We can reproach Pushkin for not having offered a more satisfactory ending to *Onegin*, but we must realize that to do so would have meant finding a way for himself and those like him out of the impasse in which they found themselves. Pushkin's solution, as it is sketched in *Onegin*, is not revolution, an option which, as I have tried to show in my analysis of the poetic semantics, is rejected, but a retreat into a personal, private world of poetry and memory. Such a retreat is balanced by the poet's pride in rejecting the possibility of a toothless and undignified old age, which the poet rules out in favour of a speedy death. As a novel, *Onegin* clearly does not live up to the expectations of a reader weaned on Tolstoi and Dostoevskii, or Lawrence and Forster, for its presentation of the problems of life is not matched by the anticipated advancement of a solution. There is in Pushkin no Levin experiencing epiphanies as he contemplates the threats that nature presents to his young son. Indeed, for Pushkin, the younger generation serves, not as a symbol of hope, but as a challenge and a *memento mori*:

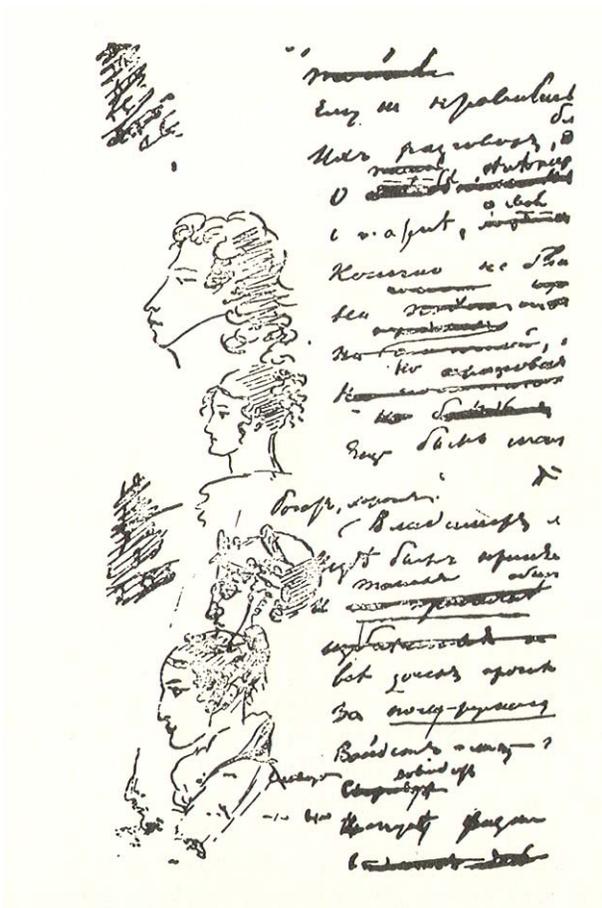
Pridet, pridet i nashe vremia,
I nashi vnuki v dobryi chas.
Iz mira vytesniat i nas!

*[Our time will come too, and one of these fine days our grandchildren
will push us out of the world too! (Two: XXXVIII: 12-14)]*

However much we try, it is difficult, if not impossible, to read into *Onegin* the social concerns and involvement of a Turgenev or a Tolstoi. Despite Bakhtin's assertion of the presence of a truly novelistic range of voices in *Onegin*, in fact the author's voice overrides all, and the 'dialogic' conflict of voices and ideologies which we can expect in a good Russian novel is present only in an embryonic way. Even the depiction of Russian reality in the poem, however well done, is mannered and personal, evoking Canaletto (or even, as Pushkin himself reminds us, Breughel) rather than Repin. As an 'encyclopedia of Russian life' it is simply deficient, as Nabokov has pointed out. We would do better to turn to the realists of a generation later for a believable evocation of the Russian landscape.

As a lyrical poem and an *apologia pro vita sua*, *Onegin* fares much

better, documenting the intimate life and cares of the poet Pushkin, hinting, also, at the life of the man himself, and serving as the vehicle for flights of Russian poetry that have remained unsurpassed. It is here, I believe, that we must seek the ultimate importance of the work, and the reason that it has succeeded in captivating and fascinating generations of Russian-speakers. As I have tried to show, it is in reading the work as poetry, as a piece whose structure is the analogue of a lyrical poem, that we can penetrate to the heart of it and grasp the uniqueness of a work which, despite its imperfections and contradictions, proved an extraordinary beginning to an extraordinary literary century.



Pushkin (top) and two female acquaintances. Drawing by Pushkin on the manuscript of Two: XI-XII. 1823