

## **Ice and Flame': Aleksandr Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin***

In the canon of Russian literature, few works have been as controversial, or as influential, as Pushkin's novel in verse, *Eugene Onegin*. Its critical history mirrors the changes in Russian political culture since its publication in 1833. Clayton traces that history and offers a new reading.

Nineteenth-century critics of *Eugene Onegin* saw it solely as a novel, and recognized its programmatic function in the creation of the Russian realistic novel. It was only in the 1920s that the Formalists perceived the ambiguous nature of the work, as poem/novel and identified the metaliterary concerns that make *Onegin* the forerunner of Modernism. Later, Stalinist criticism brought a stultifying return to the realist view that had prevailed in the nineteenth century, but Soviet criticism after 1953 has produced a new and vigorous debate.

This new reading offered by Clayton encompasses all the contradictory features of form and content that have preoccupied successive schools of critical thought. He identifies a principle of 'flawed beauty' as central to an interpretation of the form, and examines the major characters of *Onegin* within this context. He explores the lyric burden of what is ultimately a profoundly moral work, in which the many opposites in the text are characteristic of Pushkin's poetic semantics.

Clayton concludes that *Eugene Onegin* is the first great work of Russian literature in which the moral values differ significantly from Western models; its moral sense, like its critical history, is uniquely Russian.

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# *Ice and Flame*

Aleksand Pushkin's  
*Eugene Onegin*

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Volna i kamen', Stikhi i proza, led i  
plamen' Ne stol' razlichny mezh soboi.

[Wave and stone, verse and prose, ice and flame are not  
as different from each other.]

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## Preface

In this study I have used transliteration system II as described in J. Thomas Shaw, *The Transliteration of Modern Russian for English Language Publications* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967). Quotations from *Eugene Onegin* are marked in the following way: chapter written out, stanza in roman numerals, and line references in arabic, e.g., One: LX: 5-6. All quotations from Pushkin's oeuvre are taken from the 'Jubilee' edition A.S. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v shestnadtsati tomakh* (Moscow-Leningrad: AN SSSR, 1937-49), which is designated PSS. Quotations from Pushkin's letters are from Shaw's translation: A.S. Pushkin, *The Letters of Alexander Pushkin*, three volumes in one, translated with preface, introduction and notes by J. Thomas Shaw (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967). All other translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. Another source to which frequent reference is made is Nabokov's translation and commentary: *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse by Aleksandr Pushkin*, translated from the Russian, with a commentary, by Vladimir Nabokov, revised edition in four volumes (Princeton University Press, 1975; Bollingen Series LXXII). This is referred to simply as 'Nabokov.' Notes in parentheses in the text refer to the bibliography, which is organized according to the author-date system. I would like to thank the editors of *Canadian Slavonic Papers* and the *Russian Language Journal*, for their kind permission to quote extensively from two of my articles on *Onegin* published in their journals (198Gb and 1981).

# Introduction

If there is one work which has above all others the key role in the formation of Russian literature as we know it, then it is surely Aleksandr Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. In it the reader recognizes for the first time in the evolution of the literature those features which were to typify the Russian novel. It contains, quintessentially, the whole of Turgenev and Tolstoi within itself, like a DNA molecule. What is more, Russians have generally recognized Pushkin as the greatest poet and even the greatest writer their country has produced, an accolade which is by no means inconsiderable. In Russia a vast amount of scholarship has been devoted to the researching and analysis of Pushkin's work, his life, and his role in the development of Russian literature. This effort continues undiminished today.

This may be surprising to the Western reader who, although he has heard of Pushkin, is generally unlikely to have read much of his work, and may be disinclined to consider him on the same level as Tolstoi or Dostoevskii. It is more so when one realizes to what extent he is an exception in Russian literature. This difference is widely commented upon, but perhaps never better expressed than in the words of Iurii Zhivago:

What I have come to like best in the whole of Russian literature is the childlike Russian quality of Pushkin and Chekhov, their shy unconcern with such high-sounding matters as the ultimate purpose of mankind or their own salvation. It isn't that they didn't think about these things, and to good effect, but that they always felt that such important matters were not for them. While Gogol, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky worried and looked for the meaning of life and prepared for death and drew up balance

sheets, these two were distracted, right up to the end of their lives, by the current, individual tasks imposed on them by their vocation as writers, and in the course of fulfilling their tasks they lived their lives, quietly, treating both their lives and their work as private, individual matters, of no concern to anyone else. And these individual things have since become of concern to all, their work has ripened of itself, like apples picked green from the trees, and has increasingly matured in sense and sweetness. (Pasternak 1958, 259)

While an English-speaking reader might be surprised at the solemn tone of the passage (which in itself seems very un-Pushkinian), it seems to me that the point of Zhivago's comment is undeniable: that Pushkin was able to endow the apparently trivial with extraordinary meaning; and that the nature of Pushkin's strength as a poet is very elusive. It is to be found in the laconicism, in the irony, in the value which his work acquires through the years - in spite of itself, almost.

It is this elusiveness that has led to Pushkin's being understood only imperfectly, or with difficulty. He himself was aware of the fact and shuddered to think of the critical fate which his works would receive at the hands of the 'ignoramus' (*nevezhda*) or the 'fool' (*glupets*), to use his own terms from 'The monument' ('Pamiatnik'). Intimate, personal, elusive, Pushkin is, to quote a cliché that appears apt here, a 'poet's poet,' appreciated most by the Pasternaks, the Mandel'shtams, and the Akhmatovas of this world. In the critical literature, which I survey in chapter one of this study, Pushkin has generally met with everything but understanding at the hands of his critics; his worst fears were justified. He quickly became an object of national veneration, an icon to be fought over, to be praised or blasphemed, but rarely to be understood. It is my central thesis in this book that what constitutes in one sense the importance of *Onegin* - its 'programmatically' function, which I described above - has led generations of critics to misapply to it the criteria of realist aesthetics, that is to say of Russian literature of a generation later. (It goes without saying that by 'realism' I understand the poetic which formed the Russian prose novel of the 1850s through the 1870s and which strove to invoke in the reader a willing suspension of disbelief and acceptance of the fictive reality as a 'reflection' of the real world. I do not, therefore, use the term in the loose sense in which Soviet critics employ it to mean all works which have a mimetic basis, or even all works which they find ideologically acceptable.)

My own interpretation of *Onegin* fits into the process of rejecting the 'realist' reading which has gone on intermittently in Russia since the 1920s, and which has acquired a special vigour in the past two decades in the work of the Structuralists. It should therefore not be surprising to the reader if I borrow their insights and terminology at various points in my analysis. I aim, however, to go beyond them in striving to determine what *Onegin* can be seen to mean in the historicoliterary and personal-biographical circumstances of its creation.

This is still a slightly unusual undertaking in the English-speaking world, where the tendency has been very much to read *Onegin* in the tradition of the Russian realist novel, the thing we 'know best' (a tendency which is no doubt reinforced by the strong tradition of the realist novel in British and American literature). This a posteriori imposition of the poetics of the realist novel is clear even in the latest translation of the work into English (by Charles Johnston), from which *Onegin's* Journey is totally omitted. Recent Soviet critics have echoed Tynianov's persuasive argument that the Journey forms a true coda to the work. It is a view that I share and which I shall elaborate in the following study. Clearly, to omit it totally is to deform the text in a very important way. This 'realist' bias in the view of the work is reinforced by John Bayley's introduction to the translation, which, while containing very useful insights, still manages to talk about the work very much as a novel in which we are totally absorbed in the fates of the characters.

If one reads *Onegin* with the expectations of the realistic novel in mind, one is likely to end up puzzled or even find one's expectations of that genre unmet and reject the work in toto. This was the logical conclusion to which the nineteenth-century Russian critic Pisarev came, in a rare moment of outspoken iconoclasm. In a sense he was right in dismissing *Onegin* - right, that is, according to his lights. If the objections which Pisarev had to the work are to be answered, then we must find an interpretation which does justice to both aspects of the work - the poem and the novel- and which permits us to account for the importance the work has been recognized to have by the vast majority of Russian and foreign critics. An attempt must be made to deal with more than technical aspects of the text. This is my intention in this book.

This book has been written with more than a narrow spectrum of specialists in mind. I assume that the reader is familiar with the text of *Onegin*, whether in translation (preferably that of Nabokov, if only for the wealth of background given in the commentary) or in the original,

and has, in addition, some background in nineteenth-century Russian literature. Quotations are given in the original Russian with my own prose translations beneath to serve as a crib. Titles and quotations from Russian critics are translated with the original Russian given in parentheses if necessary. I have tended to quote more at length from recent Soviet critical commentary on *Onegin*, since it is precisely that which is likely to be unfamiliar even to some working in Russian literature, and therefore of the most interest.

The book which follows is the product of some five years of intermittent research. I am all too aware of certain inconsistencies and changes in opinion which I have undergone in the course of thinking about *Onegin*, and hope that these are not too evident in the final result. The reader will find six chapters of unequal length. The first, and longest, is devoted to the evolution of criticism on *Onegin*. Subsequent chapters are devoted to aspects of the work that seemed important for the illustration of the central thesis of the book. I am aware that in choosing to focus on certain topics I have neglected others the analysis of the poetry being one, and the history of the writing another. However, these questions are adequately covered by others, and it did not seem useful to go over ground which they had already covered so well.

Finally, I would like to express my thanks to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (formerly the Canada Council) for the generous grants which have made it possible for me to undertake this research, to the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ottawa for the time and facilities, and to my colleagues Z. Folejewski, J. Thomas Shaw, Henry W. Sullivan, and Andrew Donskov, whose advice and support I have found invaluable. I would like to record my gratitude to my assistants Madeleine Guerin, John Kwak, Caroline Lussier, and Phil Houston for help with various stages, and also offer special thanks to Mr Doug Geddie and the staff of the Office of External Relations at Brock University for kindly letting me use their wordprocessor for the final revision of the text. Most of all this work stands as a monument to the patience and encouragement of my wife and family, to whom the volume is dedicated.

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