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Eugenii Onegin

Pushkin's masterpiece *Eugenii Onegin* (1823–30) is universally recognised as the starting point of the classic nineteenth-century Russian novel, and has challenged generations of readers and critics. The period of writing *Eugenii Onegin* spanned an amazing epoch in the poet's creativity, and, as the leading nineteenth-century Russian critic Vissarion Belinsky aptly remarked, 'to evaluate this work is to evaluate the poet himself in the full range of his literary endeavours'.¹ The first impression *Eugenii Onegin* gives is of striking simplicity and disarming transparency – with its minimalist plot, formal elegance and economy and crystalline purity of language. Closer analysis reveals ever-new depths of philosophical, psychological and literary meaning, characteristic not only of great poetry but stemming from the work's radically innovative narrative structure. In its self-conscious play with narrative form and fictionality, *Eugenii Onegin* joins the novelistic tradition of Cervantes, Diderot and Sterne, while expanding the potential of mock-epic and burlesque poetry.

Outdoing Byron

A useful starting-point for approaching Pushkin's innovation is its acknowledged debt to, and differences from, Byron's 'novels in verse'. Like *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*, *Eugenii Onegin* was written in numbered verse stanzas for which Pushkin devised a variant of the sonnet, in fourteen iambic tetrameter lines, that has become known as the 'Onegin stanza' (on which see the Appendix);² the novel was published in chapters that appeared irregularly over many years, with no ostensible end point envisaged; and featured a loose framework associated with the adventures of an eponymous hero that allowed the poet to incorporate disparate material (literary, historical, cultural and quasi-autobiographical). From chapter 1 to the 'Fragments of *Onegin's Journey*' appended to the final eight-chapter version, Pushkin's protagonist appears 'Childe-Harold-like' (I.38, VIII.24) – that is, as a type

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whose (in Byron's words) 'early perversion of mind and morals leads to satiety of past pleasures and disappointment in new ones'.³ Pushkin's crucial move was to take what was a generally acknowledged weakness in Byron and turn it to his own productive advantage. In deciding to discontinue *Childe Harold*, Byron publicly admitted that he had failed to draw a clear distinction between himself and his fictional protagonist.⁴ In *Evgenii Onegin*, Pushkin directly confronts this key problem of Romantic poetics, bringing these two aspects of authorial self into self-conscious dialogue. Pushkin's brilliance lies in playing them off one another, demonstrating the fundamental interdependence of art and life, 'literariness' and 'reality'. *Evgenii Onegin* thus marks a quantum leap in Russian literature, from the earlier century's mistrust of 'fiction' to a new conception of art. Pushkin offers a profound meditation on the ways in which cultural models (especially novels) shape modern identity.

The two realities

The interplay between art and life in *Evgenii Onegin* begins with the opening lines. Sub-textual reference veils caustic irony when Onegin refers to his uncle as a man 'of most honest principles', undercutting the ostensible praise by echoing Ivan Krylov's fable about an 'ass of most honest principles', who, despite good intentions, tramples his master's vegetable garden and gets a thrashing.⁵ There are also more obvious meta-literary jokes, like the burlesque invocation of Zeus (suggesting Onegin as an epic hero) and the apology for skipping a formal epic introduction (postponed until the end of chapter 7). At the same time, two opposing ontological realities here come into play – that of the narrator, who in chapter 1 appears as a character, calling Onegin 'my good friend', and that of *Evgenii Onegin's* creator, who stands outside the text and refers to 'the hero of my novel'.

The complexity of the narration also reflects the problem facing its narratees, *Onegin's* readers, who appear as an explicit presence ('Onegin, my good friend / Was born on the banks of the Neva / Where perhaps you too were born / Or flourished, my reader', I.2).⁶ From the outset, *Evgenii Onegin* sets extremely high expectations of its readers. It is assumed that they will get the joke when Evgenii makes his reference to Krylov's ass, that they are familiar with the problem of Byron's authorial persona, as well as a plethora of other literary, cultural and historical information. The great number of more or less hidden literary references and echoes continue to be uncovered and explored. The many blank stanzas where no text is given but the stanza number is retained serve as a purposeful 'minus device', also challenging the reader to 'fill in the blanks'. In some cases, these omitted

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stanzas were published separately, constituting a kind of ‘penumbral text’ beyond the published version; in some cases they were simply cut out; and in some probably never written; these marked excisions may serve various purposes, depending on context, but in general stress the open, unfinished, fragmented nature of the work.⁷

Evgenii Onegin does not merely imply the existence of an ‘ideal reader’ (that is, one able to fully appreciate authorial intention), but incorporates its own sliding scale of good and bad imagined readers. The scholar Sona Hoisington describes this as its ‘hierarchy of narratees’ who are treated with differing degrees of irony, including parodic ‘mock readers’, that is, readers whose misreadings are anticipated. The main groups of readers addressed in *Evgenii Onegin* are the poet’s ‘friends’ and the novel’s ‘readers’. This suggests the contrast between the work’s ‘two realities’ but does not neatly accord to them. Gauging the distance between ‘ideal’ and ‘mock’ readers addressed in *Evgenii Onegin*, like triangulating the gaps in the narrator’s multiple perspective, presents a fundamental challenge for us as readers. The judgement of ‘readers’ is generally treated with condescending irony, but while that of ‘friends’, who represent Pushkin’s coterie of fellow-poets, is often privileged, they too are mocked at times. While some critics chart a movement toward ‘stable irony’,⁸ others have stressed *Evgenii Onegin* as an ‘essentially open dialogue . . . designed to exemplify a deep suspicion of all “statements” about the world – including its own.’⁹

From its opening stanzas, *Onegin* also calls upon the reader’s familiarity with Pushkin’s literary and public image. One is expected to understand the difference between Pushkin, mentioned as author of *Ruslan and Liudmila* who fictively befriended Onegin during the 1819–20 season in St Petersburg (the time described in chapter 1), and Pushkin the author who began *Evgenii Onegin* while in exile in the south of Russia. Furthermore, since Pushkin makes his created hero three to four years older than he is, it turns out that the Pushkin at the time of writing (1823) is at the same age as Onegin at the time recalled and depicted (1819–20), thus emphasising his own inner evolution and measuring it against that of his protagonist. While *Evgenii Onegin*’s ‘two realities’ may ultimately come together when we consider the characters as functions of the poet’s self, it is incorrect to insist on the primacy of either aspect taken separately.

This chronological divergence in narrative perspective generates the novel’s dialectical perspective on the problem of Byronic disillusionment.¹⁰ I shall apply in my discussion the three stages of the author-narrator’s development as established by J. Thomas Shaw. Stage one encompasses an initial period of youthful enchantment. Stage two is a phase of crisis. The final and third part is the synthetic stage of ‘mature re-enchantment’. Chapter 1

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establishes the pattern: the narrator's joyful optimism and subsequent Childe-Harold-esque alienation are revisited from a subsequent 'mature' vantage point. This defines the narrator's retrospective position as a poet and man of experience, and within the world of the characters marks the stages of their progress (or failure to progress) towards mature self-consciousness. The open, dialectical quality of the narrative consciousness thus spills over into the characters. It accounts for what Roman Jakobson has referred to as *Evgenii Onegin's* 'elastically polysemantic' character, that has led historically to diametrically opposed interpretations of both author-image and protagonists.¹¹

The fissure in the 'Byronic' narrator-protagonist had far-reaching consequences for all aspects of *Evgenii Onegin*, and is reflected in the fundamental open-endedness of its larger structure. The work was written over the course of seven years (1823–30), ten if we include the minor changes to the first full edition, and it was published in separate bound chapters over a similar span (1825–32). The action takes place over the course of five and a half years and is continuous except for the two-year gap between chapters 7 and 8 (the hiatus for Onegin's journey and Tatiana's move to Moscow and marriage).¹² The narrator-creator keeps evolving, responding to changes outside the text, and meditating on earlier aspects of his self and his creation. The serialisation of the novel at irregular intervals served to emphasise the openness of its structure, without foreseeable end, all the more so as the narrative incorporated the changing circumstances of its own production. If the first chapters recreate a relatively optimistic period of the poet's life before exile, the generally darker tone of the later chapters may be seen in the context of Pushkin's problematic attempts to come to terms with Nicholas's new and oppressive regime. The period of writing *Evgenii Onegin* also witnessed a major shift in the poet's critical standing, including a progressively more negative reception of the novel itself. Pushkin lamented the lack of decent literary criticism in Russia, and in *Evgenii Onegin* he compensated by offering a running commentary on the problem of its own reception – with critics and journalists being perhaps the bottom rung of the 'hierarchy of narratees'.

Genre and narrative

Evgenii Onegin's close attention to changing social, cultural and historical realities (from ballet and folklore to food and philosophy) have led critics ever since Belinsky to remark on its character as an 'encyclopedia of Russian life' and 'an historical novel'. Paradoxically, *Evgenii Onegin* is an historical novel by virtue of its vital connection to the open-ended present, whose 'historical' character is most clearly marked in the realm of changing fashions. This

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paradox of transforming chaotic, unfinalised reality into historical narrative was one which Tolstoy directly confronted in *War and Peace* (1865–68). Yet however much Tolstoy might rework the Napoleonic narrative, the basic outcome was predetermined, and in this sense Pushkin's narrative experiment was far more open-ended and radical.

Evgenii Onegin foregrounds its ostensible lack of plan and the ad hoc process of its creation:

I've thought about the form of my plan
And what I'll name the hero;
Meantime I have finished
The first chapter of my novel;
I've looked it over scrupulously:
There are very many contradictions,
But I don't want to fix them.

(I.60.1–7)

The evolving 'form of the plan' is one of the clearest signs of *Evgenii Onegin's* open-ended structure. The narrator-creator unapologetically challenges us here with what critics call *Evgenii Onegin's* oxymoronic 'principle of contradictions'. The 'contradictions' do not highlight the artificiality of conventions in order to deny them in favour of 'reality', as some (most notably the influential Russian critic Iurii Lotman) have argued, but rather underscore the inevitability of mediation: 'reality' is always filtered through culture, convention, language, and it is the understanding of this necessary limitation that enables the poet's creative manipulations. In any case, *Evgenii Onegin's* specific 'form of the plan' changed at least three times during the course of its writing and publication, from a projected two parts in twelve chapters, to nine chapters with a tripartite structure, and finally, to eight chapters, with the decision to destroy the (later very partially deciphered) politically sensitive – and unpublishable – 'chapter 10'.¹³ The fact that the larger plan could change without destroying the integrity of the whole is another indication of *Evgenii Onegin's* organic, dialectical structure.

Evgenii Onegin's hybrid status as a 'novel in verse' may also be seen as a consequence of its break from a 'Byronic' type of lyrical narrative. According to the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, the novel is an 'anti-genre' in relationship to the classical Aristotelian hierarchy of fixed lyric genres, which it both recycles (or 'cannabilises') and subverts (or 'carnivalises'). True to this description, *Evgenii Onegin* absorbs and parodically reworks a panoply of literary discourses, both those of specific poetic genres (elegy, love lyric, epigram, friendly epistle, ode) and those of particular novelistic prose traditions. While the first hundred years of Pushkin criticism treated *Evgenii Onegin*

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primarily as a novel merely *written* in verse, since the Formalist critics in the 1920's, and especially in the last decade, commentators have insisted on the fact that it is a novel *in verse*, a work of poetry, and have redefined Pushkin's 'novel in verse' as a dialectical blending of the two. Pushkin himself famously commented apropos *Evgenii Onegin* that there is 'the devil of a difference' between a novel and a novel in verse,¹⁴ but the precise bounds between novelistic (or prosaic) and lyric (poetic) principles remain slippery.

Stanzas 57–60 at the end of chapter 1 may be seen as a contrast between these two kinds of narrative. They follow a forceful rejection of the idea that Evgenii is a veiled self-portrait of the author – 'as in Byron' – and juxtapose the way 'all poets' operate to the narrator's own unique creative process. Love leads not to the spontaneous 'sacred frenzy' of creation but to silence ('I in love was deaf and dumb'); 'freedom' and the 'union of magical sounds, feelings and thoughts' – mature re-enchanted poetry – only appear afterward, after the storm of passion has passed. Narratives of the *Childe Harold* type, in which the authorial and fictional voice are one, may thus be equated to that of lyric poetry as a whole (especially love poetry), while the self-conscious writing of a novel in verse involves a fundamental break from the monological lyric persona where a single authoritative voice maintains control. This opens up space for a new, 'novelistic' discourse, which Bakhtin defined as dialogic and multi-voiced.¹⁵

Characters and traditions

Evgenii Onegin's characters are also 'novelised'. They fluctuate within *Evgenii Onegin*'s 'two realities', appearing to possess a fundamental verisimilitude while also serving as literary devices and reflections of dialectically evolving authorial consciousness. In sharp contrast to the canonical 'realist' novel that offers detailed context for a character's behaviour, thus circumscribing the reader's ability or need to make independent judgements, *Evgenii Onegin* is open, fragmented, leaving much for the reader to 'fill in'. The openness of the author-narrator's position and his evolving retrospective point of view determine the various shades of his irony that frame the fictional protagonists, who are situated at various stages in their own dialectic of self-consciousness. Character emerges through the interplay of 'lyric' and 'novelistic' perspectives that allow different degrees of self-revelation.¹⁶

Like the plot, the characters in *Evgenii Onegin* seem archetypal in their simplicity, but on more serious consideration challenge us with profound, perhaps irreducible, ambiguities and complexity. Broadly speaking, *Evgenii Onegin*'s three main protagonists represent the three main novelistic

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traditions of the day, English, German and French, that are presented consecutively in the first three chapters.¹⁷ Evgenii, of course, assumes the mantle of the English Byronic protagonist, but also incorporates traits from the Gothic horror novel ('the British muse's eerie ravings', III.12, for example, J. W. Polidori's *The Vampire* and C. R. Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*) and the (French) psychological novel, especially Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe*.¹⁸ Vladimir Lenskii is 'impregnated to the core / With Göttingen and Kantian lore' (II.6),¹⁹ in other words, with German pre-Romantic and Romantic idealism. As a novelistic hero, his main source is Goethe, while his poetry echoes Schiller's elegiac mode.²⁰ Tatiana Larina – 'in her hand a book from France' (VIII.5) – adopts sentimental epistolary novels as her own, those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Mme de Staël and Samuel Richardson.²¹ As even this brief listing suggests, these three 'representative' traditions demand qualification. There are in fact numerous border-crossings among them, and a host of secondary cultural and literary cross-references. The challenge for Pushkin in creating a 'Russian novel' is mirrored for the characters of *Evgenii Onegin* in their need to pick and choose from among the styles, languages and roles that modern life offers and to negotiate a cultural identity that best 'translates' their individual needs. Conflicts emerge when the cultural and novelistic conventions that the characters adopt impinge on the fulfilment of their desires. This is a dynamic process, full of potential for self-discovery and realisation as well as the danger of miscarriage.

The duel is arguably the main action of *Evgenii Onegin*, and leads to a crisis for each of the main characters, paralleled by the author-narrator's own evolution. The narrator marks the decisive exchange between Lenskii and Onegin at Tatiana's name-day party (V.40) by forswearing digressions, associated with his happy-go-lucky, stage-one self. Similarly, in the next chapter he accompanies Lenskii's death with meditations on growing old and the denial of 'wild [*shal'naia*] rhyme' in favour of 'solemn prose' (VI.43). The duel highlights the basic conflict between Lenskii and Onegin as fundamentally opposite types, Lenskii in the naive enchantment of stage one, and Onegin mired in Byron's 'bleak egoism' of stage two (III.11). However, even 'ice and flame, verse and prose' turn out to be 'not so different among themselves' (II.13), and the duel suggests both characters' limitations as well as potential for change. Each plays out the problematic limitation of the monological 'Byronic' narrative situation, Lenskii following the model of 'all poets', without critical distance from his own overly ecstatic self-expression, and Onegin his Childe-Harold-esque inverse – suffering from a lack of self-perspective due to hypertrophied cynicism. Onegin is trapped by the demon of irony, while Lenskii uncritically defines himself by the fixed clichés of his 'obscure and flaccid' 'Romantic' poetry, its inflexibility – as in Olga's case – marked by

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being ‘always like this’ (II.6, I.20). Lenskii’s unhappy fate in *Evgenii Onegin* may then be ascribed to the immaturity of his self-consciousness as reflected in his poetry. A crucial moment comes the night before the duel when he visits Olga. He realises that his doubts about her that sparked the duel are groundless, and is ready to speak out, but he ‘can’t find the words’ (VI.14). His anguished state is not communicated because ‘he who is pampered by the muse / is always like that’. His poetic persona turns out to be a fatal obstacle to self-expression.

The duel is also a vivid example of the way in which the ‘open’ structure allows for multiple possible outcomes. Many factors might have prevented the duel (VI.18): had Lenskii been a better poet; had he known about Onegin and Tatiana’s affair; had Lenskii told Olga about his quarrel; had Onegin mentioned it to anyone; or had Tatiana found out – any of these might have prevented the disaster. Nanny alone had the opportunity to figure things out and take action (often the function of servant-confidantes in literature!), but chance had it that she was too old and farcically obtuse (compare III.19). Other circumstances also gravitate toward a bloody outcome. Lenskii’s second, Zaretskii, is ‘a duelling hawk’, and as critics have noted, he repeatedly violates or manipulates the rules: he fails to urge reconciliation when delivering the challenge and at the duel itself, and ignores Onegin’s own breaches of etiquette (coming late, bringing his servant as second). Such factors suggest other potential results, what G. S. Morson has labelled as novelistic ‘sideshadowing’, that are also depicted in the several counterfactual scenarios offered had Lenskii not died (VI.36–40).²² The alternatives are gauged both in terms of ‘the world of the novel’ and as corresponding to various readers’ expectations. (Might the crisis of the duel have spurred Lenskii to true poetic greatness, or would he have abandoned the muse and sunk into domestic mediocrity?)

Onegin’s crisis in *Evgenii Onegin* plays out as a conflict between the frigid egoism of his assumed ‘Byronic’ self and his potential for change. While Onegin is described from the start as *not a poet* (I.7, I.43), his advice to Lenskii that ‘If I were a poet like you / I would have chosen the other one’ (III.5) (that is, Tatiana) indicates a poetic intuition superior to that of Lenskii that suggests the potential to break out of his dead-end consciousness. This potential is also suggested by Onegin’s relatively gentle spurning of Tatiana, when he felt ‘long silenced feelings’ newly awakened (IV.11–12). Nevertheless, Onegin gives Tatiana the logical arguments that refute the assertions he makes in their final meeting about his regained ability to love. Throughout, Onegin never completely accords with his Byron-esque (or any other) role – which may be appropriate insofar as stage two dictates scepticism towards *all* roles. He is only ever described as being ‘like’ (*kak*) a hero from Byron, a

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dandy, etc., and possible alternative definitions of him come with a question mark or a 'perhaps'.

Onegin's provocation of Lenskii marks his failure to achieve an alternative selfhood. When he takes misplaced revenge upon Lenskii at the ball for his embarrassment over spurning Tatiana, Onegin follows the pathological pattern of 'Byronic' behaviour anatomised in the French psychological novel, most notably *Adolphe*. Similarly, Onegin's participation in the duel despite pangs of conscience (VI.9–11) marks his failure to throw off the Byronic mask. Still, it would be unfair to charge Onegin with cold-blooded murder unless we presume a moral objection to duels per se (as in Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison*). As Tatiana learns, Onegin is 'no Grandison' (III.10), but neither does he violate the code of honour. Onegin's duelling, like his deliberate insult to Lenskii in the first place, represents an extension of his cold uncaring 'Byronic' self, a 'correct' pose that becomes uncomfortably constraining. Both Lenskii and Onegin are coerced by the harsh code of 'false shame' imposed by duelling (VI.28), yet Onegin clearly shoulders the burden of responsibility. His very violations of etiquette, that might conceivably be taken as resistance to the duel, turn into fresh insult under Zaretskii's malevolent tutelage. Zaretskii here functions as Onegin's evil double, a personification of 'the tyranny of convention' whose yoke Onegin fails to shed.

Tatiana: 'love by the book'

Both Onegin and Tatiana undergo journeys of self-discovery, neither of which reaches full resolution. Onegin's killing of his friend sends him off on his 'aimless wanderings' in Europe (VIII.13). Tatiana is the most complex of the three major protagonists. Like Lenskii, she begins in naive enchantment (in effect, Shaw's stage one), and her interest in sentimental fiction likewise counterpoints Onegin's disillusion. If Onegin's behaviour in the duel reveals his failure to free himself from his social role, Tatiana's failure to win Onegin with her letter may be ascribed to unawareness about the conventional nature of her own behaviour.²³ Tatiana's love letter, one of four inserted verse texts not in the Onegin stanza,²⁴ is dictated by her reading of French epistolary novels ('love by the book', see also II.29, III.9–11), yet reveals her as a genuine stage one lyric poet. Although she adopts the role of novelistic heroines like Rousseau's Julie de Wolmar, Richardson's Clarissa Harlowe or de Staël's Delphine, this is 'love without art' (*ona liubit bez iskusstva*) springing from her spontaneous inner need, and likened to a seed germinating in spring (III.9). Like Lenskii and 'all poets', she speaks directly from her heart, but unlike Lenskii's poetry, the author-narrator presents Tatiana's outpourings without irony, reverently offering his 'weak translation' of Tatiana's

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original French. Nevertheless, the irony here is multiple. There is the paradox of Tatiana's having unconsciously 'borrowed' her words – and the very idea of sending such a letter – from sentimental novels, and the author's apology for the fact that she wrote in French (since her written Russian was poor). These are set against the achievement of her 'artless art', and against the parallel feat of the author-creator, who describes what is generally acknowledged as the greatest example of love poetry in Russian as a weak paraphrase of Tatiana's French. Tatiana's authenticity of expression, despite its 'borrowed' foreign literary form, is thus identified with the narrator's genius in naturalising French amatory discourse into an expression of 'authentic' Russianness. This is consistent with other details that, alone among the major characters, closely associate Tatiana – 'Russian in her soul' (V.4.1) – with traditional folk traditions.²⁵

Tatiana's path to understanding is hard-fought. Reacting to Onegin's rejection, Tatiana may be said to take several journeys: her dream in chapter 5, which reveals her own erotic desire and Onegin's violent capacity; the visit of this 'young pilgrim' (VII.20) to Onegin's library in chapter 7; and her trip to Moscow and married life. Her dream offers the most privileged view of any character, and may be read both as Tatiana's unconscious reprocessing of the letter and Onegin's refusal, as well as a prophetic warning of the duel to come. Onegin appears in the dream not as the virtuous hero of a sentimental novel as Tatiana had earlier imagined him, but as ringleader of a band of grotesque, monstrous creatures, as both a predator and object of desire. The dream enacts sexual confrontations in several forms (crossing the stream, being chased and carried by the bear, being laid down on the bench) and envisions Onegin's attraction and repulsion, power and violence. It has been mined for its Russian folkloric material and its psychoanalytical symbolism, both of which offer suggestive clues about Pushkin's – and his heroine's – sexual identity.²⁶

Tatiana's search for answers to Onegin's rejection and Lenskii's death leads her to Onegin's library in chapter 7, where new knowledge appropriately comes in the form of reading novels (VII.21–25). Two statuettes preside over Onegin's library – Lord Byron and Napoleon, that serve as embodiments of those two or three 'Byronic' novels that reveal the true nature of Onegin's behaviour. Tatiana realises that she had 'misread' Onegin – he was 'not a Grandison' but in a class with these far less trustworthy protagonists who personify 'contemporary man . . . with his immoral soul' and 'malicious mind'. Onegin's association with Napoleon adds a further layer of cultural resonance to Tatiana's trip to Moscow, the place where destructive Napoleonic egoism (compare II.14) will seek sanction but again face harsh rebuff (VII.37).

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Tatiana's road to self-consciousness thus entails becoming a critical reader. Nevertheless, her discovery remains relative (she understood *more clearly*, VII.24), and her revelations remain in an interrogatory mode:

Sad and dangerous eccentric,
Creation of heaven or hell,
This angel, this arrogant demon,
Which is it? Is he really an imitation,
A paltry phantom, or also
A Muscovite in Harold's cloak,
Interpretation of foreign whims,
A complete lexicon of fashionable words?
Is he then but a parody? . . .

Has she solved the riddle?
Has *the word* been found?

(VII.24–25.1–2)

The issue of his character is thus posed in terms of novels (how is one to 'read' him?) and the problem of his authenticity as a man is posed in terms of language: how to 'translate' words and cultural types into selfhood. In this case, translation means an 'imitation' of something ephemeral, a meaningless assemblage or parody of empty labels ('a complete lexicon of fashionable words'). Similar questions are posed by the public that greets Onegin after his return from his travels in chapter 8, questioning whether or not this is the same Onegin of old or in 'yet another faddish mask' (VIII.7–8). The passage ends, "Do you know him?" "Yes and no", and the answer to this question – key for *Evgenii Onegin's* conclusion – is left to readers, who may ponder the frustratingly perfect Pushkinian ambiguity.

Conclusions and culminations

While the change in Onegin's character remains a question, Tatiana's dramatic transformation as revealed in chapter 8 is both a culminating moment of her trajectory and a key to the author-narrator's development. This is the point where *Evgenii Onegin's* 'two realities' explicitly come together. The opening stanzas (VIII.1–6) give a short history of Pushkin's development as a poet described in terms of the metamorphoses of his Muse, from the one who 'revealed a feast of youthful pranks' in school years; to 'the young Bacchante' who inspired his 'Anacreontic' poetry, named after the lyric poet of classical Greece (this is the Muse of his boisterous life described in chapter 1); to the one who inspired the arch-Romantic heroines of his 'southern' poems. Then:

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Suddenly everything was transformed
And she appeared here in my garden
A provincial maiden
With a sad look in her eyes
With a little French book in her hand.

And now for the first time
I am bringing my Muse to a society rout.

(VIII.5.11-14-6.1-2)

Tatiana is thus revealed as the personification of mature Pushkinian poetry. As William Todd has argued, Tatiana's new position as salon hostess and social 'legislatrix' (VIII.28) in chapter 8 represents 'the highest form of creativity open to a woman at this time':

The author-narrator underscores the parallels between her creation and his by applying similar epithets to them – 'unforced' and 'free'. And just as Pushkin realises his freedom to play with literary conventions within one of the most intricate stanza forms in Russian poetry, Tatiana achieves her greatest level of creativity within the sphere of high society, with all of its norms, patterns, and potentially corrupting fashions.²⁷

Tatiana's special status defies simple description, and is given primarily in negative terms, as the antithesis of everything 'vulgar':

Not cold, not garrulous,
Without insolent gaze at anyone,
Without straining for success,
Without any of those little contortions,
Without affected mannerisms,
Everything was calm, simple in her,
She seemed a true copy
Du comme il faut (Shishkov, excuse me:
I don't know how to translate this.)

(VIII.14.6-14):

As with her letter, Tatiana here is able to unite self and self-expression, without any suggestion of imitateness. Earlier Tatiana embodies a spontaneous stage-one outpouring of emotion, paradoxically effecting a 'perfect translation' as ideal heroine of an epistolary novel. Here she personifies a dynamic synthesis, manifesting a mastery of many poses, discourses and conventions. In both cases she embodies an 'iconic', fully integrated self, paradoxically combining copy and authenticity (a 'true copy'), whose open-ended referent here is the universal yet indefinable 'comme il faut'. It has been observed that Tatiana can only be described by this kind of 'fundamentally untranslatable

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foreign concept', which alone can suggest her essential self – as opposed to Onegin, for whom foreign guises turn parodic.²⁸ Tatiana has mastered the distance between convention and self, sign and signifier, having both 'deeply assumed her role' (VIII.28) and realised its empty, contingent nature (as a 'masquerade', VIII.46).

Confronting this dramatically transformed Tatiana is what sets off the potential change in Onegin, although there remains a fatal ambiguity in his newly discovered love for her. On the one hand, Tatiana has every right to suspect Onegin's motives, supposing that he wants to make a scandalous social conquest now that she has become a princess. She has come to 'read' him as a Byronic villain (VIII.44); even the author comments on the attractiveness of 'forbidden fruit' (VIII.27). However, this does not necessarily mean that Onegin's feelings are false, only that he has no way to validate them. His past behaviour offers little or no basis for trust, and his words prove incapable of conveying authenticity, whether for an actual lack of integrity, expressive incapacity, or both. Still, the Tatiana of whom Onegin now dreams is not 'the unapproachable goddess / Of the luxurious, royal Neva' (VIII.27) but the young maiden sitting at the window of her rural home (VIII.37), and his renewed capacity to love is linked to meditations on Lenskii's death (in his letter, VIII.37). Perhaps the strongest – but still ambiguous – indication of Onegin's change is the fact that he is on the verge of *becoming a poet* (VIII.38). Tatiana's letter, previously in the author-narrator's possession (III.31), now belongs to Onegin (VIII.20), which might suggest the merging of poet and pupil, author and creation. But this change also remains only a potential, and Onegin's new poetic inclinations are rather pathetic.

The action of *Evgenii Onegin* ends much as it began, *in medias res*, emphasising the arbitrariness and conventionality of all endings and beginnings. While the open-ended form of *Evgenii Onegin* left room for a continuation (about which Pushkin joked), both thematic and formal elements suggest closure. In terms of their relationship, Tatiana and Onegin have nowhere further to go. With Tatiana's rejection, Onegin seems to have met a fundamental impasse in his attempt to free himself from the burden of his past (Pushkin suggested that Onegin would have ended up a Decembrist, though this may have been part of an earlier discarded plan). Tatiana has also reached a plateau, reflecting a new-found apprehension of what she has lost and gained. She cherishes her past self (the innocent maiden in the country garden), and understands the limitations of her new role, but she has also reached a level of freedom. Like a third-stage poet – or, more accurately, the Muse of such a poet – she is able to creatively manipulate the conventions of her culture. She has made peace with the strict limitations of her position and perhaps stands as Pushkin's analogy for himself as he confronted the limitations of

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his life under Nicholas I. From this perspective, Tatiana's situation suggests both Pushkin's wishful thinking for his own eventual married life and a reflection on his thorny position as a writer. He felt increasingly constrained (in a 'female' position of subordination) by the oppressive post-Decembrist political atmosphere, yet took fierce pride in his spiritual independence as a poet. If Evgenii is left as if thunderstruck, 'plunged in a storm of emotions' without release, Tatiana makes a self-conscious withdrawal. Indeed, nineteenth-century social critics (Vissarion Belinsky, Nikolai Chernyshevskii and Dmitry Pisarev) found Tatiana's (Pushkin's) 'reconciliation with reality' unacceptable, and many subsequent novels – from Chernyshevskii's *What Is To Be Done?* (1863) to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1875–77) may be seen as offering alternatives or responses to her basic dilemma. Like the author-narrator in the final stanzas, her position suggests a mature 'elegiac' sense of the world, one of loss and lost possibility, but also of clear-sighted vision.²⁹ This vision approaches the tragic: a new level of understanding, but one that entails knowledge of inevitable age, loss and death. Together with the shedding of this naive, Romantic self, *Evgenii Onegin* thus traces its own formal and spiritual movement away from the enchantment of poetry toward 'the severity of prose'.

NOTES

- This chapter is indebted to the critical works listed in the Guide to further reading.
1. V. Belinskii, 'Eugene Onegin: an encyclopedia of Russian life', in Sonia Hoisington (ed. and trans.), *Russian Views of Pushkin's Eugene Onegin*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 17.
 2. For an introduction to the Onegin stanza, see A. Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, V. Nabokov (trans. and commentary), 4 vols., rev. edn., Princeton University Press, 1975, vol. i, pp. 9–15, and A. D. P. Briggs, *Alexander Pushkin: Eugene Onegin*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 8–27.
 3. 'Preface to chapters I–II', in *Byron*, ed. J. J. McGann, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 21.
 4. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
 5. Translations are my own, except where indicated. References in the text are to the standard edition by chapter, stanza, and line number.
 6. S. Hoisington, 'The hierarchy of narratees in *Evgenii Onegin*', in Pushkin, *Evgenii Onegin*, translated by W. Arndt, pp. lxiii–lxxv; Iu. M. Lotman, *Roman v stikhakh Pushkina 'Evgenii Onegin'*, Tartu, Tartuskii gosudarstvennyi universitet 1975, chap. 2–4, *passim*.
 7. Iu. Tynianov, 'On the composition of *Eugene Onegin*', in Hoisington (ed.), *Russian Views*, p. 77; on *Evgenii Onegin* as Romantic fragment, see M. Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion: Fragment, Elegy, Orient, Irony*, Stanford University Press, 1994, chap. 5.

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8. The term – like the notion of ‘implied reader’ – is from Wayne Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*, University of Chicago Press, 1974. For another view of irony in *Onegin*, see Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, chap. 5.
9. G. S. Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky’s Diary of a Writer and the Traditions of Literary Utopia*, Austin, TX, University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 143.
10. J. T. Shaw, ‘The problem of unity of the author-narrator’s stance in *Eugene Onegin*’, *Russian Language Journal* 120 (1981): 25–42.
11. R. Jakobson, ‘Marginal notes on *Evgenii Onegin*’, in Pushkin, *Evgenii Onegin*, translated by Arndt, p. xliii.
12. See J. D. Clayton, ‘Considerations sur la chronologie interne de “Evgenii Onegin”’, *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 21:4 (1979), 479–88.
13. In the final organisation, chapter 9 was transformed into the concluding chapter 8, and ‘Onegin’s Journey’ (the former chapter 8) was included in fragmentary form as an appendix. See I. M. D’iakonov, ‘O vos’moi, deviatoi i desiatoi glavakh “Evgeniia Onegina”’, *Russkaia literatura* 3 (1963), 37–61.
14. Letters to P. A. Viazemskii of 4 November 1823 and 13 December 1825.
15. M. Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in *Eugene Onegin*’, in Hoisington (ed.), *Russian Views*, pp. 115–21. See also S. Bocharov, ‘The stylistic world of the novel’, in Hoisington (ed.), *Russian Views*, pp. 122–68.
16. Craig Cravens, ‘Lyric and narrative consciousness in *Evgenii Onegin*’, *Slavic and East European Journal* 46:4 (2002), 683–710.
17. L. Shtil’man [Stilman], ‘Problema literaturnykh zhanrov i traditsii v “Evgenii Onegin” Pushkina’, in *American Contributions to the Fourth International Congress of Slavists*, ’s-Gravenhage, Mouton, 1958, pp. 321–67.
18. See Sonia Hoisington, ‘*Evgenii Onegin*: product of or challenge to *Adolphe*?’, *Comparative Literature Studies* 14 (1977), 205–13.
19. Arndt’s translation.
20. See Sonia Hoisington, ‘Parody in *Evgenii Onegin*: Lenskii’s lament’, *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 29:2–3 (1987), 266–78.
21. S. Mitchell, ‘Tatiana’s reading’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 4 (1968), 1–21.
22. G. S. Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: the Shadows of Time*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994.
23. M. Levitt, ‘The dance of love in Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* (the “Maiden’s Song”’, in J. T. Ryfa (ed.), *Collected Essays in Honor of the Bicentennial of Alexander S. Pushkin’s Birth*, Lewiston, Edwin Mellen, 2000, pp. 75–91.
24. The others are: the dedication; the Maiden’s Song; and Onegin’s letter.
25. This is also suggested by her surname ‘Larina’, associated with domesticity (*lares*). Onegin and Lenskii’s surnames may derive from bodies of water (Lake Onega, the Lena River), although Lenskii might also be associated with *len’* (laziness; compare his ‘flaccid’ verse) and Onegin with *nega* (languor), or, as Greenleaf suggests, negation (*o-ne* = ‘oh no!’).
26. Richard Gregg, ‘Tat’yana’s two dreams: the unwanted spouse and the demonic lover’, *Slavonic and East European Review* 48 (1970), 492–505; D. Rancour-Laferriere, ‘Pukin’s still unravished bride: a psychoanalytic study of Tat’jana’s dream’, *Russian Literature* 25:2 (1989), 215–58; and J. D. Clayton, ‘Towards a

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- feminist reading of *Evgenii Onegin*', *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 29:2-3 (1987), 255-65.
27. William Mills Todd III, *Fiction and Society in the Age of Pushkin: Ideology, Institutions, and Narrative*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1986, p. 327.
 28. Bocharov, 'Stylistic world', p. 153.
 29. O. P. Hasty has also noted how women writers from Pavlova to Tsvetaeva could also 'enlist Tatiana to champion female creativity' (*Pushkin's Tatiana*, University of Wisconsin, 1999, p. 13).