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Round Two: Nabokov versus Pushkin

EUGENE ONEGIN: A NOVEL IN VERSE. 4 vols. By *Aleksandr Pushkin*.
 Revised Edition. Translated and with a commentary by *Vladimir Nabokov*.
 Bollingen series, 72. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975 [1964].
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It should be said at the outset, and provocatively, that this translation of *Eugene Onegin* by one of the great literary craftsmen of our time is execrable. Worse than that, it is poor; and it is not Pushkin, whatever else it is. If it is true that poetry is what is left over after sense has been stated, then this "literal" translation systematically abandons poetry and does so on the basis of a shallow and spurious "theory" of translation stated by the author in his foreword to the first edition in 1964 and not deepened, during the interval, by any consideration of the extensive recent experimentation in the techniques of translation, or by any serious attention to linguistic problems. That his "literal" translation conveys no impression of the brilliant verbal choreography of the original was pointed out by many critics, including the present writer (see *Slavic Review*, December 1965), upon the appearance of the first edition in 1964. Walter Arndt, the author of a verse translation far superior to Nabokov's literal one—one which Nabokov savagely attacked "with a mixture of arrogance, cuteness, and occasional distortion" (and I might add competitive malice) and which he now venomously refers to as "a paraphrase, in burlesque English, with preposterous mistranslations, some of which I discussed in the *New York Review of Books*, April 30, 1964" (1975, 2:4)¹—Walter Arndt, I say, dealt briefly but acutely with the linguistic problem when he said: "After all there simply are no interlingually equivalent semantic units, regardless of the form of the discourse."² And Alexander Gerschenkron, who has written much the best critique of Nabokov's translation and commentary, argues cogently that what Nabokov calls the literal "truth of literature" relates at best to a single aspect "of that infinitely complex entity which is a work of poetic art."³ Roman Jakobson

1. References to Nabokov's four-volume translation and commentary will be given in parentheses in the text and will indicate the first edition (1964) and the revised edition (1975). Incidentally, Nabokov, the collector of nits in other men's work, has the date of that article correct here, but in his "Nabokov's Reply" (*Encounter*, February 1966) he gave it mistakenly as August 30, 1964 (p. 83)—"with what measure ye mete it shall be measured to you again."

The superiority of Arndt's translation is recognized by, among others, Alexander Gerschenkron, who argues persuasively that Arndt has managed to preserve Pushkin's rhyming system and meter while remaining close to the "sense" of the original ("A Manufactured Monument?," *Modern Philology*, May 1966, p. 341).

2. In "Goading the Pony," *New York Review of Books*, April 30, 1964, p. 16.
3. Gerschenkron, "A Manufactured Monument," p. 332.

has pointed out that “on the level of interlingual translation, there is ordinarily no full equivalence between code units. . . . The English word ‘cheese’ cannot be fully identified with its standard Russian heteronym ‘syr’ because cottage cheese is a cheese but not a ‘syr.’”⁴ Some semioticians maintain that each separate language is itself a “modelling system” which conditions a speaker’s view of the world. Moving from one such code to another would therefore be an immensely complicated process, not a simple “literal” step. I mention these matters in order to emphasize the complexity of the problem which Nabokov dismisses with his simplistic formulations (“only a literal translation is a translation at all”), while offering the casual back of his hand to anyone who disagrees with him on this subject. He says (1975, 1:xiii):

In an era of inept and ignorant imitations, whose piped-in background music has hypnotized innocent readers into fearing literality’s salutary jolts, some reviewers were upset by the humble fidelity of my version; the present improvements will exasperate them even more.

It was clearly the translator’s purpose to “exasperate us even more.” The version of 1964 was memorable for the fact that Nabokov, although he claimed to have sacrificed to his ideal of literalness “everything (elegance, euphony, clarity, good taste, modern usage, and even grammar),” was betrayed by his own long practice as a verbal conjurer and his deep instinct for poetry into occasional happy alliterations, many “modern” enjambments, not a few assonantal effects, occasional inversion of prosaic word order, some wonderfully inventive phrases, and a fairly steady iambic beat—in other words, verbal structures that, while not directly imitating Pushkin, did occasionally suggest the brilliance of the original. It’s true that such things were rare and that in the main Nabokov hewed to his “servile” line; the final effect of the translation even as originally done was a dull monotone. Nabokov now boasts that the revised version is even worse, and he is right.

What has happened, for instance, to the iambic measure? In the 1964 edition Nabokov wrote in his translator’s foreword: “I have sacrificed to completeness of meaning every formal element save the iambic rhythm: its retention assisted rather than hindered fidelity” (1964, 1:x). That passage itself has now undergone a significant revision: “I have sacrificed to completeness of meaning every formal element including the iambic rhythm, whenever its retention hindered fidelity” (1975, 1:x). As to the “greater number of enjambments,” which were a feature of the early version, Nabokov now says (1975, 1:xiii): “In correcting the verse [I set myself the task] to achieve a closer line by line fit (entailing a rigorous coincidence of enjambments and the elimination of verse transposal).” In other words, the enjambments contributed by Nabokov himself are religiously eliminated in the new version, the lines of which do very closely match Pushkin’s. Here are a few examples:

Chapter 1, stanza 1:

1964 edition: To others his example is a lesson;
 but good God what a bore to sit
 by a sick person day and night, not stirring
 a step away!

4. Roman Jakobson, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” in *On Translation*, ed. R. Brower (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), p. 233.

1975 revision: To others his example is a lesson;
 but good God what a bore
 to sit by a sick man both day and night,
 without moving a step away!

The enjambments not found in Pushkin's stanza have been eliminated, along with the alliterative force of the verb "stirring," which is replaced by the more humbly literal "moving . . . away" (*otkhodia*). And in stanza 2 the change from "by the most lofty will of Zeus / the heir of all his kin" to "the heir of all his relatives" provides an exact syllable by syllable fit to Pushkin's line.

In stanza 5 we observe how Nabokov flattens out the inadvertent poetry of his first effort in favor of the starkly literal: "hence in our midst it is not hard / thank God, to flaunt one's education" has become: "hence education, God be praised / is in our midst not hard to flaunt," which once again exactly fits the Pushkin line. And in the following lines another enjambment not to be found in Pushkin has been eliminated: "Onegin was in the opinion / of many (judges resolute and stern)" has become: "Onegin was in the opinion of many / (judges resolute and stern)." In stanza 7 Nabokov tortures English word order in order to fit his line neatly to Pushkin's:

Lacking the lofty passion
 not to spare life for the sake of sounds,
 an iamb from a trochee he could not—
 no matter how we strove—distinguish.

The English word order here is quite unnatural and is a travesty of the Russian text, where the final placement of the word "distinguish" is motivated by a neat rhyme (*shchadiť'—otlichit'*).

The final epigrammatic couplets that close each stanza in Pushkin's poem were usually flattened into prose in Nabokov's first version, but not all of them. Compare, for instance, the ending of stanza 11 as first offered: "and afterward, alone with her / amid the stillness give her lessons!" with the new version: "and afterward, alone with her / in the quietness give her lessons," in which Nabokov's first unmindful flash of poetry is disposed of by the not-so-humble "translator."

The examples I have given are all from the first chapter, but they are sufficient to illustrate the nature of the changes Nabokov has made in the translation. What can be said for the theory that motivates this product? Nabokov, not strong on theory and positively averse to ideas, simply states dogmatically that the only valid variety of translation he allows is the literal: "rendering, as closely as the associative and syntactical capacities of another language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original. Only this is true translation." We have already seen that Arndt, Gerschenkron, and others contest this position, I think successfully, but let's concede for the moment that Nabokov may have a point. Completely faithful translation of poetry from one language to another may indeed, as Nabokov actually implies, be impossible, since poetry is a linguistic artifact whose total effect is inseparable from the language in which it is originally written. It could be argued, then, that it is better not to attempt translation at all but simply to state soberly the meaning of each line, while supplying a commentary that suggests to the reader in his own idiom the poetry forever locked away from him in the forms of an alien tongue. This is the procedure that Nabokov has adopted, but to suggest that what he has produced is a translation, in fact the only possible translation (Nabokov), a "dazzling achievement" (Harrison Salisbury), "a version so sensitive that it becomes poetry in its own right" (John Bayley), verges on the absurd.

There is, of course, another way of looking at it, and probably the translator's "game" is deeper than we think. The metrical and rhyming complexities of *Onegin* or *Don Juan* are distinctly out of favor today, especially in America. An original poem written in the meter or rhyme scheme of either would sound hopelessly old-fashioned to an American ear, and probably could not find a publisher. This generation has become accustomed to hearing in poetry what Donald Davie has called the "ametrical sprawl." Heard in the environment of modern American poetry, Nabokov's metrically formless, unrhymed lines have seemed to many rather elegant in the contemporary manner; Arndt's more "humble" version, which attempts with some success to convey the poetic effect of Pushkin's lines, has on the other hand an old-fashioned ring (as it should have).

Nabokov has drained the poetry out of Pushkin's lines in his translation; he does allow it to reappear occasionally in the notes and commentary, but there it is evoked by him and under his total control. The path he has chosen is not "servile" at all, as he suggests, but involves the arrogant appropriation of Pushkin for Nabokov's own purposes. I doubt that the genre of his remarkable "Commentary," which takes up two of the four volumes, has yet been properly identified. I would suggest that it is a collage which can be read for itself alone with only occasional reference to Pushkin's poem (and read with pleasure). The tone and style, even at times the inflection of the author's voice, are suspiciously reminiscent of Dr. Kinbote in Nabokov's own *Pale Fire*, that "scholar" whose commentary reduces, embellishes, and interprets Professor Shade's poem according to the arbitrary needs of the commentator's own ego.

I have called Nabokov's commentary a collage, but this collage has a system of its own. A truly humble, really "servile" translation and commentary would, I should think, focus on the literary fact under consideration and, in a word, illuminate Pushkin's poem. But Nabokov's collage illuminates in the first instance Nabokov himself and whatever strikes Nabokov as interesting and piquant: his occasional offbeat excursions in literature and history; his amusement or scorn at earlier translators and commentators; his interest in butterflies (1975, 2:123); the fact (he says it is a fact) that "the cluster of four estates that figure in the poem is situated between parallels 56 and 57 (the latitude of Petersburg, Alaska)," a matter that ought to be of no interest to a critic who in other contexts denies any placement of the poem in the "real" world; various "idiot" mistakes by a wide range of people which Nabokov has spotted (*passim*); the exact names of Pushkin's own tutors both French and German: "Monfort (or Montfort, or Count de Montfort), Rousselot, and Chedel. He also had a Russian teacher with a German name, Schiller" (1975, 2:39), and, in this vein, mimicry ad nauseam of the pedantic scholiast; incidental curiosities; casual intelligence purely for fun; significantly personal notes like this one on Eugene's walks with his tutor in the *Letnii Sad*: "there, a hundred years later, I too was walked by a tutor" (1975, 2:41); original and creatively simple historical formulations: "Tsar Paul (who was strangled by a group of exasperated courtiers on a March night in 1801)" (1975, 2:43); a digression on Beau Brummel, apropos of Pushkin's use of the word "dandy" (in fact the digressive character of the commentary is itself a mimicry of Pushkin's poem); sweeping but whimsical historical judgments: "Chaadaev . . . found a cure for his spleen in the Roman Catholic Church" (1975, 2:46); amusingly contemptuous miniatures on revered classics: "insipid Virgil and his pale pederasts"; queer little footnotes like this one on Theocritus: "Victorian translators managed to expurgate, twist, or veil Theocritus in such a way as to conceal completely from gentle readers that lads rather than lassies were pursued by his pastoral characters" (1975, 2:55); tongue-in-cheek annotation of the obvious: ". . . Achilles (hero of Homer's *Iliad*)" (1975, 3:111). All this is mingled with frequent poetic annotation of Russian word and phrase in which Nabokov conveys with his own elegance and style some notion of Pushkin's

verbal magic. Nabokov's wide reading in English and French literature of the Romantic period enables him, moreover, to illuminate the poetic background of *Eugene Onegin*; he sees it, of course, not as an "encyclopedia of Russian life"—he insists in fact that it has little to do with any reality—but rather as a purely literary performance drawing heavily on both Russian and Western sources, a complex play with the tricks of poetic language, a pattern of allusions to all the books Pushkin knew (“[for him] life and library were one”). In a word, Nabokov re-creates Pushkin as an earlier Nabokov, one fully capable of “tomfooleries of genius,” with certain limitations, it is true (Pushkin knew almost no English and his French was stilted), but still great. Even very great.