Translator's Preface

Six Words Go Out, Six Others Come Back

MY UNCLEar, awkward, ski-jump start will, in the end, be resolved and cleared up, and will (I can hope!) even coax a quick smile. But for now, well... Onward, onward, speeds my story — a strange one, perhaps, but then, so are many.

We may as well begin on a blustery October eve, as my stalwart buddy Greg Huber and I are trudging westward, straight into the biting wind, along Saint Petersburg's Petrovskaya Embankment; with us is a young Russian acquaintance, Natasha, a friend of a friend of Greg's, whom we've met only once before. She is about 21, bright, open, and pretty, and has told us she teaches English to children in a small school in town. As we walk, with the sun still bouncing a few feeble rays off clouds in the west, night seems reluctant to take over from the purplish dusk. All three of us suddenly shiver as a specially sharp gust comes whipping through, and I turn to Natasha and utter a few words that have just popped into my head: *Vot séver, túchi nagonyáya, dokhnúl, zavýl* ("Here's the north, clouds a-chasing; it blew, it howled"). She flicks me a little smile and throws in a few words of her own: *I vot samá idyót volshébnitsa zimá* ("And here comes winter herself, the sorceress").

I'm pleased, but this is a mundane event, so mundane that I let it pass without a word. We cross the Troitskii Bridge, turn right, pass the imposing Admiralty, find our restaurant as night settles, and at dinner talk, laugh, talk. But for some reason, over the next few days, this symmetric little exchange — six words sent out, six words received — keeps reverberating in my mind, and slowly it dawns on me that what transpired that blustery purple evening — and precisely *because* it was so ordinary, so mundane — was in fact an extraordinary, magical event, filled with hidden meaning.

The words I had spoken, though they'd popped spontaneously into my head at that moment, were not of my own invention: my command of Russian is, so sad to say, not nearly that good. They were lifted from a sonnet written by Alexander Pushkin in the late 1820's — line 12 and half of line 13 of the sonnet, to be specific. Nor were Natasha's words invented by her, for they were the remainder of line 13, plus the sonnet's concluding line. Here are those lines, as they appear in the poem:

Вот север, тучи нагоняя,
Дохнул, завыл — и вот сама
Идёт волшебница зима.

And so Natasha and I had swapped successive pieces of a poem with each other. That's cute, but what's so extraordinary in it? Indeed, the truth of the matter is that when I threw my six words

at her, I was almost *expecting* something of the sort. What I was thinking was roughly this: "Russians know their Pushkin; here's a snippet of Pushkin that describes this scene right now; she'll of course recognize these words, and she'll like the fact that an American knows them." And my hunch was right; accordingly, I was not astonished, just pleased, whence the lack of comment.

What was it, then, that made my perception of this event flip so dramatically? In a word, it was its sheer randomness. Firstly, my six-word phrase was by no means the Russian counterpart of a famous opening nugget like "To be or not to be" or "Fourscore and seven years ago" — it lies buried inside the fairly arbitrary stanza 29 of Chapter VII of Pushkin's eight-chapter novel in verse *Eugene Onegin,* which consists of nearly 400 stanzas, almost all of them tetrameter sonnets in the purest of iambic meter. Secondly, Natasha was not a literary scholar, or even a student of Russian literature — she was a fairly typical product of the modern Russian educational system. And yet out of some 5,300 lines of *Eugene Onegin,* she had instantly and effortlessly recognized my few words — but not just that, without even blinking, she had instantly and effortlessly completed the stanza.

I knew well, from prior conversations with Russian friends, that many Russians know a great deal of *Eugene Onegin* by heart, and people had occasionally said to me, "I used to know it all, when I was in high school." At first I had been incredulous, and thought they must be pulling my leg. Even when I realized they were not joking, I was skeptical. How could anyone memorize 5,300 lines of poetry? I myself had never memorized more than about 100 lines of poetry — a long speech by Cyrano in Edmond Rostand's drama in verse *Cyrano de Bergerac,* when I was in high school — and doing that had felt like a huge *tour de force* to me.

Nonetheless, having heard so many similar claims, I had slowly come to believe that educated Russians were very familiar with a lot of this novel, and that's why I confidently quoted a few lines to Natasha. She, in turn, had confirmed my expectations. But what she did with such ease really made the Russian love for Pushkin's novel hit home, because the stanza I had quoted is neither central nor celebrated — it does not stand out from the whole in any way. In effect, I had closed my eyes, thrown a dart at the novel, and hit it in a random line, and then, without my intending it as such, that line had played the role of a spot-check of her knowledge, which she passed with flying colors. And in a certain sense, Natasha herself had been selected from the Russian population by the throw of another dart. The upshot was that a tiny exchange of twelve words constituted an amazing demonstration of just how profoundly Alexander Pushkin's novel in verse pervades the minds of his compatriots nearly 170 years after its completion.

An Opera or a Novel?

When, sometime in my dim past, I first heard the words "Eugene Onegin", it was as the title of a Tchaikovsky opera. The name "Alexander Pushkin" was nowhere in sight, nor was the idea of poetry. And in recent years I have found, over and over again, that my experience is pretty typical, outside of Russia. To the

average culturally-inclined adult in a western land such as ours, the two words "Eugene Onegin" (properly pronounced, by the way, "Onn-*yay*-ghin", so as to rhyme, approximately, with "Ron Reagan") tend to bring to mind an opera but little else, while the name "Pushkin" coaxes up a vaguish image of some nineteenth-century literary figure but seldom any specific work.

In Russia, by contrast, Pushkin is a universal hero — not the musty equivalent of Wordsworth or Longfellow, nor even of the bright star of Shakespeare; Pushkin is much closer to the common people than any of those. He is seen as the founder of Russian literature, as the prototypical symbol of Russia's cultural greatness, and as a vivid and lovable though flawed human being. To speak Pushkin's name is to evoke an aura inseparable from the beauty of the Russian language. Even nonintellectuals revere him and know some of his poems by heart. The closest counterpart that I can come up with is the role played by Frédéric Chopin in the hearts of Poles.

Of all of Pushkin's output, which is sizable despite his death in a senseless duel at 37, the most revered is without question this novel, *Eugene Onegin*. Although we outside of Russia tend to think of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* or Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as the top icons of Russian literature, within Russia *Eugene Onegin* knows no rival. Wherefore, then, the relatively low level of appreciation abroad? It's hard to say for sure, but one factor must be that *Eugene Onegin*, being as it is in verse, is considerably harder to translate into other languages than most novels are. Another factor might be the work's compactness — it is very slender. Perhaps another quality that makes this poetic novel seem strange or, well, *foreign* to some readers is its unprecedented manner of intermingling lightness and seriousness — that is, its uniquely contrapuntal character, on which I'll now say a little.

Those who have seen the Tchaikovsky opera will remember it as a lugubrious story of star-crossed lovers, of anger, jealousy, and tragic death. And yet, although that is indeed the "plot line" of the novel, it is but one facet of the work. What makes Pushkin's book so marvelously alluring is not its sad plot line (which is fine as far as it goes), but the way in which that line, like a single line in a piece by Bach, weaves its way in and out of the focus, yielding the floor to other lines of quite different character.

Above all, the novel's counterpoint involves an intricate, unpredictable bouncing back and forth between the characters in the story and Pushkin's own droll, sardonic observations about life, about himself, about poetry, about women's legs, about friendship, about wine, about truncated lives, about nature, about each of the seasons, about foreign words used in Russian, about hypocrisy, and on and on. All of this is executed in graceful, sparkling, yet mostly colloquial language that is nearly always pellucid to a native speaker of Russian, even today. Altogether, reading *Eugene Onegin* provides as tingling and keen a jolt to the lively mind as the stark Finnish habit of jumping back and forth between sauna and snowbank does to the healthy body.

Tchaikovsky's opera, whatever its merits as drama or music might be, conveys little if any of this exquisite polyphonic charm, since voices other than the plot are totally lacking. Moreover,

despite the fact that many stanzas from the original poem have been set to music, the linguistic charm is also largely missing. For nonspeakers of Russian, the reason is, of course, that the poetry is completely inaudible as such, even on a phonetic level — but this lack extends also to native speakers, oddly enough. It is hard to hear the arias' lyrics as verse, in part because, as any opera-goer knows, words, even when sung in one's own language, are often hard to make out, and in part because the natural poetic beat is overridden by the musical beat. And so... with the polyphony missing and the poetry missing, the opera is but the feeblest, faintest trace of the novel.

For the opera to have supplanted its sparkling source, in the eyes of the non-Russian world, as the chief referent of the term "Eugene Onegin" is, in my opinion, a sad development, and for that reason, I must say, it would be a source of great pleasure to me if the appearance of my "novel versification" of Pushkin's novel in verse in 1999, the poet's bicentennial year, contributed in some way to the reversal of this trend, and helped to restore the place of honor to *Eugene Onegin* the novel, as opposed to *Eugene Onegin* the opera.

A Nonspeaker of Russian Encounters *Eugene Onegin*

It will not have escaped notice of readers of this preface that on its first page, I commented that my spoken Russian is rather poor. How in the world, then, could I have even considered getting involved in such a project, let alone have had the hubris to think I could do a decent job of it? A good question, and the story is, I think, of some interest.

In 1986, I read the novel *The Golden Gate* by Vikram Seth, and was bowled over by its lilt and grace, as well as its plot and characterizations. Never had I imagined a novel in verse, and Seth's work impressed me enormously. I so much enjoyed it, in fact, that I wrote a letter to Seth and suggested we get together next time I was in his neck of the woods. Not too many weeks passed before we were sharing a leisurely Californian coffee, and in the course of our chat he pointed out something that somehow had failed to register on me in my first reading — namely, three stanzas in his Chapter 5 that explicitly declare that his inspiration had been British diplomat Charles Johnston's "luminous translation" into English of Pushkin's novel in verse. This was an eye-opener for me. I knew next to nothing about Pushkin or his works, but Seth, in a generous gesture, bought me a copy of the Johnston version of *Onegin,* and in so doing opened wide a gate through which I might easily pass into the golden land of Pushkin. And yet, though I peered through it, I did not walk through Seth's golden gate. Instead, I left Johnston sitting on my bookshelf for five or six years, utterly uncracked.

Then one day in late 1992, by lucky chance, I ran across another English *Onegin,* this one from the pen of James Falen, professor of Russian at the University of Tennessee. I riffled through it, and since, at least on the surface, it looked as if it

wasn't half-bad, I purchased it, more or less on a whim. Soon Falen's version was sitting right next to Johnston's on my dusty shelf, both of them now relegated to the same sad literary limbo.

But as the weeks passed, the lonely pair beckoned and nagged at me, and one day in the spring of 1993, knowing how my wife Carol and I got a kick out of reading to each other, I pulled them down and asked Carol what she thought of the idea of our reading them *both* out loud together. She was game, and thus began a little evening ritual in which, our children having been duly storied and cuddled and now drifting off into golden dreams, we would climb into our own bed, plump our pillows till they were right, and then plunge into our double-barreled *Onegin.* One of us would read a Falen stanza, then the other would read the "same" Johnston stanza, then we'd comment on them, after which we'd read the same stanzas out loud once more, make more comments, then move on to the next stanza.

In this plodding but pleasing manner, Carol and I got to know both translators' styles, got to know the structure and characters of *Eugene Onegin,* and got to know something of Alexander Pushkin, to boot. We even felt we could get a slight taste of the Russian poetry itself, for between the two translators' ways of phrasing things, details of the original in a certain sense showed through. Although we were impressed by both translators, we soon came to the mutual conclusion that Falen's translation, despite Seth's lavish praise for Johnston, was smoother, more graceful, and far clearer.

Some two years later — a nightmare period during which, out of the blue, Carol succumbed to an unsuspected brain cancer and our small family was turned upside down by the loss — I was slowly trying to regain some vague semblance of normalcy, and I recalled one special, though now most poignant, source of sanity: the joy of reading *Onegin.* I wondered what other translations might exist and how they might sound, so I went to the library and got a hold of several. A few were pretty wretched, but two of them seemed decent — one by Walter Arndt, and the other by Oliver Elton, later revised by A. D. P. Briggs. I carefully perused both of them, comparing stanza after stanza with those by Falen and Johnston, and in this manner came to have a clear sense for all four verse translations still in print. I still liked Falen's the best, but saw virtues in all of them. And at that point, I wrote a comparative review of the four translations for *The New York Times,* which subsequently, and greatly expanded, became two chapters of my book *Le Ton beau de Marot.*

In the spring semester of 1997, just as *Le Ton beau de Marot* was about to appear, I offered a seminar on verse translation at Indiana University, and among the many works we were looking at, *Eugene Onegin* — in these four highly diverse anglicizations — featured prominently. I felt the best way to compare the four approaches was to ask each student to concentrate on one stanza, studying it carefully in all four translations, making notes about prominent merits or defects, and then coming to class and performing the four rival stanzas out loud with as much skill as they could muster, after which a class-wide discussion would take place. I decided to focus on Chapter III, and from it selected a

section that included the most famous part of the novel — Tatyana's letter to Onegin. As a lark, I treated myself as a student along with the other dozen and, wearing that lowly hat, I was assigned by our demanding professor to discuss a series of twenty-five successive lines in the middle of Tatyana's letter (one of just three parts of the novel that are not in sonnet form).

As I was preparing my presentation, it occurred to me that my students, only one or two of whom knew any Russian, would probably benefit from hearing how at least a few lines sound in their original tongue, and so, having studied a little Russian some twenty-five years earlier, I got out my copy of the authentic text (which I had also purchased, just for fun) and sounded out the words in my portion very slowly. I found it rough going, and in quest of smoothness, I read this short section out loud to myself at least thirty times, and then contacted a Russian friend and asked her to critique me. It turned out I had a good long way to go in mastery of Russian phonetics, but Ariadna's careful coaching was of enormous help to me, and encouraged me to redouble my efforts at accuracy. And so I kept on reading my lines out loud over and over to myself, and after another thirty or forty readings, I realized they were getting pretty familiar. Of all things, could I perhaps *memorize* this stretch of Russian poetry? Well, why not? It seemed an odd thing to do, given my track record at poetry memorization, but it appealed to me.

Fascination Turns to Passion

How vividly I recalled a conversation in which Carol's and my old friend Marina had nonplussed us by nonchalantly remarking, "I used to know the whole book by heart — and so did many of my friends." In light of such heroic feats, it seemed to me only reasonable that I, too, should memorize at least a *little* of this novel. But how crazy, were I to follow that route, to be able to recite merely the middle third of Tatyana's letter! And so I bravely decided to expand my self-challenge to include all 79 lines of that celebrated epistle.

The long and the short of it is that within a couple of weeks, I finally got the whole letter under my belt, and my students were amused when I came to class and told them that that morning while in the shower, I'd repeated it to myself in eight minutes; then a couple of days later I proudly reported I'd got it down to four minutes; and the following week I finally attained my goal of three minutes. They thought my concern with speed was silly, but to me it was crucial that the lines flow extremely easily, which essentially required my being able to say them in my sleep.

Needless to say, all this was quite an odd twist in my growing involvement with *Eugene Onegin,* for heretofore I had dealt exclusively with various translations, while now I was dealing with the real McCoy. I decided that, as a kind of icing on the cake, I would also memorize the stanza that introduces Tatyana's letter, because it had always been a favorite. But truth to tell, I had lots of favorite stanzas, and so one little addition like this followed another, and pretty soon I had memorized stanzas scattered through all eight chapters, in total amounting to over twice the

length of Tatyana's letter. No doubt about it — I was hooked on this off-the-wall new mental sport.

Unfortunately, I was no great shakes at memorizing, and to get a stanza really ingrained in my memory so that I could recite it smoothly even when starting cold, I found I needed somewhere in the neighborhood of 300 to 400 mental rehearsals. To reach such large numbers, I found myself exploiting my twenty-minute showers, my three-mile runs, various and sundry car rides, plane rides, doctors' waiting rooms, children's soccer games, and so on — in short, any and every moment of spare time — in repeating one stanza or another to myself.

One of the weirder aspects of all this was that I was committing to memory dozens of lines in which one, two, or more words were completely novel to me. Although of course I looked each one up and knew its rough meaning, these words were nonetheless in some sense little more than rote sounds to me. But any time a word appeared in two or three different stanzas, in quite different contexts, it started picking up its own flavor and started being imbued with more of a true meaning. So through memorization, my vocabulary began growing, although not in anything like the order in which one acquires words in a class. Ironic though it seemed, here I was, cutting my Russian-language baby teeth on the most hallowed work of Russian literature!

In early September of 1997, six months or so into this odyssey, I had committed between thirty and forty stanzas to memory and was working on the first three stanzas of Chapter VII, which I found deeply moving, when one morning a friend happened to put on a recording of Ella Fitzgerald singing the melancholy song "Spring Is Here", by Rodgers and Hart. All at once, I was struck by a remarkable resonance between Pushkin's lines and Hart's lyrics, both in subject matter and in tone. Both poets were dealing with a spring whose return is anything but joyous, and I marveled at how an American popular song from the 1930's and some Russian sonnets from the 1820's could overlap so greatly.

Alone in the house that afternoon, I played the song again, and as Ella's mellifluous voice intoned the sad words in English, I recited stanzas VII.2 and VII.3 out loud in a deep, despairing voice, thus baldly superimposing male voice onto female, Russian poetry onto American song, the 1820's onto the 1930's, and "high culture" onto "pop culture". I found myself strangely moved by this stark juxtaposition, and as soon as the song was over, I played it again and recited the Pushkin again. I did this at least a dozen times before having to stop so I could pick up my kids at school.

That evening, so engrossed in those stanzas, I found myself wanting to "possess" them even more profoundly and personally, much as one wishes to possess a beloved as profoundly as possible, and the only more intimate kind of involvement I could imagine was to try translating them to my mother tongue — making them truly my own poetry. I still had no thought whatsoever of doing the whole book; I merely wanted to see if translating a few isolated stanzas was within my reach, or if I would make a fool of myself in trying. Although Falen's versions of these stanzas had touched me deeply when I'd read them, luckily his lines weren't so fresh in my mind as to crowd out my own ideas. This gave me hope that I

wouldn't have to constantly check my lines to make sure that I wasn't unconsciously rewriting Falen. Thus, in a daring mood, I simply closed my eyes and took the plunge with VII.1.

I found that it took me a couple of hours to get a first draft, and then I spent two or three further hours just making small adjustments here and there, in order to polish the result ever more. And so the next day, I had an Onegin stanza of my very own — and then, two days later, *mirabile dictu,* I had all three at the start of Chapter VII. And yet, somehow, I still did not see the handwriting on the wall.

The Crystalline Building Blocks of this Novel in Verse

Perhaps at this point an interlude is needed to explain the nature of the so-called "Onegin stanza", for without a crystal-clear understanding of its building blocks, one cannot fully appreciate the novel's artistry. Pushkin, influenced by Byron, decided to try his hand at writing a novel in verse, but he chose a very different structure in which to pack all his ideas. Basically, Pushkin's crystal vessel was a sonnet, but a very special form of sonnet. In the first place, each of its lines was composed in uncompromising iambic tetrameter — stresses falling always on even-numbered syllables. In the second place, all stanzas shared exactly the same rhyme scheme: ABAB, CCDD, EFFEGG. And thirdly — and this is the touch that, at least for me, really gives these stanzas their distinct flavor — he chose an elegant and catchy quasi-alternating pattern of *feminine* and *masculine* rhymes.

This distinction is not that well known in English, so I will explain it here. A masculine rhyme involves *one* stressed syllable at the end of each line, such as "turn" and "burn", whereas a feminine rhyme involves *two* syllables, the second of which is unstressed, as in "turning" and "burning". Note that in the example, the unstressed syllables, rather than rhyming with each other, are simply identical. Most feminine rhymes are that way: stressed syllables rhyme, unstressed syllables coincide. However, to my ear at least, it is also acceptable for the unstressed syllables to rhyme (an example of this sort that I use in Chapter VI is "rock's doze" and "cock's crows"). In any case, Pushkin decided that feminine rhymes would always occur on the A, C, and E lines of each stanza. Thus the fixed pattern of masculine lines and feminine lines is this: FMFM, FFMM, FMMFMM.

One of the effects of using feminine rhymes in iambic tetrameter is that each feminine line has nine syllables, all five of whose odd-numbered beats are unstressed, whereas masculine lines have just eight syllables, and just four unstressed beats. There is thus a slight metric irregularity to the Onegin stanza: 9898, 9988, 988988, to spell out the syllable-counts explicitly. This, to me, is the key to much of the charm of the Pushkinian crystal that pervades these pages.

Although my commas in the pattern "ABAB, CCDD, EFFEGG" seem to suggest that each stanza breaks up naturally into two quatrains and a sextet, this is not at all the case. Pushkin often

expresses ideas that do not break cleanly at quatrain boundaries, nor indeed, even at line boundaries. There are even cases where a sentence will start near the end of one stanza and jump right across into the next stanza.

Many commentators have pointed out that the first twelve lines of the Onegin stanza neatly display all three possible rhyme patterns for a quatrain — namely, ABAB (interleaved), CCDD (separated), and EFFE (sandwich-style) — and they are then complemented by a closing couplet, GG. But though many stanzas do end in couplets that have a "zinger" quality to them, having a stand-alóne couplet at the end is certainly not *de rigueur,* and indeed it would be most misleading to suggest that there is any fixed pattern at all of how semantic chunks are distributed among the fourteen lines. Quite to the contrary, Pushkin plays very free and easy with the flow of thoughts among his lines, and a great deal of the charm of his poetry emanates precisely from the manner in which unpredictability and irregularity coexist with an overarching, rigid formal structure.

The Handwriting on the Wall is Finally Seen

I'll pick up now on my personal saga. The memorizing continued apace throughout the fall of 1997, and several weeks later another stanza in Chapter VII took hold of me so strongly that I again felt the urge to try converting it to English. This time something utterly unexpected happened. I'd done what I thought was a fine job of anglicization and was admiring my own handiwork when my eye lit on a strange semi-pattern at the lines' beginnings: nine out of the fourteen capital letters were, for some odd reason, "T". I looked at those "T"'s and thought, "How curious! A pattern crying out for completion!"

Other people might perhaps not have reacted that way, but it seems to me that it's just a question of how one is tuned. Thus I find it hard to imagine *anyone* who, upon noticing that a sonnet just penned had all but *one* of its lines beginning with "T", would not feel at least a little tempted to try to make them *all* do so. What if all but *two* started with "T"? All but three? All but five? Different people will have different thresholds, and mine might be lower than some, but I daresay that virtually everyone would tilt in the direction I tilted in, provided the quasi-pattern were sufficiently blatant. In any case, my personal threshold had been easily met, and so I started dismantling and rebuilding lines that only moments earlier I'd been most pleased with.

It was with surprising ease that I got twelve out of the fourteen lines to start with "T", and then another half hour or so turned the trick of the remaining two, and *voilà* — an Onegin stanza had just been born whose left edge obeyed a tight visual constraint and whose right edge obeyed a tight sonic constraint (not to mention the rhythmic constraint that pervaded each line, from left edge to right). At first, I had mixed feelings about this extra level of pattern that I'd added, feeling that it might reek of exhibitionism, but one stark fact convinced me that I should leave it in the new form: the anglicized stanza had, beyond any shadow of a doubt, been *improved* by the pattern-inspired modifications!

At this point, I'd done four out of about 400 stanzas, but still wasn't dreaming of tackling the whole book. To be sure, some people would see the beckoning pattern already at just 4/400, while for others, it might require having completed 350/400 before it would occur to them that they might as well go for broke... I, in any case, didn't yet see my destiny looming between the lines of what I'd done so far.

Another couple of months passed, and my mind was getting ever more loaded with new stanzas. At Christmas vacation, my mother, my sister's family, and my children and I all went to Hawaii for ten days, and there I was once again overcome by the beauty of certain stanzas — this time the trio with which Chapter VI concludes — and was once again invaded by the irresistible desire to "possess" them via translation. I did the first two of them while there, and when we returned to the mainland, I noticed a blank book that I had been given several months earlier, sitting untouched in some random pile of papers and books. Staring at it, I was all of a sudden hit by the thought: "That blank book has about 400 pages; *Eugene Onegin* has about 400 stanzas. Just think: one stanza on each page!"

The thought seemed quite ridiculous: me, with such sparse knowledge of Russian, hoping to clamber up this formidable Everest of translation, a book often said to be next to untranslatable, and square at the center of the inner circle of Russian literature! Yet it couldn't be denied that I'd *already* done six stanzas and, by George, they weren't all that bad! Who says you need to be a fluent speaker of Russian? My mind toyed with this idea. How long would it take? How much of my life would I have to devote to this preposterous endeavor? Could I afford the time? Why on earth would I want to do such a thing?

But the answer to the last question was simple: *love, sheer love.* And indeed, that answer was enough to override all other doubts, and in no time flat I was riffling the pages of that heretofore totally boring blank book and envisioning some future day when each one of those white sheets would be covered with black ink, with good lines, bad lines, crossings-out galore — and there was my future, beckoning me, staring me in the face, pulling me forward. My fate was sealed.

Lolling in Bed Sweet Bed with My Sultry Feminine Rhymes

From this crazy challenge there was clearly going to emerge one goal that I had dreamt of for decades — namely, I was going to learn a *lot* of Russian. Since I'd already done four stanzas of Chapter VII, I decided, quite arbitrarily, that that chapter was where I would begin, and in early January, I plunged in with ardor. It so happened that during the previous months my mood had been slipping gradually down a long slope, and by early January, I was in a state of great agitation and sadness. Life seemed nearly devoid of joy, and all felt bleak — all, that is, but my little stanzas. But now that I'd decided to tackle the whole book, things started looking up enormously. I found new

strength and peace, even occasional exhilaration, when I was working on this task, and somehow *Eugene Onegin* pulled me right up out of one of my life's deepest pits.

Each morning, after getting my children up and off to school, I would return home and fix myself a cup of hazelnut coffee, pour some milk and a small boatload of sugar into it, carry it upstairs, and cozy up with the Russian text in bed — or as Carol used to call it, "bed sweet bed". At some point it crossed my mind that this cozy spot in which I was creating my own stanzas was exactly the spot where Carol and I had first read Johnston's and Falen's stanzas to each other with such delight, a realization that lent a double-edged poignancy to my toil.

Sipping my pseudo-coffee, I would start hunting for feminine rhymes to use in lines 1 and 3. It was always with a search for feminine rhymes that my work would have to start because, given how much more elusive they are than masculine rhymes, it's around their scaffolding that all else must be built. I'd think and think, pause for a little drink, think and think some more, now and then scribble down a list of potential rhymes or rough synonyms, and then, every so often, some exquisite feminine rhyme would come wafting into my mind from out of nowhere, solving a problem that had been plaguing me for a half hour or more, and for a few brief moments, I would know ecstasy.

Yes, strange to say, of all the pleasures I've known in life, those countless mornings spent lolling in bed sweet bed with my beautiful, elusive, sultry, seductive feminine rhymes, converting Pushkin's lilting Onegin stanzas into my own strange brand of poetry, rank close to the top. For various reasons of my own, I wound up doing first all the odd-numbered chapters in the order 7–1–3–5, and then tackled the even ones in the order 2–4–6–8. And day after day, I would flip the pages of my once-blank book and say to myself, "Twenty down, 358 to go!" Or else, "Finally I'm into three digits!" Or even better, "Fifty percent!" — a most memorable moment, which came on June 5.

My pace was very irregular. On lucky days, a good first draft of a full stanza would come within a mere hour, while on rough days, it could take three, possibly even four hours. But then the act of polishing, scattered in random episodes over the next few days or even weeks, added much more time. Nonetheless, there started to emerge a fairly clear pace: about 1.3 completed stanzas per day, on the average. To my delight, I could almost predict that sometime in the early fall of 1998, I would be done!

In order not to slow my pace at all, I made sure that every day, without exception, I worked on *Onegin*. Stanzas were thus done on vacations, on work-related trips, on countless airplane trips, in the car while I was driving one place or another, while I was sitting on the deck while the kids splashed away in friends' pools, while I was hiking with friends and family among remote lakes in the high Sierras, and on and on. Indeed, I'm always struck when I enumerate the widely-spread-out locales in which this translation was worked on: California, Hawaii, Indiana, Tennessee, Illinois, France, Switzerland, Italy, Bulgaria, Sweden... In my memory, each of these spots glows warmly with the special aura of the particular stanzas that I translated in it.

But the most unexpected, the most glowing site of all was saved for the very last. In mid-summer 1998, I went to Sofia, Bulgaria, for a conference in cognitive science, and while there I found myself strangely drawn by the Slavic faces all around, and, reading signs in Bulgarian everywhere with surprising ease, I was tantalized by the sense of closeness to that other Slavic tongue with which I was now so intimately bound up. Almost inevitably, my thoughts jumped from Bulgaria to Russia, and a wild idea sprang unbidden into my head. I had a sabbatical year coming up very soon, in fact overlapping with Pushkin's bicentennial year — and so why not spend it in his own land, indeed in his own beloved city of Saint Petersburg?

Never had I set foot in Russia. The idea of spending a full year there, though deeply enticing, was also fraught with complexity, especially with respect to my children. For me, I envisioned a stint at the State University of Saint Petersburg, centered somehow on my involvement with Pushkin and translation, but for the kids? I couldn't just jump into such a situation blindly, and so once I was back in the United States, I set out planning an exploratory week-long jaunt to Petersburg, and the most natural date — in fact, the only workable date for me — was in mid-October. It did not escape me that with this timing, my trip would come close to coinciding with the date I foresaw for the completion of my *Onegin,* at which point the whole trip took on a certain eerie feeling of predestination.

Not long after I'd purchased my air ticket, the sudden terrible landslide of the ruble's value started, and what up till then had seemed an idyllic prospect for a sabbatical year started taking on ominous tones. I tried to keep an open mind, but making an exploratory visit seemed far more critical now. In any case, as my trip drew closer, I started counting days and stanzas very carefully, parceling out the latter in such a way as to ensure that I would have precisely three left to do when I arrived in Petersburg.

And then occurred a strange twist of fate. Ten months earlier, just before our Hawaiian vacation, at a gala fund-raiser in California to support a bicentennial Pushkin jubilee, I'd met a distant American relative of the Russian poet — Kenneth Pushkin, a man of most honest principles, an art dealer, a friendly fellow who was in fact dutifully respecting his name — pushing his kin, that is to say — by spearheading the bicentennial celebration in America. The two of us hit it off, and over the following months remained in contact. I knew Kenneth did much business in Russia, so in early September, a month or so before taking off, I tried phoning him at home in Albuquerque in order to get some hints about hotels and contact people in Petersburg, only to find out that just that day he himself had taken off for Petersburg for a month, and I got his phone number there. This was a stroke of luck for me, partly because during the next few weeks I was able to call Kenneth up frequently to get a first-hand sense of all the turmoil I was reading about in the papers. But Kenneth also happened to be placed in the most strategic imaginable way to help me in my visit: he was in daily contact with key people at the

All-Russia Pushkin Museum, and thus through him, in the twinkling of an eye, I had a link to people as involved as anyone in Russia in preserving Pushkin's legacy.

Given this fortuitous link, I couldn't resist the temptation to ask whether, during my brief October visit, I might not be able to give a small reading somewhere of selections from my translation. Within a day or two, the answer came back from the Museum's director, Sergei Nekrasov: he proposed I give one in a series of readings called "Poets from Around the World", as part of a traditional October literary festival in the idyllic rural town now called Pushkin, formerly called Tsarskoe Selo — "the czar's village" — where Pushkin had gone to a special, elite boarding school in his adolescence. I was very gratified by this unusually warm reception, and of course accepted without delay.

Egged on by success, I upped my level of chutzpah one more notch, and inquired whether, a day or two before my reading, I might be granted the privilege of translating the very last stanza of *Eugene Onegin* in Pushkin's apartment along the Moika Canal in Petersburg. This time, the response took a little longer in coming back, but to my great joy, it too was positive: the day before my Tsarskoe Selo reading, I would be given a couple of hours to "commune with Pushkin" alone in his apartment, and to do the final stanza. Since for me, this had always been one of the most affecting of all the stanzas in the book, and since in it, the poet bids a final farewell to his novel and his beloved Tanya and Eugene, it seemed the perfect way for me, too, to bid farewell to my translation and to all the multiple meanings with which it of late had so graced my life.

And thus, at 5:00 in the evening of Friday, October 16, 1998, I found myself being ushered into the elegant book-lined drawing room of Alexander Pushkin's hallowed apartment — in fact, into the very *stanza* in which Pushkin died from wounds received in his duel — and there I was left in solitude, so that I could calmly spread out all my working materials on a dark wooden table and make myself comfortable on a couch just below a large portrait of the poet. Aside from a clock somewhere, I was immersed in total silence, and the last stanza's familiar words looked up at me from the novel's last page.

It was hard to believe that only a year and a half earlier, I hadn't read a single stanza of *Eugene Onegin* in Russian, while now I knew nearly fifty of them by heart and had translated nearly 400 of them into English, and now here I was, alone in Saint Petersburg with Pushkin's spirit — or at least with his portrait — just about to tackle the novel's very last fourteen-line crystal. And I'd been allotted precisely two hours to carry out this crowning task, and there was that clock, ticking softly away. Time to stop musing and set to work.

As was the case with every stanza, my opponent's opening gambit was the first pair of feminine rhymes — lines 1 and 3. What was my move? In my usual way, I thought and thought about the first quatrain and how it could be reworded in rhyming English, but nothing came, and tick tick tick, the game clock kept ticking away. I read and reread the Russian lines, even though I could say them in my sleep. Nothing I thought of worked.

A half hour passed, then forty minutes; still I hadn't written one word. I was starting to feel pretty antsy. What if, given this once-in-a-lifetime chance, I blew it? This fear compounded my nervousness, of course, starting what could be a vicious circle. But all at once, perhaps forty-five minutes into my allotted time, a little idea flashed into mind that felt *right.* How well I knew that tremor of excitement at a potential solution to a difficult pair of lines! I scribbled it down, and suddenly the logjam was broken. The first quatrain was coming into focus; things were feeling looser, more fluid. I had a hunch I was going to win this game.

"My uncle ..... mine."

For months and months, long before I'd dreamt of making a pilgrimage to Saint Petersburg, I'd anticipated the moment of finishing up my very own *Onegin,* knowing it would inevitably be a time of great emotional complexity: an intimate mixture of relief, joy, and pride, on the one hand, with, on the other, deep sadness at the fact of closing the book on this bizarre, beloved adventure. Though I'd had no idea as to how it would feel in detail, there was nonetheless one tiny fact about the final moment of translation that my magic crystal had been telling me for months, with every bit as much certainty as an astronomer will tell you where and when an eclipse will occur, and that was what the word would be with which my work would wind up — to wit, the word "mine".

The reason underlying this peculiar predictability was just as compelling as it was simple: Pushkin's novel's first stanza's first word is *мой* ("my"), while its last stanza's last word is *моим* (a variant of the same word — namely, the instrumental case of *мой*). That was quite enough for me. It was not that I knew that Pushkin had intended this little symmetry; indeed, it could well be a mere coincidence, and it's doubtful whether anyone will ever know the truth of the matter. But intentional or not, this echoing of the takeoff in the act of landing was an elegant structural property of the original Russian, and once having noticed it, I couldn't imagine failing to mirror it in my English rendering.

Though the minutes were ticking away quickly now, my lines too were clicking like clockwork. Before I knew it, there I was, zeroing in on that final line, that inevitable final masculine "mine" — and then, truly as though gifts straight from heaven, first one, then two, then three masculine lines, each of them rhyming with the preordained final one, came tumbling into my fervid brain. Everything fell smoothly into place, and ten minutes before I was to turn into a pumpkin, my stanza, my chapter, and my translation as a whole were done.

In those remaining ten minutes, savoring the fact of having scaled this metaphorical Everest, I took in the scenery around me for the first time, wandering gingerly about Pushkin's last *stanza,* actually noticing the portrait under which I had been sitting, seeing the sheet music on the clavichord, trying to decipher words from the manuscript of a poem in a notebook that had been sitting right by my notebook as I toiled away. Then, having snapped a few photographs, I hunted around for the apartment's caretaker, thanked her, and stepped out into the brisk evening

air. Moments later, Greg ambled into view along the Moika Canal, and in a festive mood, the two of us sauntered off to celebrate, over dinner, the reaching of this long-awaited goal.

Walter Arndt's Symmetric Translation

It turns out I'm not the only translator who noticed and opted to respect the novel's *мой–моим* symmetry; there was one other — the prolific and versatile Walter Arndt. He, too, imitated the gesture, though in a cleverly different manner. Arndt's first line runs, "Now that he is in grave condition", while his closing line is: "As I to my Onegin now." Once again, I'm not sure the symmetry is deliberate, but given Arndt's astuteness, I would bet it is.

Stylistically, Arndt's *Onegin* differs vastly from mine. If I err on the side of too much modernity and informality, I would say that Arndt errs on the side of too much classicism and formality. The tone of Pushkin's language falls somewhere in between these poles. Despite this often troubling tendency, Arndt's version has many virtues, and quite a few marvelous stanzas. Here, for example, is stanza IV.20 in Arndt's delightful rendition:

> *Heigh ho... Sweet reader, let me question,*
> *How is your family? All well?*
> *If you don't mind the mere suggestion*
> *And are at leisure, let me tell*
> *The proper meaning of "relations".*
> *Here goes, then, word and connotations:*
> *Folk to be earnestly revered,*
> *Deferred to, cosseted, and cheered;*
> *At Christmas, thus decrees convention,*
> *One goes to see them without fail*
> *Or sends them greetings through the mail,*
> *Just to be paid no more attention*
> *For the remainder of the year...*
> *A ripe old age God grant them here!*

Arndt's anglicization of *Eugene Onegin* came out in 1963 and was generally well received; indeed, it was honored by that year's Bollingen Prize for poetry translation.

Nabokov Hopes for Yet Greater Ugliness

The following year, the famed Russian–American writer Vladimir Nabokov published an extensive scholarly commentary on *Eugene Onegin,* which was accompanied by what he termed a "pony" — a line-by-line literal translation of the novel-in-verse, making no attempt at rhyme, rhythm, or literary grace. Now, the idea of a line-by-line gloss of *Eugene Onegin* is certainly not in itself a bad one. Such a work could be used in many ways: by other translators, by students of the Russian language and its literature, by literary scholars with a medium command of Russian, and so forth. However, Nabokov was not content to offer his version as one among many possible approaches; harshly denouncing all

rivals, he shrilly proclaimed his own vision as the only "true" vision. Thus in the foreword to his literal translation, he wrote:

> ...it is when the translator sets out to render the "spirit", and not the mere sense of the text, that he begins to traduce his author.
>
> In transposing *Eugene Onegin* from Pushkin's Russian into my English I have sacrificed to completeness of meaning every formal element including the iambic rhythm, whenever its retention hindered fidelity. To my ideal of literalism I sacrificed everything (elegance, euphony, clarity, good taste, modern usage, and even grammar) that the dainty mimic prizes higher than truth.

Nabokov's scorn for the *dainty mimic* who would eschew *truth* in favor of "spirit" (here I quote his quote-marks, of course) of the original is puzzling, to say the least. It amounts to taking a fanatical attitude toward originals and translations — namely, that a work can be appreciated only in its original language, and that no attempt should be made to reproduce the *feel* of the work in any other language. Those poor saps who are ignorant of the original tongue are simply doomed to remain deprived of that experience, and the closest they can come to imagining what it must be like for lucky natives is by reading an always awkward, often opaque word-for-word gloss, while thinking to themselves, "Oh, but in Russian this comes out as sparkling, lilting, delicious poetry that one absorbs without any effort whatsoever."

Reading Nabokov's gawky "pony" and his commentary is a bit like taking a long mountain hike in a severe blizzard, chilled to the bone, dead tired, able to see but a few inches beyond one's nose, while being subjected to a ceaseless barrage of remarks from one's companion, who yammers on and on about how it feels to come skipping merrily along the same trail on a sunny day amidst brilliant fields of spring blossoms, with all the names of said blossoms (as well as trees) provided in Latin, not to mention the names of nearby peaks, plus a deep well of sagas of local loggers, loiterers, and litterers, a detailed history of the Wilderness Act, and so on and so forth ... One would get far more from staying at home and just watching a video of the springtime hike than from making the "true" hike in this eccentrically sadistic manner.

Let's take a look, for instance, at how Nabokov, in his "pony", renders the stanza we saw above as done by Arndt:

> *Hm, hm, gent reader,*
> *is your entire kin well?*
> *Allow me; you might want, perhaps,*
> *to learn now from me*
> *what "kinsfolks" means exactly?*
> *Well, here's what kinsfolks are:*
> *we are required to pet them,*
> *love them, esteem them cordially,*
> *and, following popular custom,*
> *come Christmas, visit them,*
> *or else congratulate them postally,*
> *so that for the rest of the year*
> *they will not think about us.*
> *So grant them, God, long life!*

The British critic and *Onegin* co-translator A. D. P. Briggs has written incisively of the cult of "Pushkinolatry", whose adherents bow deeply before Pushkin's works, as if every thought, every metaphor — indeed, every word — must have come from the gods. Vladimir Nabokov is, no doubt, the high priest of this cult.

Although in his younger years he translated verse into verse with great gusto (including Pushkin), he declares in the foreword to his crib that the task of translating *Onegin* while respecting both form and content is "mathematically impossible" (as if less heroic acts of form-plus-content translation had somehow been proven "mathematically possible", but literature-loving mathematicians had demonstrated with ironclad rigor that *Onegin* falls in a totally different category). If one takes Nabokov's peculiar declarations at face value, one must conclude that he believes that to read a hideously ugly literal translation is the sole path to Pushkinian truth for a non-speaker of Russian, and that to produce such a version is the only way for a translator to show adequate respect for Pushkin's holy opus. To translate Pushkin's verse *as verse* is to desecrate the novel, is to spit on the tomb of its author.

A couple of years after his commentary and crib were published, Nabokov made the following remarks about his prosaic offering in a belligerent article called "Reply to My Critics":

> My *Eugene Onegin* falls short of the ideal crib. It is still not close enough and not ugly enough. In future editions I plan to defowlerize it still more drastically. I think I shall turn it entirely into utilitarian prose, with a still bumpier brand of English, rebarbative barricades of square brackets and tattered banners of reprobate words, in order to eliminate the last vestiges of bourgeois poesy and concession to rhythm. This is something to look forward to.

And thus was rendered inevitable a brutal collision between Nabokov and Arndt, wearing their hats as translators of the same work of literature, a work equally revered by both, but in very different ways.

The Sacred Quiddity and Eyespot of a Poet's Genius

To give just the smallest sample of how Nabokov did his best to decimate his rival in print, I'll quote a tiny piece of a huge, sprawling attack on Arndt's translation, which Nabokov first published in *The New York Review of Books* in 1964, and later reprinted in his book *Strong Opinions*. The topic is the first few lines of stanza VI.36 (Друзья мои, вам жаль поэта: / Во цвете радостных надежд, / Их не свершив ещё для света, / Чуть из младенческих одежд, / Увял!) which I would render literally this way: "My friends, the poet grieves you: / In the bloom of joyful hopes, / But not yet having realized them for the world, / Barely out of infant clothing, / He withered!", and which Arndt rhymingly and rhythmically renders as follows: "My friends, you will lament the poet / Who, flowering with a happy gift, / Must wilt before he could bestow it / Upon the world, yet scarce adrift / From boyhood's shore." Here is how Nabokov comments upon these lines, in Arndt's rendering:

> Passive readers will derive, no doubt, a casual illusion of sense from Arndt's actually nonsensical line 2 of VI.36. They will hardly notice that the chancrous metaphor in lines 4–5 inflicted by a meretricious rhyme is not Pushkin's fault, nor wonder at the naïve temerity a paraphrast has of throwing in his own tropes when he should know that the figure of speech is the main, sacred quiddity and eyespot of a poet's genius, and is the last thing that should be tampered with.

A certain haughtiness comes through here, does it not? One might suppose that Nabokov's own rendering of these lines would be a breath of fresh air, but no such luck: "My friends, you're sorry for the poet: / in the bloom of glad hopes, / not having yet fulfilled them for the world, / scarce out of infant clothes, / has withered!" It's hardly enticing prose, let alone lyrical poetry, and on top of that, it is quite in vain that one searches for the subject of the verb "has withered".

These samples we've had of Nabokov's idiosyncratic rendering of *Eugene Onegin* are typical, though they are far from the most awkward of passages. And yet, of all anglicizations of Pushkin's novel-in-verse, Nabokov's is by far the best known and, in my experience, the most frequently found on bookstore shelves. Why would this be? Because the name of the author of *Lolita* is far better known than those of James Falen, Charles Johnston, Walter Arndt, Oliver Elton, A. D. P. Briggs, or Babette Deutsch. And why are these names little known? To some extent, it's because they are translators, and in our culture, translators — even the best literary translators — are seen largely as drones. But also, to a fair degree, they are little known because the author of *Lolita* mercilessly trashed their translations (Falen's and Johnston's he never saw, thanks to mortality, but since he trashed verse–verse translation *in general,* he effectively trashed all future versions as well as all past ones), and because a star-struck and gullible public bought the glittery Nabokovian pontification on credit.

Scholars of Russian literature, of course, know better, and they generally look upon Nabokov's bitter, relentless attacks on verse translators of *Onegin* as the rantings of an eccentric genius, and let it go at that. The tragedy, though, is that upon literature-loving non-readers of Russian, the Nabokovian dogma has been foisted, and by them has by and large been swallowed whole. All over the English-speaking world, highly placed literary scholars who know no Russian seem to think Nabokov's repellent, wooden crib is *the* translation, and that all flowing, metrical, rhyming translations of *Onegin* are necessarily works of misguided amateurish buffoonery. As a consequence, most have probably never looked at any of the verse translations, and hence never tasted the exquisite beauty of Pushkin's novel. Such, sadly, can be the influence wielded by a ceaselessly self-promoting silver-tongue with a famous name.

Deutsch, Johnston, and Elton/Briggs

When I wrote my comparative review of *Onegin* versifications for *The New York Times* as well as my more extensive chapters on the same topic in *Le Ton beau de Marot,* I knew there was one verse translation into English that I had not seen. That one, from the

pen of Babette Deutsch, had been published in 1936 and was out of print. The library's copy was checked out, and despite various attempts to recall it, I was unable to lay my hands on it. But one day, soon after my review appeared in the *Times*, I received in the mail an unexpected present from Kelly Holt, a professor of Theater Arts at Case Western Reserve University, whom I had once met in the apartment of Lil Greenberg, an elderly mutual friend in Cleveland. Lil had in the meantime died and given many books away to friends, among which was the very translation that I lacked, in a handsome clothbound edition with a slipcover. Having read my piece in the *Times*, Kelly felt that I, as an *Onegin* savorer, could probably put the Deutsch translation to better use than she could, so she sent it to me and I accepted it gratefully, thinking of it in a way as a posthumous gift from Lil.

I dipped into it and before long, I realized that this translation appealed to me more than did any other except Falen's. Here, to give you a sense of Deutsch's deft touch, is the same stanza as we've already seen from the pens of Arndt and Nabokov:

H'm, h'm! Dear reader, pray apprise me,
Are all your relatives quite well?
You might be pleased — if so, advise me —
To have your humble servant tell
What the word "relatives" embraces.
It means the people to whose faces
We show at all times due respect,
And whom we kiss as they expect,
And visit at the Christmas season,
Unless indeed we send a card
In token of our warm regard,
Lest they should miss us beyond reason
All during the ensuing year.
And so God grant them health and cheer!

Deutsch's *Eugene Onegin* has the virtues of simplicity and clarity, as one sees here, and usually of rhythmic smoothness as well.

I now present two further versions of the same stanza, the first of them taken from Sir Charles Johnston's 1977 translation — the one that so inspired Vikram Seth:

Hm, hm. Distinguished reader, tell me
how are your kith and kin today?
And here my sentiments impel me
for your enlightenment to say
how I interpret this expression:
our kin are folk whom by profession
we have to cherish and admire
with all our hearts, and who require
that in the usual Christmas scrimmage
we visit them, or without fail
send them good wishes through the mail
to ensure that till next time our image
won't even cross their minds by stealth...
God grant them years and years of health!

Although this stanza flows fairly well (except for line 12, which has ten instead of nine syllables — a flaw that can be righted if one pronounces "to ensure" as "twinsure"), it just doesn't have the directness and charm of Deutsch's stanza.

Far more problematical, unfortunately, is Oliver Elton's translation, published in 1937, the centennial of Pushkin's death:

Ahem! Most honoured reader, let me
Ask, — are your family all well?
And might it please you to permit me
This opportunity to tell
The accurate signification
Of the words "family", "relation"?
— With love and kindness we are bound
To treat relations; with profound
Respectfulness; to go to see them
At Yule — our custom national;
Or, through the post, to greet them all.
Thus, for the twelvemonth, you will free them
From giving you one thought; and so,
Long years God grant them, here below!

There are several annoying glitches in this stanza, and as one reads more and more of Elton's version — even as modified a few decades later by A. D. P. Briggs — one finds that it often falls short of Pushkinian standards along one dimension or another.

Finally, a Pushkin Translation Truly à la Pushkin

The legendary harpichordist Wanda Landowska once proudly remarked to another musician, "You play Bach your way; I play him *his* way." There is a certain charmingly Nabokovian hubris to her comment, and it's easy for me to imagine Nabokov saying to a rival translator, "You render Pushkin in your style; I render him in *his* style." But of course such a claim would be patent nonsense, Pushkin's Russian style being anything but "bourgeois", "bumpy", "rebarbative", or bulging to the brim with "reprobate words".

On the other hand, if ever anyone were entitled to make such a remark, it would be James Falen. I hasten to add that it would be outrageously out of character for Falen to trumpet himself in that way, but I feel I can take the liberty of doing it for him. It was, after all, through Falen's version that Carol and I first were enchanted by Pushkin's style, and it was through a deeper involvement with his translation that I subsequently fell head over heels in love with *Onegin*. Since then, I've shown Falen's *Onegin* to many Russians, and it evokes a near-universal reaction of astonishment along these lines: "I've looked at other attempts in English and always been disappointed; never would I have believed that Pushkin's deeply Russian flavor could be captured in any other language — but this, well, it sounds *just like* Pushkin."

And I myself, having now read the original *Onegin* at least 100 times and Falen's *Onegin* at least two dozen times, feel Falen has

come as close to writing what Pushkin himself would have written, had he been an English speaker, as is humanly possible to imagine. Let's just take a look at this same old stanza IV.20, which gets Falen's style across pretty well, although, to tell the truth, it is a rather run-of-the-mill effort for him:

Hm, hm, dear reader, feeling mellow?
And are your kinfolk well today?
Perhaps you'd like, you gentle fellow,
To hear what I'm prepared to say
On "kinfolk" and their implications?
Well, here's my view of close relations:
They're people whom we're bound to prize,
To honor, love, and idolize,
And, following the old tradition,
To visit come the Christmas feast,
Or send a wish by mail at least;
All other days they've our permission
To quite forget us, if they please —
So grant them, God, long life and ease!

It reads effortlessly, both semantically and rhythmically, and no wonder, since, like the original Russian, it is 100 percent iambic. Indeed, Falen made a much more concerted effort than all of his predecessors to write in iambs, though on rare occasions he will resort to a trochee or two in a stanza (strong–weak, instead of weak–strong). He also strove to make his sentences flow as naturally as speech, since that's how Pushkin's sentences flow. And his vocabulary floats midway between the modern and the antique — a kind of timeless, placeless English, hinting vaguely of the past. But Falen also excels on less tangible levels, such as narrator's tone, use of irony, reluctance to resort to rare words, sense of wit and snap, degree of inter-stanza homogeneity, use of sonic repetition, and on and on.

Why Try It Yourself If You Feel It's Been Done Perfectly?

At this point, I hear my readers aching to ask me, "Why on earth would you want to do your own translation, if you so admire Falen's?" Well, I would ask them back: Did people stop climbing Everest when Hillary and Tenzing had climbed it? Does a good pianist stop playing a work simply because great recordings of it already exist? Of course not. People are driven to do their own thing precisely because of the wonderful accomplishments of others. In my case, it was Falen's magical artistry that first of all made me want to experience the original, and secondly made me want to do something similar, yet different, in my native tongue.

If anything, Falen's translation *liberated* me to do a translation in my own style. What I mean by this is that, had he not done such an extraordinary job in his translation, I would have felt far more constrained to restrain myself at each decision point (of which there are a myriad myriad, needless to say), to be "more

Pushkinlike" than my natural tuning would wish. But since Falen had already done a translation *parfaitement à la Pouchkine,* I could instead go off and do my own thing, and feel not the slightest trace of guilt about it.

Thus here is an example — once again, stanza IV.20 — in the Hofstadter style:

Hallo, hulloo, my gentle reader!
And how're your kinfolk, old and young?
Pray let me tell you, as your leader,
Some scuttlebutt about our tongue.
What's "kin"? It's relatively subtle,
But you'll tune in if I but scuttle:
Our kith and kin we're meant to love;
We dish out kisses, tokens of
Our high esteem; we pay a visit
Each Christmas — it's a Russian rut —
Or else send notes in greeting, but...
It isn't out of fondness, is it?
It's all so they'll forget forthwith
Us kin — and so let's toast our kith!

I do not find it all that easy to articulate the characteristics of my style, but since the greatest influence on me was James Falen himself (though Vikram Seth, too, had deep impact), I tend to contrast my style with his, and so I sometimes say that where Falen is lyrical, I am jazzy, or where he's legato, I'm staccato, or where he's flowing, I'm percussive, or where he's subtly seasoned, I'm saucy and spicy.

In any case, one of my traits, here very easy to see, is a love for playing with repeated sounds, as in "scuttlebutt", "subtle, but", and "but scuttle". A closely related trait is a proneness to indulge in alliteration: "Russian rut" provides a simple example, as do the phrases "fondness" and "forget forthwith" near the end. I'm also fond of internal rhymes, as exemplified by "What's kin" and "tune in" on successive lines. Yet another tendency of mine is to play on slightly buried resonances of a word or phrase, such as using the adverb "relatively" in a stanza whose topic is kinfolk.

A friend of mine, after reading first Falen's *Onegin* and then mine, commented that he hadn't realized, until reading my version, how unconventional and startling Pushkin's language must have seemed to readers in his day; Falen's version didn't convey that quality of Pushkin at all clearly. I had to smile when I heard this, because such an impression is quite wrong; it is Falen who gives a truly accurate reflection of Pushkin's tone, not I — though how could my friend have known that?

I'm not into self-flagellation, and I'm certainly not espousing here the Nabokovian line that my translation's tone constitutes a shameful betrayal of Pushkin; I'm just objectively observing that my tone is a tad less similar to Pushkin's than Falen's is. But my "sinning" in this regard is not unique; the fact is that *all* the translators prior to Falen deviate from Pushkin's tone in quite substantive ways. Indeed, that's precisely why Russian readers are so astonished when they encounter Falen's work. And so, dear

reader of my preface, I suggest that if you don't read Russian and if you find, either before or after reading the present translation, that you have a hankering to experience even more directly those beautiful vernal mountain meadows of the Russian original, you go out and get yourself a copy of Falen. You'll never come closer to tasting the true taste of Pushkin than that.

But that in itself doesn't invalidate my effort. One doesn't always stick to one's favorite dish when dining at a favorite restaurant; sometimes one selects another one, for variety's sake. Variety is the spice of life! And I, in my own way, bring out certain rather subtle spices in the lovely brew that is Pushkin's style by turning up various knobs a bit.

Thus, for instance, Pushkin and I share a keen enjoyment of alliteration, but I indulge in it to a greater degree than he does, on the average. This can be seen as a defect or as a virtue of my version. If Falen's translation didn't exist, my turning up of the alliteration knob would probably be less justifiable — but it *does* exist; someone's already done it at just the right level. Why should I try to repeat what Falen did? I would doubtless do less well at the task — and in any case I feel, somewhat paradoxically, that I have been liberated by Falen's translation, liberated and encouraged to explore territory that I am more cut out for. It's my hope that, precisely because of my natural tendencies to push a little extra in certain stylistic directions, my translation will find a friendly audience in the contemporary English-speaking world, a world that, after all, tends to go for things that are somewhat bigger than life.

In *Le Ton beau de Marot,* I self-deprecatingly wrote that I am a selfish translator, and that the only reason I do translation is to come in ever closer touch with the original author, purely for my own pleasure. But I take that back here. When I compare myself with Vladimir Nabokov, I see that I am, in fact, a generous translator. I deeply desire to share with others the thrill of being in close touch with Pushkin, a thrill that I first experienced through James Falen's English version of *Eugene Onegin,* and, some years later, through Alexander Pushkin's Russian version. I want now to make that experience more widely available to anglophones, whether through my own translation, through Falen's, through Deutsch's, through Arndt's, or whatever.

"I Will Now Proceed to Decode...

Throughout his lifetime fascinated by foreign languages and by complex acts of translation, the American statistician and pioneering computer scientist Warren Weaver was among the first to propose the idea of machine translation, and in a famous paper that he once wrote on the topic, he declared, "When I look at an article in Russian, I say, *This is really written in English, but it has been coded in some strange symbols. I will now proceed to decode.*" This has to be one of the funniest things I've ever heard said about translation — and yet I know exactly how Weaver could feel that way. Indeed, each morning, when I plunked myself down in bed with my coffee by my side, I'd don my trusty Warren Weaver cap and duly *proceed to decode.*

I'd like to make one thing very clear, at this point: Though far from a fluent speaker of the Russian tongue, I always worked *from the Russian* and from the Russian *alone* (either memorized or on paper in front of me). In fact, I studiously avoided looking at other anglicizations, even though, of course, I'd read bits and pieces of them all, and in Falen's case, had read the whole thing cover to cover several times. Fearful at first of having been unwittingly contaminated by the excellent work of others, I soon discovered, to my relief, when I compared my stanzas with those of my "rivals", that nothing of their texts jumped into my mind claiming falsely to be of my own invention; no, my rhymes and ways of phrasing things were almost always quite different from anyone else's. Whew!

Of course there were occasions when I found I'd come up with just the same pair of rhymes as someone else did, but that was pretty rare. Worst of all was that handful of times when I came up with a solution that I loved and that I thought was so very much *me,* only to find that Babette Deutsch or Oliver Elton, way back in the 1930's, had turned over exactly the same stone. Frustrating! But truth to tell, I found that for the most part, my own version overlapped less with preceding ones than they overlapped with each other. And thus it was clear that I was not a plagiarist, either wittingly or unwittingly.

...with a Little Help from My Friends"

I said above that I never looked at any English input text, but I have to retract that. Once in a blue moon, being but a baby speaker of Russian, I would in fact find myself having to resort to napping briefly in Nabokov's crib. This was necessitated when, after staring and staring and struggling and struggling, I simply could not for the life of me figure out what the Russian meant — my well-worn Kenneth Katzner dictionary, much though I loved it, just was not sufficient to pull me out of the pit. This happened probably a few times per chapter at the outset, and gradually less as time went on. On such humiliating occasions, I would glance only at the specific lines in question and then quickly shut the book before my eyes could take in any more of the rebarbative and reprobate, bourgeois and bumpy Nabokovian turns of phrase. Obviously, I felt a little weird about using my nemesis as my consultant, but it seemed slightly less shameful when I found out that I was in good company — even Johnston and Arndt and Falen had ridden the VN pony once in a while themselves.

The greatest joy was afforded me each time I completed the first draft of a new stanza, for it was then that I allowed myself to open up all five of my "rivals" in order to see what solutions they'd found to exactly the problems that I'd just been tangling with. I always began with Falen and always finished up with Deutsch, in order to maximize pleasure at beginning and end, and each time I would read Falen's, I would sigh and say to myself, "Ahh... Now *that's* how you translate poetry!" Still and all, I generally felt I more or less held my own with the others, even if I couldn't reach Falen's level of artistry. It was the friendliest of competitions, and I felt I was getting to know each translator quite well.

Making these comparisons was not just fun but also served, as it turned out, a very useful purpose — namely, as a way of making sure I did not put my foot in my mouth. Yes, though I hate to admit it, there were a few occasions on which I made a total fool of myself, thinking I'd perfectly understood a passage and then discovering that all the other translators had read it in a different manner. Sometimes it was just that I'd been confused about a noun's or adjective's declension; other times it was subtler. In any case, though, my "rivals" showed their true colors by helping me out, just like good friends.

In a couple of cases, I found my very own interpretation for certain lines, breaking decisively with the prevailing winds. The most noteworthy of these cases was the famous suite of five stanzas in Chapter I to which Nabokov gave the rebarbative label "pedal digression". It is in these stanzas that Pushkin seems to reveal that he is a foot fetishist — but I say "seems" advisedly. To be precise, the word Pushkin uses — нога — is a notorious Russian word that means both "foot" and "leg" (and my Russian friends assure me that its diminutive form, ножка, which Pushkin also uses in the "pedal digression", is no less ambiguous) — and therefore, in his sensual pæan to sleek pairs of feminine appendages, Pushkin is referring just as plausibly to *legs* as to *feet*. Indeed, every single Russian whom I have consulted — mostly females, I might add — has been absolutely convinced that "leg" and not "foot" is what Pushkin had in mind. I've thus bucked the heretofore universal and slightly puritanical trend to say "feet", and in my version of the pedal digression, which Greg Huber has amusingly called my "iambic diversion", I present Pushkin as a "leg man" rather than a foot fetishist. In rendering нога and ножка in English, I have used not just one word over and over, but rather, a whole spectrum of words that run admiringly up and down milady's limb, all the way from top... to bottom.

Poetic Lie-sense

An enthusiastic non-Russian-speaking friend to whom I once read out loud my version of Tatyana's letter exclaimed, "Doug, how did you ever learn all the subtle nuances of those Russian words?" What she imagined, at least so it seemed, was that I was taking each Russian word and somehow finding its perfect English counterpart, thus building up a sequence of perfect counterparts, and then, lo and behold, what came out was a flawlessly rhyming, flawless iambic-tetrameter poem! Regrettably, such a scenario is "mathematically impossible", as some authority once memorably phrased it.

The truth of the matter is that the name of the game is — and here Nabokov hits the nail right on the head — *paraphrasing*. Of course, Nabokov's pet word for someone who indulges in this shameful act — "paraphrast" — fairly reeks of contempt, but Nabokov notwithstanding, paraphrasing is the only way to go, in poetry translation. But given the negative aura around this term, thanks to Nabokov's constant nagging, I would propose an alternate name for the art of compromise in poetry translation — I would say that poetry translation is the art of "poetic lie-sense".

Yes, one is always lying, for to translate is to lie. But even to speak is to lie, no less. No word is perfect, no sentence captures all the truth and only the truth. All we do is make do, and in poetry, hopefully do so gracefully.

I do not, I freely though ruefully admit, have a mastery of all those subtle nuances of the Russian words I was translating. I have, rather, a *basic* sense of what each one means — I know the ballpark it's in. Thus благородный, for example, which occurs in a few of the stanzas that I've memorized, means to me "noble", and I can also see inside it to its roots, which tell me that it originally meant "well-born" (and as ever-observant Greg pointed out to me, so does the name "Eugene"). But I don't feel, when I hear it, the rich resonances that a native speaker of Russian must feel; I just think to myself, "noble", and then let any synonym or even roughly related word spring to mind. "Aristocratic"? Fine. "High-born"? Fine. "Fine"? Perhaps. And so forth.

What matters is not getting each and every word to match perfectly in connotations, but getting the overall *sense* and the overall *tone* of a line across, and doing so with an elegant rhythm and a high-quality rhyme, to boot. That's what matters. Rhythm, rhyme, sense, and tone — all of them together are what *Eugene Onegin* is about, and not just literal meaning. To throw any of these overboard is to destroy the poem utterly.

I have exploited poetic lie-sense so many times in making this translation that it's almost silly to try to pick examples — just take any line whatsoever! For instance, line 1 of stanza I.1. In the original, it runs as follows: Мой дядя самых честных правил, which could be literally rendered as "My uncle, of most honest principles", and phonetically rendered as *Moj dyádya sámykh chéstnykh právil.* But my translation's opening line runs this way: "My uncle, matchless moral model". As you see, already in line 1 of stanza I.1 I have introduced alliteration where there is none, I have used concepts like "morality" and "role model" that are not spelled out explicitly in the original, and with my choice of the word "matchless" I have perhaps wound up somewhat overstating the uniqueness of the speaker's uncle's admirable character traits. Compromise lies everywhere.

Let's skip lines 2 and 3, which also lie, though perhaps slightly less egregiously, and let's go on to line 4 — И лучше выдумать не мог, in Russian — "And couldn't have dreamt up [anything] better", *I lúchshe výdumat' ne mog,* literally and phonetically. But what yours truly writes on line 4 is, "Of all his ploys, that takes the cake", thus using a fairly jazzy idiomatic expression that probably most non-native readers wouldn't even know. What can I say about such brazen lying, and so early on, to boot? That really takes the cake.

Let's jump to the concluding line of the opening stanza: Когда же чёрт возьмёт тебя? (*Kogdá zhe chyort voz'myót tebyá?* — "When *will* the Devil take you, then?") Here, through my placement of the words "hurry" and "up", I indulge in a small piece of wordplay: "Hurry, dear Uncle, up and die!" To non-native readers, this almost surely parses as if it said, "Hurry up, dear Uncle — and die!", while to most American readers, it probably comes across with a more down-home flavor: "Hurry, dear Uncle — up-and-die!" There is nothing remotely like that

droll ambiguity in Pushkin's line, unless someone argued that its sharp bite, due especially to the words же чёрт, is somehow "equivalent" to my line's playfulness.

For one last example, let's look at the concluding line of the novel's second stanza: Но вреден север для меня (*No vréden séver dlya menyá* — "But harmful is the North to me"). Here, Pushkin is subtly (or not so subtly) alluding to the fact that it was from the northern town of Petersburg that he was sent by the czar into exile in southern Russia, for nothing more serious than having written a few slightly irreverent poems. Falen says here, "But found it noxious in the north", thus using poetic lie-sense by introducing alliteration where there was none, and also — if you want to be nitpicky — by having the chutzpah to change present into past. Arndt says, "The North, though, disagrees with me." Johnston: "but I'm allergic to the North..." Elton/Briggs: "But baneful is the North to me..." And finally, here is Deutsch: "But find the North is not my style."

By contrast, my translation says: "The North was, shall I say, 'severe'." By golly, I don't just toy around with tenses; I also sin in a big-time way by playing on the fact that the Russian word for "north" is pronounced *séver*. To some readers, this flippancy of mine will come across as so irreverent towards Pushkin that they would exile *me* to Bessarabia if they had the chance; to others, it will merely seem amusing. As for me, I see it as just another typical example of poetic lie-sense, and a quite Pushkinesque one, if I don't say so myself.

My translation abounds in this kind of thing, and if you don't like it, just set it down. Remember, there's always Falen, Deutsch, Arndt, and the others. Or else — why not? — you can just go and translate the whole thing yourself! It'll be a great opportunity for you to brush up on your Russian, that's for sure.

Personal Musings on Fluid Syllable-lengths, Dubious Rhymes, and Biased Perspectives

Here I'll take just a few paragraphs to describe some of my guiding principles in doing this translation, and to explain a little the rationale behind some stylistic choices.

One of the most central maxims that I've tried to abide by is that of *covering my tracks* as far as rhymes are concerned. By this, I mean that a reader should not be able to tell, by looking at two rhyming lines, which of them came first and which was created later, for the sake of rhyme. Both lines should seem equally natural; neither should suggest that it was written just to rhyme with the *other* — even though it might very well have been. One does one's best to make each line look as though it, in and of itself, was the optimal way of packing the thought in words, and as though it came effortlessly.

A word or two now about some subtleties concerning the art of syllable-counting, and masculine and feminine rhymes. There is, in English, a class of words that float roughly halfway between monosyllabicity and bisyllabicity — words such as *higher, hire, liar, lyre, shyer, shire, quail, fail, stale, ail, phial, file, I'll, isle, loyal, oil, royal, roil, boy'll, boil, jewel, duel, cool, cruel, rural, squirrel, earl, swirl, power,*

tower, hour, shower, and so forth. In different metrical contexts, these words can adapt and become either monosyllabic or bisyllabic, as needed. Accordingly, I make no apology for the fact that I have used such words to end masculine lines on certain occasions, and feminine lines on other occasions. Language is flexible, and readers need to be flexible, too. There is even one line where I use the phrase "hour after hour", and the first of the two occurrences of "hour" is closer to being monosyllabic (and hence adds just one to the line's syllable-count) while the second one is closer to being bisyllabic (and hence adds two syllables, as well as making a feminine rhyme).

I have to say, sadly, that I found myself quite turned off, when reading previous translations, by encountering scores and scores of supposed rhymes that to me were not rhymes at all. This phenomenon riddles the Elton/Briggs version to such an extent that it would be pointless to try to list examples, but to my surprise, I found that it abounds also in Arndt, who in many ways has such a keen sensitivity to sound. Thus a careful reader will stumble over dozens of false rhymes like the following ones, in Arndt's translation:

gently/competently, hunger/monger, passage/message, passion/expression, frack/truck, tongue/long, under/tundra, charm/swarm, islands/silence, leery/sincerely, elixir/I fear, shadow/meadow, none/on, any/nanny, tenor/manor, singer/finger, bother/mother, glance/countenance, over/cover, heed it/needed, nonce/once, revealing/feelings, travel/devil, horse/sorts, heaven/even, talons/balance, enough/off, denuded/hooded, carried/buried, hearts/part, tarry/quarry, barter/quarter, moms/comes, reward/bard, penchant/mentioned, wonders/ponders, hauteur/there, there/her, her/hear, fluster/foster, merit/spirit, lower/power, chamber/amber, consoling/lolling, hate/fête, wetting/plaiting, rigid/fidget, glamour/tremor, able/indefatigable, forgotten/trotting, another/bother, flung/throng, off/love, ruin/undoing, rambled/resembled, sense/lens, detect it/connected, tête-à-tête/magistrate, winces/princess, Onegin/begging.

The case for the defense might simply point out that these are near-rhymes, and claim that that's all Arndt was striving for. But against this is the fact that far more of his rhymes are *real* rhymes, from which one certainly gets the impression that rhyming in the olden fashion — in Pushkin's fashion, after all! — is what Arndt was after. But for some reason, he was just willing to settle too easily for too little, in my opinion.

There is another class of non-rhymes that abounds in all the translations except for Falen's, and they are exemplified by the following, again drawn from Arndt:

Lyudmila/feeler, fawns/horns, balm/arm, sport/thought, really/merely, demeanor/Paulina, day does/invaders, amongst us/youngsters, born/spawn, enters/portentous, entreat us/meters, sauntered/haunted, Alina/seen her, brought us/waters, Voronskáya/aspire, far/spa, better/Benedetta, was/pause, figure/trigger, been/eighteen.

These rhymes work, at least fairly well, in British English; however, they do not work at all in American English. Most of them (all but the final three) are based on the British dropping of the "r" sound at or near the end of a syllable. To me, such rhymes are anathema, because they do not reflect at all how I speak. In

translations done by people born or bred in England, they are perfectly reasonable, but I am surprised and confused when I find — even in Falen, as American as he can be! — "honor" used as a rhyme for "Tatyana". We all have our idiosyncrasies, I guess. But I personally wouldn't touch these rhymes with a ten-foot pole.

To be sure, some of my translation's readers, even American ones, will find that some of what I pass off as rhymes (and which genuinely do work for me) don't work for them; it just goes to show that language is far more subjective than we often suppose. For example, there is one feminine rhyme in Chapter II that some readers might take exception to: that of "hamlet" with "tablet". That one, however, has its own special justification, which readers will surely pick up on.

One last apologia. Alexander Pushkin lived in an enormously sexist era, where any red-blooded author took for granted that his readers were masculine, and that in fact all "active" members of society, such as bards, bakers, and candlestick-makers, were also males. An author might well engage in man-to-man chats with his friendly reader, on such topics as *guns, guts, grog, grit,* and, of course, *girls.* This is not the way *I* write, dear reader, but if *you* can see how to make Pushkin sound like Pushkin in totally nonsexist English, then you're a better man than I! As for me, when I don my Pushkin mask, I simply have to swallow my pride as a writer of nonsexist English — indeed, as a long-term crusader for nonsexist English — and reproduce the flavor of what I am reading, for sexism was part and parcel of the culture in which Pushkin was nourished, and to fail to echo that sexism would be, well, to traduce my author–brother.

Pushkinolatry's Pipe Dream of Poetic Perfection

Speaking of reluctance to traduce one's author, I am brought back one last time to Pushkinolatry, that weird dogma at whose very core lies the tacit but utterly groundless assumption that Pushkin, being all-powerful, *never* had to compromise on words in the way that his translators do. The vision is of Pushkin picking the semantically perfect word and having the rhymes and meter just somehow work out ideally each time. Put another way, the dogma would have Pushkin totally in control of the language he was writing in, whereas the truth is that, like all the rest of us, Pushkin was partly in control and was partly pushed around by the language he was using. Even the best of bucking-bronco riders is now and then thrown, remember.

Eugene Onegin, masterpiece though it surely is, is riddled with compromises; it's just that we as readers can't see the alternative words or phrases that had this or that clear advantage over the final choice, and that therefore tugged hard at the poet's heart, but were ultimately rejected as being weaker overall. As often as not, Pushkin would find that the first word that sprang to his mind gave a trochee, not an iamb, or had too many or too few syllables, or that the perfect word to finish up a line didn't rhyme with the equally perfect word on the previous line, and so one or

the other of them had to give. Compromises abound, yet even compromises can give the illusion of having fallen from heaven.

Like all of us, Pushkin encountered stone walls here and there, had to find ways around them, and had to live with compromise and imperfection; the result of his labors is a wondrous, glowing, but not flawless piece of work. Yes — dare I say it? — this novel in verse could even be *improved* here or there! This sounds like shameless blasphemy, but the fact is, it's all too easy to idolize Pushkin and to see him as being of divine inspiration, having everything work out every time in exactly the way he'd most like. But just as surely as Alexander Sergeevich erred grandly by getting lured into a fatal duel, he also erred here and there, though obviously on a smaller scale, in weaving the web of his poetry.

It is only through having an attitude of Pushkin-as-mortal, Pushkin-as-fallible, Pushkin-as-pretty-much-like-oneself, that one can approach the daunting task of translating him. Otherwise, like Nabokov, one will find oneself in a morass of self-flagellation and frustration, and one will be rapidly immobilized by what one perceives as the hopelessness of the "mathematically impossible" task. My cure for this paralyzing disease is just to remember that *poetry is not mathematics* — there is no perfection, no absolute right or wrong, no truth or falsity, no black, no white, just shades of gray. And this holds as much for the original author as for the "dainty mimics", the "paraphrasts", and the "traducers".

The Concert Pianist Who Couldn't Sight-read

Each of the many scores of stanzas that I have not memorized has nonetheless had to inhabit my brain for a good while, as I translated it. The first stage is reading it to myself a few times, trying to get its gist without help, usually having trouble with at least a line or two, often more, and then looking up all the words I don't know. The next stage is to read it over and over again to myself, probably dozens of times, and in that manner to absorb its rhythms and its sound-patterns so thorougly that it feels totally comfortable and natural. Only then can I begin to translate it. In that final phase, there is no doubt that I know all the words and feel in genuine possession of the stanza as a whole.

When, however, I return to a stanza that I translated weeks or months ago, I am often shocked to discover that that feeling of possession was quite illusory. Words that once I thought I knew may not even seem familiar! But fortunately, a second or third go-round of this sort often solidifies my knowledge somewhat, and eventually, over months, the words enter my bloodstream and become part of me.

Do I or do I not know much Russian, then? I still have the most awful time trying to understand what people say to me, and it embarrasses me no end. Strangely, I can express myself better than I can follow others. I guess I'll just have to live with this until I've had enough experience with native speakers that in real time I can chop up the continuous slur of words that make up the seamless-seeming speech stream. Could such a pathetic speaker of Russian possibly have read and deeply understood, let alone translated, *Eugene Onegin*? Judge for yourself, is all I can say.

I remember hearing, one time, that a certain famous concert pianist had an extremely rudimentary sight-reading ability, and for that reason had a devil of a time learning any new piece — it would take him far longer than a "normal" concert pianist. But in the end, his artistry was at just as high a level as that of pianists who were fluent sight-readers, because what counted was not how *quickly* he could absorb music, but how *deeply*. What mattered was his musicianship, not his sight-readership. I would like to think that something of this general ilk applies to translation as well. Obviously, a professor of Russian is going to get into a work of Russian literature much faster than someone who merely has a second-year or third-year knowledge of the language, but what matters, when it comes to the translating crunch, is who loves the work in question, who instinctively resonates with its author and its style, and who has a way with their own native tongue. Without those, one will get nowhere — and with them, one may just get everywhere, provided one works hard.

The Saga Winds Down...

Though exhilarating in its special way, this year devoted to translating *Eugene Onegin* has nonetheless been a very lonely one. I would spend day after day largely as a hermit, having no one off of whom to bounce ideas or turns of phrase. The only person who really served as a sounding-board for my various competing alternatives was my mother, out in far California. Perhaps a couple of times a month, I would pick up the phone and read her a stanza or two, and she would give her two cents' worth on the possibilities that I'd proposed. Once in a while, she'd suggest something that was better than I'd thought of — for example, "bois'trous" in the third sonnet from the very end. I wonder if Pushkin ever asked *his* mother for advice on his choice of words? ("What say the Pushkinolatrists?", asks my mother, on this score.)

I've stated above that my main motivation for translating anything is to come into closer contact with its source — with the person behind the scenes. Although I obviously couldn't go back 170 years and meet Pushkin in the flesh, there was something I could do that had something of that magic to it, and that was to establish contact with James Falen, Pushkin's closest anglophone voice. And so first by exchange of letters, then by email, then by telephone, and finally by bodily transport through physical space (an action known as "translation" in mathematics), I got to meet Jim and Eve Falen in their natural habitat, right at the edge of a beautiful, wide lake in rural Tennessee. That first visit was several days long, and during it, I had the enormous pleasure of doing a full reading, spread out over two evenings, of Falen's translation in front of a friendly crowd at the University of Tennessee, among whom were Jim and Eve.

A few months later, I took my children down to the Falens' house to visit again for a few days, at a point when I had done perhaps 40 percent of my translation. Jim read all that there was of it at the time, chuckling now and then, and off-handedly remarked to me about a line or two, "This sounds a little as if it had been translated by Cole Porter." I could not have been more

flattered, since I have adored Cole Porter's songs — lyrics and music equally — ever since I was a young boy. They're the top!

And finally, just a few weeks ago, when the translation was all done but for the tiniest final polishing brushstrokes, I once again drove down to Tennessee and spent a wonderful weekend with Jim and Eve, during which the three of us sat around their living room, this time reading *my* translation out loud, now and then comparing my version of a stanza with Jim's version (often quoted by Jim from memory), and exchanging ideas about last-minute modifications. All of this to coffee and tea, tasty chocolates, and the warmest of companionship. Чего ж вам больше?

It was on that visit, right in the Falens' house, that I did the final act of translation in this book, which was to bring Pushkin's moving dedicatory poem into English. Unexpectedly, I wound up doing it in two versions: a straight one, with Pushkin's voice, leaving it dedicated to his friend and publisher Pyotr Alexeevich Pletnyov, and another, touched up here and there so as to turn it into my own personal dedication. Both are included here.

...and the Torch Passes on

Over this past year, a marvelous torch was momentarily passed to me; by some quirk of fate, it fell to me to "be" Pushkin, just for a flash — and for that flash, I felt he was living again, somehow through me — and then it was gone, the torch was out of my hands, and Pushkin had flitted somewhere else, his soul-flame was flickering in the brain of some other susceptible soul, some other "future dunce with scant gray matter".

So here's my stab at this proud poem by Pushkin, prince of Russian bards. How dearly I'd have liked to know him, but clearly, that's not in the cards. Poor Alexander Sergeevich! "Life is", as often they say, "a bitch, and then you die." And die he did, by bullet stung. The czar got rid of Pushkin through a rigged-up duel with d'Anthès, toyer with Pushkin's wife. To save his face he gave his life, did A.S.P. Yes, fate is cruel. His voice, though stilled at tragic age, still sings upon this magic stage.

And thus, EO, you're finally finished;
This bullet I must bite, I know.
So be it, but I feel diminished
For through you, I've long fought off woe.
I'm grateful for the many pleasures,
The pangs, the sweet and sour treasures,
The hue, the cry, the feasts, the glee —
For all, for all you've given me.
My thanks are yours. By you attended
Through calm and crush, life's crazy quilt
I've savored — yes, and to the hilt!
Enough. My sails are bright and mended,
So off I push for unkent brine,
And take my leave from Pushkin mine.