

On Chapter One: XXXIV-XLVIII

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Stanza 38, ll. 3-4: Nabokov does not mention Baudelaire in the notes to "spleen." It seems slightly strange, even if Nabokov considers that Baudelaire should be separated from the nineteenth-century Romantics. (A. Suzuki)

Stanza 48, l. 2: In the first chapter of *The Gift*, "the Neva's parapet on which one can scarcely discern today the imprint of Pushkin's elbow" is quoted from Yasha Chernychevsky's poem as a fashionable cliché "exalting his 'grievous' love of Russia" (Vintage edition, p.38). (T. Wakashima)

"Onegin's Day" (winter 1819), which has been intermittently described in the previous thirteen stanzas, is over with the 36th stanza, and is followed by the theme of "spleen" that begins in the 38th stanza. Onegin, a debauchee, who has enjoyed a social life with day and night reversed, gets tired of it and is overwhelmed by "spleen," which finally leads him to an encounter with Pushkin, a character.

Nabokov sternly criticizes the fact that Russian scholars discussed Onegin's "spleen" so enthusiastically that they even invented a special term "Oneginstvo [Oneginism]" for his distemper and spent thousands of pages on him as a "type." Nabokov derides a contemporary Soviet scholar, N. L. Brodsky, who defined Oneginism as the result of "tsarist despotism," as if it were newly found, but in fact had been insisted upon by Russian critics for more than a hundred years. Nabokov proves that Onegin's mental malady was not particular to an era of Russia but was widespread

in Western Europe during the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries by carefully tracing its first appearances; definitions; and various usages in Voltaire, Boswell, La Fontaine, Sainte-Beuve, Stendhal, Chateaubriand, Byron and other Romantics. Moreover, he introduces how “spleen” spread over to Europe so that a lot of English tourists tried to commit suicide from such a distemper, how “spleen” marked the characters in English and French novels of the nineteenth century, and how they were mentally and medically treated in these works. Nabokov shows the personality of Onegin as generated not only from Byron’s *Childe Harold* but also from the Romanticism of Western Europe.

However, Nabokov does not highly value such a “type” inflicted by the “spleen” popular in English and French Romantic novels. He considers that Onegin should be separated from those clichéd characters because Onegin was recomposed in a unique way by Pushkin, who could create characters both from life and literature. Nabokov criticizes Russian critics who resort to socialistic dogmas and as well to the critical generalization that from the nineteenth century has been making original creations in literature common and mundane. His statement, “[A]las, this tendency to generalize and vulgarize the unique fancy of an individual genius has also its advocates in the United States,” reminds us of his later arguments with Edmund Wilson.

Nabokov critically follows how an image of a simple boat with a musician on a river or a lake has developed into a Romantic formula, “Gondola + Brenta + Tasso’s octaves,” and pities that Pushkin used so much talent to transplant such a cliché into Russian. On the contrary, Nabokov attracts the reader by his exact verification of facts. He estimates the time when Onegin and Pushkin walked on the Neva embankment according to the chart of the climate from Pushkin’s library. He also entertains the reader by describing how delicious European beefsteak used to be and then shows the price of

a dish, comparing it with a yearly subscription to a weekly magazine, as well as informing how many bottles of champagne were imported from France at that time. On the other hand, Nabokov's fabulous style transformed the three stanzas that had remained only in the stanza numbers into brilliant nonexistence, which reminds the Japanese reader of "the volume of *Disappearing behind a Cloud*" [a volume of *The Tale of Genji* suggesting by a blank page the death of the protagonist].

Nabokov's estimation of Pushkin's ability in English, as Edmund Wilson later questions, sounds problematic. According to Brian Boyd, Nabokov originally "supposed that Pushkin had a perfect command not only of Russian, but also of English, German, and Italian," though in his finished commentary, he asserts that Pushkin knew no language except Russian and French (Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 350). Nabokov tries to impress the reader that Pushkin's English was not so good as it was supposed. Nabokov writes that Pushkin could not read Byron, Coleridge and other English Romantics in the original language, but only read them in French translation. On the other hand, as Boyd points out, Nabokov proves Pushkin's command of English in his notes, which obviously betrays his assertion above (Ibid, 351-52).

Nabokov's evaluation of Pushkin's French also troubles the reader. He affirms that Pushkin was a poor linguist. "[E]ven the fluent French . . . lacked personal tang and, judging by his letters, remained throughout his life limited to a brilliant command of eighteenth-century ready-made phrases." We are puzzled as to how we should think of their French—who was better in French, Pushkin or Nabokov? Indeed, Nabokov learned French in his childhood from a French governess, and sometimes spoke with his family in the language. Later he published a story and an essay in French, and even had the possibility that he would become a French writer. But actually he grew up after the French era had ended in Russia, when

aristocrats usually talked and students learned in the Russian language. Being a polyglot, Nabokov's first language was nothing but Russian. On the other hand, Pushkin was raised in the time of the French-language control over Russia. Conversation with his family and studies in his childhood were all done in French. As one of the students first accepted by the Tsarskoe Selo Lyceum, he was educated in Russian exceptionally at that time, but he excellently knew French literature and was so dedicated to it that he was both respected for and made fun of for his Francophilia. As almost all the books kept in the library at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow are in French, the language for him can be considered his substantial first language, even though it should not be called his "mother tongue." Could it be possible that Pushkin had such a poor command of French as Nabokov judges?

As even a learner of a foreign language could judge the quality of a native speaker's writing style, it is natural that Nabokov, who was extremely good in the language, could be critical of Pushkin's French. We could also imagine that Nabokov's underrating might be due to his hope to impress the reader that Pushkin's Russian was much superior to his French. But we cannot help feeling something obscure in it. Nabokov's assertion looks even more mysterious when we remember his attitude that he positioned Pushkin in the tradition of European literature.