On Chapter Two: I-XVII

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To study Vladimir Nabokov's *Commentary to Eugene Onegin* is to discover with what remarkable energy and meticulous research Nabokov enables us to relive Pushkin's writing of the poem. It is the method Nabokov uses in his lectures as well. He follows the story of the poet's experiences day by day, his readings, his correspondences, his creations of poems and prose, the frustrations with the authorities, the various emotions that went through Pushkin's heart, in order to revive the genius that made *Eugene Onegin.* Only, because of the form of the *Commentary,* the story is broken into separate and scattered annotations. While it will take more than this brief study to piece together the entire story, reading and researching only a few pages of the *Commentary* enables us to see what Nabokov was trying to accomplish. It was my task to cover the first half of Chapter II (Stanzas 1–17, *Commentary* 217-266) in which nothing very dramatic happens, but which establishes the fundamental stage upon which the love story and the tragedy will later occur.

Chapter II begins with the pastoral theme in the first five stanzas. It dwells on Onegin's uneventful daily management of his land, the beauty of the countryside and, naturally, his boredom. The appearance of Lenski then introduces the theme of friendship which develops between him and Onegin. Pushkin stayed in Odessa the entire time that he was writing the stanzas 1 to 17, so that there is a slow and controlled plot development and a unified pace in the flow of narrative.

Notable among Nabokov's annotations to these stanzas are three topics which I found helpful in understanding what Nabokov was trying to do in his *Commentary* to *Eugene Onegin*. The first is

Nabokov's discussion of Pushkin's Romantic sources. The second is Nabokov's references to Pushkin's political stance revealed by his emotional attachment to the Decembrists. The last is Nabokov's focus on Onegin's eccentricity which refers to the traits of the "superfluous man," a nineteenth-century Russian character type.

Because Lenski makes his appearance in Chapter II, Nabokov has occasion to make detailed notes on Pushkin's Romantic sources. Lenski has just come from Göttingen University and is thoroughly influenced by German Romanticism. Nabokov notes, however, that Pushkin is indebted much more to French sources, especially Mme de Staël's *De l'Allemagne,* and the adaptations by Zhukovsky rather than to German sources.

> Pushkin had even less German than he had English, and only very vaguely knew German literature. He was immune to its influences and hostile to its trends. The little he had read of it was either in French versions (which quickened Schiller but asphyxiated Goethe) or in Russian adaptations. (*Commentary* 235)

Pushkin's hostility to the trends of German Romantic ideology is indeed apparent in his presentation of the naïve, enthusiastic Lenski and his immature, cliché-filled poetry. By dwelling on Lenski's shortcomings as poet, Nabokov makes clear his own preferences for precise and original handling of language. However, he is not beyond criticizing Pushkin for obvious errors, such as his incomplete grasp of Olga's character in Stanza 12. Such a discriminatory sharp eye for carelessness in art is also characteristic of Nabokov.

The setting of Chapter II, Onegin's country estate, is modeled on Mihaylovskoe, where he spent the two years of his second exile for having written a letter expressing his thinly-veiled support of

atheism (Shaw). In lonely exile, Pushkin read Byron, appreciated the nature of the quiet countryside, and listened to his nurse's folktale narratives. He grew into a national poet during the exiled years of 1820-24 away from St. Petersburg (Kawabata). Ironically, his exile in Mihaylovskoe kept him safe from involvement with the Decembrist uprising.

Nabokov's *Commentary* goes into telling details of Pushkin's relationship with the Decembrists, some of whom were his friends from the Lyceum, whose armed uprising against the Czar's despotism and the serfdom of the peasants was crushed in December 1825. A few of the leaders were executed, while the rest were condemned to exile in Siberia. In Onegin's attempt at reforming the plight of his peasants, Nabokov finds a possible allusion to the Decembrist Yakushkin's attempts for serf reform (227). Nabokov also refers to Pushkin's poems and notes addressed to his schoolmate Küchelbecker, a poet deeply influenced by Schiller and a Decembrist leader sent to Siberia (234, 236). The fact that "Lenski" is a name derived from a river in eastern Siberia (228) also implies that because of the exile of his Decembrist friends, Siberia was never far away from Pushkin's thoughts. One is amazed by Nabokov's research, which enables him to stay with Pushkin's life on a daily basis. He read Pushkin’s correspondence, the journals written in the Freemason ledgers, noted his sketches and jottings in the margin, checked not only all the other English translations of *Onegin* but also all of Pushkin’s sources that he could find.

The first half of Chapter II also introduces Lenski, Pushkin's portrait of the young Romantic poet who becomes Onegin's neighbor. The earnest youth is a significant contrast to the older and more sophisticated Onegin. Nabokov notes Onegin's eccentricity -- "the Byronic moodiness, the metaphysical cult of Napoleon, French clichés, English clothes, an attitude of 'revolt'. . ." (*Commentary* 227). Nabokov remarks that Onegin is "of a certain set, of the conventions

to which he conforms as closely as the Philistines he despises do to those of their own, larger, group" (*Commentary* 227). The "certain set" Nabokov refers to is the character type called the "superfluous man," "lishnie chelovek" or "lishnie lyudi" in Russian. The term "superfluous man" comes from *The Diary of a Superfluous Man* by Turgenev (1850). Lermontov followed 17 years later with his Pechorin in *A Hero of Our Time* (1840). However, Pushkin's Eugene Onegin, is thought to be the first clear fictional characterization of the type (Kudo). A product of nineteenth-century Russian literature, the "superfluous man" is well educated and idealistic, typically an aristocrat and intellectual who lives apart from social reality. He is aware of the stupidity and injustice in society and yet unable to change the world. He is informed by idealism and goodwill but incapable, for reasons as complex as Hamlet's, of engaging in effective action ("Superfluous man," *Encyclopedia Brittanica*).

The Russian intellectual of the time was unable to digest completely the west European culture that flooded Russia with the rise of the Romantic age. As a result, their understanding became conceptual and abstract. The new educated aristocracy, especially the youths, became liberal in thought but ignorant of the real life of the lower classes and attempted to improve the condition of the Russian serfs, only to fail in establishing permanent reform. Onegin's plan of "instituting a new system" of a light quitrent (2: IV: 4) is a good example. His well-intentioned reform, not with serious political convictions but "merely to while away the time," makes enemies of his neighbors and fails to have any meaningful political effect. Nabokov views Pushkin's own political liberalism as not entirely consistent. In Pushkin's poems such as “Freedom” or *The Country,* again set in an idyllic countryside like Mihaylovskoe, strong criticism is expressed against the old system of serfdom. However, Nabokov notes that in later years, "Pushkin was not above walloping a male slave or impregnating a female one"

(*Commentary* 218). Despite his own admiration of the poet, Nabokov the historian is free of the mythical image of Pushkin as the heroic liberal. Onegin's attributes of the superfluous man, such as ennui, cynical detachment, alienation and ironic self-consciousness, exhibit the more cynical influences of the age, while the impulsive and enthusiastic Lenski exhibits its more superficial attributes, both its energy and folly.

Onegin's traits as a superfluous man points to Nabokov's awareness of the complexity of this character, not merely as the product of the malaise of the early years of nineteeth-century Russia (Nabokov was not interested in categorizing characters as types) but as an original character who presented for Pushkin an opportunity to involve the reader.

In his annotation to Stanza 6, Nabokov states that Lenski is "the third main male character in the novel" (*Commentary* 227). This would imply that the first is Pushkin, the second Onegin. In a later note, we can see an important distinction made by Nabokov between "main character" and "protagonist." In his note to Stanza 19, Line 14 ("emotions/ Long since not new to us"), Nabokov says that "to us" refers "to Pushkin, Onegin, and the novel's third protagonist, the Reader, all three, men of the world" (268). This implies that by "main character" he means a character engaged in the action, while "protagonist" means one engaged in the fictional politics of imagining and creating the action. It is a distinction characteristic of Nabokov. Being a protagonist, moreover, carries more importance than being a main character. For Nabokov, Pushkin, Onegin, and the Reader are the protagonists engaged in creation, and in that order.

Although such digressions as the faro game in his last note or the details on Pushkin's involvement with Freemasons provide rich and informative material, Nabokov's annotations to the first half of Chapter II help us mainly to see, in this brief overview, that he

regards *Eugene Onegin* as showing the essential nature of Pushkin's mind, formed by his age but ever original and independent. As annotator, Nabokov's eye never deviates from the particular historical fact, and does not waste time on speculating on generalities. The emphasis of his unique and voluminous *Commentary* is, as it was with his *Speak, Memory*, on the details that portray an extraordinary mind engaged in creation.

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