

“Is Onegin a superfluous man?”

—A Provocative Commentary—

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If someone says that *Eugene Onegin*, the first masterpiece of the 19th century Russian literature was born from French literature, you will think him ridiculous, but however ridiculous it may seem, the idea seems to have guided Nabokov all through while he was writing his commentary on *Onegin*. Nabokov seems to think that the tradition of French literature produced *Onegin*. No one seems to have looked for and found out in *Onegin* modes of expression of French origin more thoroughly and enthusiastically than Nabokov.

Russian language at the beginning of the 19th century was still crude and Russian aristocracy used French even at the level of every day life. Moreover, Pushkin was so good at French that he was nicknamed a Frenchman. So it is natural that you should find a lot of examples of the influence of French literature in *Onegin*.

But Russia was not France. In Russian society at that time, which was rushing to westernize itself, there were few people sophisticated enough to appreciate a dandy like Onegin. There was no place for him. He had to become a “superfluous man”. A superfluous man can be compared to an electric refrigerator which is imported into a developing country where there is still no fundamental infrastructure, such as water service, electricity and gas. It must feel itself superfluous and think, “What am I?” Onegin is the first superfluous man in the history of Russian literature. But Onegin as he appears in Nabokov’s commentary seems to remain a dandy. And Tatiana, who was rejected by Onegin at first, but later rejected Onegin’s love in her turn with heartbreaking grief, has been thought so virtuous that she can almost be called a saint. But Nabokov seems to think that she is just an ordinary woman. It is often said that the pair of Onegin, a superfluous man and Tatiana, a saint is the archetype which has repeated itself in the history of Russian literature, but Nabokov seems to deny it. He seems to think that Onegin is not a superfluous man but a dandy and that Tatiana is not a saint but an ordinary woman.

Is Nabokov right? Can we say that *Onegin* was born from French literature? Can we say that the archetypal pair of Onegin and Tatiana is just a stereotype

which has prevented us from seeing what they really are? We will see it by examining Nabokov's commentary.

One of the most striking characteristics of his commentary is his frequent indication of Gallicism in *Onegin*. He points out that many phrases that Pushkin uses there are of French origin. For example, he points out that "Usach" (a man with beards) in the 18th stanza of the chapter two is a Gallicism because there is a mode of expression in French, according to which a man with beards implies a soldier. He points out that "V glazah" (under the eyes of ~, or in the eyes of ~) in the 21st stanza of the chapter two is a Gallicism, though it is very likely that the similarity between this and the French equivalent (aux yeux de ~) is just a coincidence. He points out that "Mistress" in the cancelled draft of the 21st stanza of the chapter two must be "Mistriss" (a Gallicism) in Pushkin's autograph, which he did not see! He points out that "golden games" in the 22nd stanza of the chapter two is in Lenski's Gallic word-world, though he just returned from Germany. He points out that "the idea that you can find happiness in your habit" found in the 31st stanza of the chapter two is found not only in Chateaubriand but also in Voltaire. He points out that Mme Larin would address Praskovia not as Pasha, but as Polina in French style. He points out that "zhatvoy"(harvest) in the 38th stanza of the chapter two is a Gallicism. According to Nabokov, Pushkin means by this "death" or "life time ending in death" because "harvest" means "death" or "life time ending in death" in French, though in this context the word seems to mean a short happy period in our long difficult life time. He points out that "flattering hope" in the 40th stanza of the chapter two is a Gallicism. And so on.

The examples of Gallicism Nabokov points out are in many cases persuading, though his obsession about French sometimes seems to distort Pushkin's original intention. We can say that Nabokov, typical sympathizer of the West has cast a new light on *Onegin* and has freed the text of *Onegin* from the context of the history of Russian literature.

Now we will see how Nabokov thinks of *Onegin*. We take up the scene of duel between *Onegin* and Lenski.

In the commentary on the 9th stanza of the chapter six, Nabokov says that it is quite natural for Lenski, who is provoked by *Onegin*'s flattery towards Olga, his fiancée, to send *Onegin* a written challenge to a duel. On the contrary, says

Nabokov, Onegin seems quite strange. According to Nabokov, Onegin must admonish Lenski, his junior, to think better of his challenge, but he not only accepts it but also pulls the trigger first. Nabokov says that we should remember that gentlemen in those days must not pull the trigger first but endure coolly his adversary's fire in order to maintain their honor.

In the commentary on the 28th stanza of the chapter six, Nabokov says that Onegin is quite strange in the morning of duel. He says that Onegin must feel as if he were having an uncanny dream on that day. Onegin displays a lot of immoral behaviors. For example, he oversleeps and keeps Lenski waiting for more than a couple of hours in an icy wind. He must choose a person equal in social rank to him and Lenski as his second, but he chooses his servant. What is worse, he pulls the trigger first and kills Lenski. Nabokov says that these behaviors are not like those of Onegin at all. He says that though Lenski naturally wants to kill Onegin, "Onegin, a fearless and scornful marksman, would, if in his right mind, have certainly reserved his fire, and not even returned it but, if still alive, thrown it away, i.e., discharged his pistol into the air." He says that "When Lenski falls, one almost expects Onegin to wake (as Tatiana does) and realize that it has all been a dream."

The above-shown understanding of Onegin by Nabokov is very interesting. It seems to show that Nabokov firmly believes in Onegin as a dandy. A dandy would not display those immoral behaviors. But, according to the traditional Russian interpretation, Onegin affects a dandy, but actually is a superfluous man. Usually he could play the role of a dandy, but at a critical situation like duel, he drops off his mask and reveals his nature. According to the traditional interpretation, Pushkin makes the duel scene in order to arrange such a situation. But Nabokov does want Onegin to remain a dandy. That is why, it seems, he interprets Onegin's immoral behaviors at the duel scene as taking place in his own uncanny dream. We cannot help saying that though this interpretation is very Nabokovian, it is definitely a little too far-fetched.

Nabokov seems to want to ignore the duel scene if he could. But he must have thought that the scene is too important to ignore and interprets it in a little too far-fetched way.

There is another scene where Onegin's nature is revealed, and Nabokov ignores the scene completely. In the 24th stanza of the chapter seven, Tatiana enters Onegin's library and finds his jottings in the margins of books there or

his lines marked with his fingernail under the passages which he thought important. She guesses what he was thinking about. And in the next stanza, the 25th stanza, she sees through his mask and finds that he is only a parody of dandy. Nabokov ignores the stanza completely. Is it possible that Nabokov, who writes a long commentary on *Onegin* which almost reaches 1,000 pages, could have ignored it only accidentally? His complete neglect of this stanza seems to come from his persistence in his image of Onegin as a dandy. Moreover, in this stanza, not only Onegin's nature is revealed but also Tatiana's sagacity is hinted. Nabokov seems to stubbornly refuse to accept Tatiana as a virtuous woman or a saint. This may be another reason why he neglects the stanza.

Tatiana as a virtuous woman or a saint is revealed in the chapter eight, where she refuses Onegin's love with heartbreaking grief. Like in Chaykovski's opera, her refusal is usually thought to be final. But Nabokov says that it is not final but provisional. In the commentary of the 47th stanza of the chapter eight, he says that Pushkin's intention to make her refusal final is obvious, but he wonders whether Pushkin succeeds in achieving it. He says that though comments Russian ideological critics have produced are "devoted to passionately patriotic eulogies of Tatiana's virtues", "the French, English, German women of Tatiana's favorite novels were quite as fervid and virtuous as she; even more so". He points out that "her answer to Onegin does not at all ring with such dignified finality as commentators have supposed it to do." Nabokov says, "Mark the intonation of the 47th stanza." He says that "the heaving breast, the broken speech, the anguished, poignant, palpitating, enchanting, almost voluptuous, almost alluring enjambments (. . .), a veritable orgy of run-ons, culminating in a confession of love that must have made Eugene's experienced heart leap with joy. And after those sobbing twelve lines – what clinches them?" In other words, Nabokov here seems to say that with one more push, Onegin will win Tatiana. Considering the quite high evaluation of Tatiana in Russia (Tatiana as a saint), an understanding of Tatiana like this may sound even blasphemous. In order to strengthen his argument, Nabokov points out that in the fair copy of the 44th stanza of the chapter eight, Tatiana says, "Go, 'tis sufficient, I am silent, I do not want even to *see* you!" He says that we must note the hysterical yelp and concludes how this telltale note would have encouraged Onegin! We might find a lot of words

like these that would suggest Tatiana as an ordinary woman, if we closely examined the drafts of *Onegin*. It may be quite interesting as a theme of Pushkin study to compare Tatiana's words in the drafts with those in the final text. The making of Tatiana, how she changes through drafts, might be a good theme of Pushkin study.

Nabokov's commentary on *Onegin* is very unique. When we read it, it seems to us that the first masterpiece of the 19th century Russian literature was born from French literature and it is quite surprising that Nabokov seems to deny the archetypal pair of Onegin and Tatiana, which runs through the history of Russian literature as an unbroken string. This strong opinion of his is quite unique, or rather, even provocative. Whether or not this strong opinion is right, it seems to suggest that we should reexamine the idea of Onegin as a superfluous man and that of Tatiana as a virtuous woman or a saint.

