

The Cancelled Draft of “Onegin’s Album”

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The most interesting part in the latter half of Chapter 7 concerns the set of twelve entries in the draft which Pushkin cancelled called “Onegin’s Album” and Nabokov’s notes for stanzas 21 and 22 pertaining to it. The central motif in this section is the act of reading and what is called Onegin’s “album” is his personal journal, “a fashionable thing in those days” (*Commentary II*, 87), which Tatiana discovers in his study and reads in this cancelled version. Nabokov spends no less than 17 pages commenting on these two stanzas and the cancelled draft. The twelve entries which comprise “Onegin’s Album,” mainly on Pushkin’s romance with “the Venus of the Neva,” lacks serious connection to the main narrative and its cancellation has little effect on our grasp of the work. What we should pay attention to, rather, is the fact that the existence of the album itself was cancelled.

In an alternate variant to Stanza 22, what Pushkin had in mind as the content of Onegin’s album is described as follows (*Commentary II*, 86):

With writings, drawings it was covered
all over in Onegin’s hand.
‘Mongst unintelligible scribbling
there flickered thoughts, remarks,
portraits, dates, names,
. . . .
It was, in brief, a candid journal
Where had poured out his soul
Onegin in his youthful days:
A diary of dreamings and of pranks.
(XXII alt. 3-13)

Stanzas 21 and 22 in the final version, however, does not mention the album at all. The two stanzas depict Tatiana entering the empty rooms, reading Onegin’s volumes, and getting to know the man much better than when he had been standing before her. In Nabokov’s commentaries, he pursues questions about Pushkin’s characterization of Onegin: What is revealed about Onegin’s character and what Nabokov sees as reasons why Pushkin rejected the idea of using the album as an element in the drama.

Pushkin’s device of Onegin’s album reveals to us his intention to portray Onegin not as the cold-blooded intellectual in the final version who pretends to seduce his best friend’s fiancée and shoots him in a duel but as a once sensitive and passionate young man who is not only a serious thinker but also capable of feeling pain in his heart. Masao Ozawa suggests that this basic duality in Onegin’s character is due to a conflict in Pushkin’s creative imagination between historicism and anti-romanticism. As against historicism, which accepts the course of a historical event objectively, Pushkin committed himself more and more to an anti-romanticism in which the demands made by the individual on history are regarded as romanticism and egoism—in other words, “the recognition of the need to evaluate historical process by the individual’s happiness and personal rights” as well as “the eternal values of the human individual” (Ozawa 224).

In the final version of Chapter 7, another variant of the main character triumphed. That is, the character chosen was not a man who suffers from conflict with his environment and age but a man related to his age and through whom it was possible to expose its superficial egoism, a variant character that made possible sharp criticism and exposure. Pushkin gave up including the album in his novel and revised Stanza 22. (Masao Ozawa, trans. *Evgenii Onegin*. Gunzosha 224-5)

Is this, then, the reason why Onegin's album disappears in the final draft? Let us look at Nabokov's strong opinions on the matter.

Among Onegin's books that Tatiana read in his study, only Byron's name is mentioned in the final draft. However, as Nabokov discusses at length (*Commentary II*, 94-102), the Variants to Stanza 22 give two contrasting lists of books which indicate that Onegin is indeed split into two persons, as Ozawa also mentions (225). The first list—the books that Onegin takes with him on his wanderings after killing Lenski—show the breadth of his intellectual interest: historians, philosophers and thinkers from the ancient Greeks to Rousseau. In contrast, the second list—books Onegin left in his library—are the great romantics of the early nineteenth-century such as Byron, Chateaubriand, Constant, Sir Walter Scott and suggest that their owner is a passionate romantic. In the final version, Tatiana reads these romantic works and discovers the hidden Onegin. Bewildered, Tatiana says,

A sad and dangerous eccentric,
Creature of hell or heaven,
this angel, this arrogant fiend,
who's he then? Can it be—an imitation
.
.
.
Might he not be, in fact, a parody?" (*EO XXIV* 6-14)

Nabokov has a high opinion of Pushkin's characterization of Onegin. In the latter part of his notes to Stanza 22, Nabokov summarizes the plot of René's *Atala* and Constans' *Adolphe* at length and compares the characterization of Adolphe and Onegin. Adolphe is at once artistically perfect and devoid of concreteness. In contrast, Onegin, once out of the author's hands, begins breathing and becomes a concrete individual complete with characteristic gestures and wardrobe and lives forever in the world crowded by the people Pushkin had brought (*EO II*, 101). "In that sense, Pushkin overcomes French neoclassicism but not Constant" (*EO II*, 101). Nabokov approves of Pushkin's mature and realistic romanticism in contrast to the early romanticism of Constant. For Nabokov, Onegin, who bewildered Tatiana, is, in this sense, a more complex and human character than the melodramatic Byronic hero such as Don Juan and exhibits paradoxes in which objectivity and passion, nihilism and idealism coexist.

How much, exactly, did these two complex characters understand each other? They probably failed to understand each other completely to the very end. However, if Tatiana had read Onegin's album, she would have known him intimately and not been bewildered. To read someone's journal is to know his soul. Tatiana would have appreciated each scribble and loved him deeply. Stanza 23 depicts how Tatiana

discovers the marks made by his fingernails. As we find in Nabokov's commentary, making marks with one's nails was an intriguing custom of the day. Not limiting oneself to ink and pen, leaving one's secret thoughts in colorless marks with a part of your body would be one of the most private forms of confession possible. However, not even nail marks are as intimate as the confessions that would have come straight from Onegin's young heart.

Was Onegin's album, then, rejected because of Pushkin's anti-romanticism? Tatiana does read the jottings Onegin left in the margins and goes home, both moved and bewildered. However, let us be reminded that *Eugene Onegin* is a novel about missed opportunities, missed timing, characters missing each other. The letters written by both Tatiana and Onegin are central motifs to that extent. Onegin, who appears suddenly in Tatiana's life, is an unreal, distant existence. She braves his dominion, reads his books, and has glimpses of his intellect but not the direct pourings from the heart that would have been revealed by his album—from the heart of a younger, a more enthusiastic man that Pushkin had created. For Onegin who returned from his travels, Tatiana also becomes a totally different woman, enclosed in a forbidden world. The theme of the impossibility of total understanding no matter how deeply one loves is the nucleus of this work. If Pushkin had used the other Onegin living in his album, that nucleus would have fallen apart. If Tatiana had discovered all of Onegin, they would never have missed each other and the tragedy would have been impossible to pull off.

That is why Nabokov approved of Pushkin's decision to cancel the "Onegin's Album" section in his commentary to Stanza 26, as follows: "By omitting Tatiana's discovery and perusal of Onegin's St. Petersburg diary, Pushkin no doubt showed good taste and saved Tatiana from a brazen inquisitiveness hardly in keeping with her character" (*Commentary II*, 104). Tatiana was dying to know all the secrets of Onegin, but in the end, Nabokov suggests, even if the album had been in front of her, she would not have opened it. It is like Nabokov to focus on the irony of the situation. Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* are likewise tragedies of characters missing each other, of paths that fail to cross. Even if one becomes aware of the truth after overcoming the intermixed layers of reality and fiction, it is too late and life ends without solving its mystery. Nabokov, who himself wrote novels in this milieu, could never have agreed to Tatiana easily capturing Onegin's essence simply by stepping into his studying and reading his jottings.

Though Pushkin finally gave up using the idea of Onegin's album, it is clear from Nabokov's commentaries that he developed greatly as an artist through his struggles to create Tatiana and Onegin in these two stanzas. As Pushkin wrote and revised them, Onegin changed in character and Lenski and Olga were born out of necessity. The "Onegin's Album" section reveals with clarity the interaction of the act of reading and the act of solving the mystery of the human heart. Nabokov's notes to these two stanzas comprise one of the key points in the *Commentary* where his penetration and insight solve the riddles left by Pushkin.