Vladimir Nabokov

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

THE "EUGENE ONEGIN" STANZA

HERE ARE TWO SAMPLES I have written after the meter and rhyme sequence of the *EO* stanza. They first appeared (with a different last line) in *The New Yorker* for Jan. 8 1955.

What is translation? On a platter
A poet's pale and glaring head,
A parrot's screech, a monkey's chatter,
And profanation of the dead.
The parasites you were so hard on
Are pardoned if I have your pardon,
O Pushkin, for my stratagem.
I traveled down your secret stem,
And reached the root, and fed upon it;
Then, in a language newly learned,
I grew another stalk and turned
Your stanza, patterned on a sonnet,
Into my honest roadside prose –
All thorn, but cousin to your rose.

Reflected words can only shiver
Like elongated lights that twist
In the black mirror of a river
Between the city and the mist.
Elusive Pushkin! Persevering,
I still pick up your damsel's earring,
Still travel with your sullen rake;
I find another man's mistake;
I analyze alliterations
That grace your feasts and haunt the great
Fourth stanza of your Canto Eight.
This is my task: a poet's patience
And scholiastic passion blent –
Dove-droppings on your monument.

The *EO* stanza, as a distinct form, is Pushkin's invention (May 9, 1823). It contains 118 syllables and consists of fourteen lines, in iambic tetrameter, with a regular scheme of feminine and masculine rhymes: ababeeccddiff. The abab part and the ff part are usu-

ally very conspicuous in the meaning, melody, and intonation of any given stanza. This opening pattern (a clean-cut sonorous elegiac quatrain) and the terminal one (a couplet resembling the code of an octave or that of a Shakespearean sonnet) can be compared to patterns on a painted ball or top that are visible at the beginning and at the end of the spin. The main spinning process involves eecciddi, where a fluent and variable phrasing blurs the contours of the lines so that they are seldom seen as clearly consisting of two couplets and a closed quatrain. The iddiff part is more or less distinctly seen as consisting of two tercets in only one third of the entire number of stanzas in the eight cantos, but even in these cases the closing couplet often stands out so prominently as to cause the Italian form to intergrade with the English one.

The sequence itself, ababeeccidiff, as a chance combination of rhymes, crops up here and there in the course of the rambling, unstanzaed, freely rhymed verse that French poets used for frivolous narrative and badinage in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Among them by far the greatest was La Fontaine, and it is to him that we must go for Pushkin's unconscious source. In La Fontaine's rhymed *Contes* (pt. III, Paris, 1671), poems of the licentious fable type, I have found two passages – and no doubt there are more – where among the rills and rillets of arbitrarily arranged rhymes the ababeecciddiff sequence chances to be formed, much as those mutations that evolution pounces upon to create an insular or alpine species. One such sequence occurs in the pentapodic *La Courtisane amoureuse*, II. 3-16 (*miracles*, *Catons*, *oracles*, *moutons*, *même*, *Polyphème*, *assis*, *soucis*, *joliette*, *eau*, *fuseau*, *fillette*, *un*, *commun*), the other is represented in the tetrapodic II. 48-61 of *Nicaise*, a slightly salacious piece of 258 lines. The opening "Que" refers to "trésors" in I. 47 – these being masculine good looks and youth:

> Que ne méprise aucune dame,
> Tant soit son esprit précieux.
> Pour une qu'Amour prend par l'âme,
> Il en prend mille par les yeux.
> Celle-ci donc, des plus galantes,
> Par mille choses engageantes,
> Tâchait d'encourager le gars,
> N'était chiche de ses regards,
> Le pinçait, lui venait sourire,
> Sur les yeux lui mettait la main,
> Sur le pied lui marchait enfin.
> À ce langage il ne sut dire
> Autre chose que des soupirs,
> Interprètes de ses désirs.

To a Russian ear the last two lines are fascinatingly like Pushkin's clausules.

La Fontaine's free alternations had a tremendous impact on Russian techniques; and long before the sporadic ababeecciddiff sequence became fixed as a species in the *EO*

stanza Russian versificators, when following their French masters, would now and then, in the process of literary mimicry, evolve that particular pattern. An irregularly rhymed poem in iambic tetrameter, *Ermak*, composed in 1794 by Ivan Dmitriev (whom his good-natured friend, the historian Karamzin, extravagantly called the *russkiy Lafonten*), is a case in point. In this Siberian eclogue we find the sequence ababeeccddiff at least twice: II. 65-78 (the beginning of the Ancient's sixth speech in his dialogue with the Young One) and II. 93-106 (part of the Ancient's seventh speech). Twenty-five years later (1818-20) Pushkin used the same sequence in his very Gallic, freely rhymed tetrametric fairy tale, *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (e.g., Canto Three, II. 415-28), finished in 1820, three years before *EO* was begun.

In choosing this particular pattern and meter for his *EO* stanza Pushkin may have been toying with the idea of constructing a kind of sonnet. The stanza, indeed, may be regarded as (1) an octet consisting of two quatrains (abab and eecc) and a sestet consisting of two tercets (idd and iff), or (2) three quatrains (abab eecc iddi) and a couplet (ff). French tetrapodic sonnets and English tetrametric ones were, of course, common beginning with the end of the sixteenth century; the form has been termed the Anacreontic sonnet. It was parodied by Molière in *Le Misanthrope* (1667; act I, sc. ii); Shakespeare handled it once (Sonnet CXLV), and Charles Cotton a number of times. The French rhyme scheme might go, for instance: abba ecce ddi fif (Malherbe's *A Rabel, Peintre, sur un livre de fleurs*, 1630, referring to MS illustrations of flowers made by Daniel Rabel in 1624); the English one: bcbc dfdf ggh jjh (Cotton's "What have I left to doe but dye," pub. 1689).

Shakespeare's tetrametric rarity has the sequence: bcbc dfdf ghgh jj; make-hate-sake-state, come-sweet-doom-greet, end-day-fiend-away, threw-you.

In the *EO* stanza the only departure from an Anacreontic sonnet is the arrangement of rhymes (eecc) in the second quatrain, but this departure is a fatal one. One shift back from eecc to ecec would have the *EO* stanza remain within the specific limits of the Anacreontic sonnet. Actually, II. 5-8 of the *EO* stanza are not a quatrain at all, but merely two couplets (of which the masculine one, 7-8, is sometimes a discrete element, similar in intonation to 13-14). The intrusion of these two adjacent couplets and the completely arbitrary interplay of phrase and pause within the eecciddi part of the *EO* stanza combine to make it sound quite different from the most freakish tetrametric sonnet, even if, as in a number of cases, the cut is that of a sonnet (e.g., three quatrains and couplet, as in st. II and eight others in Chapter One; octet and two tercets, as in One: VI; two quatrains and two tercets, as in One: XVI, a rare case); or if, as in one striking case, the rhymes of the octet are limited to two, as in the Petrarchan typical subspecies of the sonnet (see Four: XXXI: *píshet-molodóy-dúshet-ostrotóy, uslúshit-pícchet-zhivóy-rekóy, vdohnovénnïy-svoegó-kogó-dragotsénnïy-tebé-sud'bé*; see also Commentary).

A device introducing a good deal of variation is the enjambment, which can be intrastrophic or interstrophic. In the first case, we find an extreme example in which the usually autonomic first quatrain is unexpectedly and brilliantly run into the second, with the phrase sometimes stopping abruptly in the middle of I. 5 (e.g., Five: I, XXI; Six: III;

Seven: XV). In the second case, the whole stanza is run into the next one, and the phrase is pulled up short in the very first line (see Three: XXXVIII-XXXIX, and Eight: XXXIX-XL).

On the other hand, we find certain stanzas in which our poet takes advantage of the couplet intonation to make a mechanical point, or he overdoes the tabulatory device by listing emotional formulas, or cataloguing objects, in monotonous sequences of three-word verses. This is a drawback characteristic of the aphoristic style that was Pushkin's intrinsic concession to the eighteenth century and its elegant rationalities.

The only approach to the *EO* rhyme scheme that I can think of in English poetry is the sequence in the first fourteen lines of the stanza of eighteen unequal lines in which Wordsworth wrote the *Ode to Lycoris* (three stanzas) of May, 1817. The rhymes go: bcbcddffghhgiijjkk. Here are the first fourteen lines of the middle stanza:

> In youth we love the darksome lawn
> Brushed by the owlet's wing;
> Then, Twilight is preferred to Dawn,
> And Autumn to the Spring.
> Sad fancies do we then affect,
> In luxury of disrespect
> To our own prodigal excess
> Of too familiar happiness.
> Lycoris (if such name befit
> Thee, thee my life's celestial sign!)
> When Nature marks the year's decline,
> Be ours to welcome it;
> Pleased with the harvest hope that runs
> Before the path of milder suns…

Reference: Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, translated from the Russian with a commentary by Vladimir Nabokov, Princeton, N.J, Princeton University Press, 1975, p. 9-14.