Foreword

The novel in verse *Eugene Onegin*, by Aleksandr Pushkin (1799–1837), was begun in 1823 and completed in 1831. It came out in parts between February, 1825, and January, 1832; this accumulation of eight chapters (the first two of which are represented by two editions of their own) is considered to form a "first" edition. A complete edition in one volume ("second" edition) appeared in March, 1833, and was followed by the *editio optima* ("third" edition) of January, 1837, published less than a month before Pushkin's fatal duel.*

Can Pushkin's poem, or any other poem with a definite rhyme scheme, be really translated? To answer this we should first define the term "translation." Attempts to render a poem in another language fall into three categories:

(1) Paraphrastic: offering a free version of the original, with omissions and additions prompted by the exigencies of form, the conventions attributed to the consumer, and the translator's ignorance. Some para-

*My thanks are due to the Houghton Library, Harvard University, for permission to reproduce its copy of this rare edition. See vol. 4.

phrases may possess the charm of stylish diction and idiomatic conciseness, but no scholar should succumb to stylishness and no reader be fooled by it.

(2) Lexical (or constructional): rendering the basic meaning of words (and their order). This a machine can do under the direction of an intelligent bilinguist.

(3) Literal: rendering, as closely as the associative and syntactical capacities of another language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original. Only this is true translation.

Let me give an example of each method. The opening quatrain of *Eugene Onegin*, transliterated and prosodically accented, reads:

Moy dyádya sámïh chéstnïh právil,
Kogdá ne v shútku zanemóg,
On uvazhát' sebyá zastávil,
I lúchshe vïdumat' ne móg . . .

This can be paraphrased in an infinite number of ways. For example:

My uncle, in the best tradition,
By falling dangerously sick
Won universal recognition
And could devise no better trick . . .

The lexical or constructional translation is:

My uncle [is] of most honest rules [:]
when not in jest [he] has been taken ill.
he to respect him has forced [one],
and better invent could not . . .

Now comes the literalist. He may toy with "honorable" instead of "honest" and waver between "seriously" and "not in jest"; he will replace "rules" by the more evocative "principles" and rearrange the order of words to achieve some semblance of English construction and retain some vestige of Russian rhythm,

arriving at:

My uncle has most honest principles:
when he was taken ill in earnest,
he has made one respect him
and nothing better could invent . . .

And if he is still not satisfied with his version, the translator can at least hope to amplify it in a detailed note. (See also Comm. to Eight : XVII–XVIII.)

We are now in a position to word our question more accurately: can a rhymed poem like *Eugene Onegin* be truly translated with the retention of its rhymes? The answer, of course, is no. To reproduce the rhymes and yet translate the entire poem literally is mathematically impossible. But in losing its rhyme the poem loses its bloom, which neither marginal description nor the alchemy of a scholium can replace. Should one then content oneself with an exact rendering of the subject matter and forget all about form? Or should one still excuse an imitation of the poem's structure to which only twisted bits of sense stick here and there, by convincing oneself and one's public that in mutilating its meaning for the sake of a pleasure-measure rhyme one has the opportunity of prettifying or skipping the dry and difficult passages? I have been always amused by the stereotyped compliment that a reviewer pays the author of a "new translation." He says: "It reads smoothly." In other words, the hack who has never read the original, and does not know its language, praises an imitation as readable because easy platitudes have replaced in it the intricacies of which he is unaware. "Readable," indeed! A schoolboy's boner mocks the ancient masterpiece less than does its commercial poetization, and it is when the translator sets out to render the "spirit," and not the mere sense of the text, that he begins to traduce his author.

In transposing *Eugene Onegin* from Pushkin's Russian into my English I have sacrificed to completeness of meaning every formal element including the iambic rhythm, whenever its retention hindered fidelity. To my ideal of literalism I sacrificed everything (elegance, euphony, clarity, good taste, modern usage, and even grammar) that the dainty mimic prizes higher than truth. Pushkin has likened translators to horses changed at the posthouses of civilization. The greatest reward I can think of is that students may use my work as a pony.

One of the complications attending the translation of *Eugene Onegin* into English is the necessity of coping with a constant intrusion of Gallicisms and borrowings from French poets. The faithful translator should be aware of every such authorial reminiscence, imitation, or direct translation from another language into that of the text; this awareness may not only save him from committing howlers or bungling the rendering of stylistic details, but also guide him in the choice of the best wording where several are possible. Terms that are stilted or antiquated in Russian have been fondly rendered in stilted or antiquated English, and a point has been made of preserving the recurrence of epithets (so characteristic of a Russian romanticist's meager and overworked vocabulary), unless a contextual shade of meaning demanded the use of a synonym.

I have tried to explain many special matters in the Commentary. These notes are partly the echoes of my high-school studies in Russia half a century ago and partly the outcome of many pleasant afternoons spent in the splendid libraries of Cornell, Harvard, and the City of New York. Nothing, of course, approaching an exhaustive study of the variants to *Eugene Onegin* could be accomplished without photostats of Pushkin's manuscripts, but for obvious reasons these could not be obtained.

In many instances it was necessary to quote the Russian text. Pushkin, and his printers, used, of course, the old orthography (an illustration of it is provided by the reproduction of the 1837 edition). A method of transliteration not only based on that spelling but also reflecting Pushkin's personal departures from it would have conformed better to my notion of accuracy in these matters; but in a work not intended to baffle the foreign student of Russian, I thought it wiser to base transliteration on the new orthography introduced after the Revolution of February, 1917 (especially since all Pushkin's texts, with no concession to scholarship whatsoever, are so printed in Soviet Russia). Some of his drafts lack punctuation, and this has been supplied. His deletions are always enclosed in pointed brackets, and I have square-bracketed my own explanatory intrusions.

The writing of the book now in the hands of the reader was prompted about 1950, in Ithaca, New York, by the urgent needs of my Russian-literature class at Cornell and the nonexistence of any true translation of *Eugene Onegin* into English; but then it kept growing—in my moments of leisure, with many interruptions caused by the demands of other, more complicated, pursuits—for about eight years (during one of which I received the support of a Guggenheim Foundation award). Since 1957, after most of the book was completed, I have had little contact with current Pushkiniana.

In connection with my translation and annotations, several papers of mine have appeared: "Problems of Translation: *Onegin* in English," *Partisan Review* (New York), XXII (fall, 1955); "Zametki perevodchika" (A Translator's Notes), I, *Noviy zhurnal* (New Review; New York), XLIX (1957); "Zametki perevodchika," II, *Opiti* (Essays; New York), VIII (1957); and "The Servile Path," in the collection *On Translation*, ed. R. Brower (Cambridge, Mass., 1959).

The two stanzas on pp. 9–10 of my Introduction, be-

sides appearing in *The New Yorker*, were reprinted in my collected *Poems* (New York, 1959; London, 1961), likewise in my collected *Poesie* (Milan, 1962) *en regard* of an Italian translation. My version of stanza XXX of Canto Six of *Eugene Onegin*, with part of its commentary, was published in *Esquire* (New York), July, 1963. Appendix One, on Abram Gannibal, was published in a somewhat abridged form, entitled "Pushkin and Gannibal," in *Encounter* (London), XIX: 3 (September 1962). Appendix Two, my notes on prosody, was privately issued as an offprint by Bollingen Foundation in spring 1963.

I have always envied the writer who ends this kind of foreword with a glowing tribute to Professor Advice, Professor Encouragement, and Professor Every-Assistance. The extension of my own thanks is more limited, but their temperature just as high. I owe them to my wife, who suggested many improvements, and to my son, who made a preliminary index. For undertaking the publication of this work, I am grateful to the officers and staff of Bollingen Foundation and, in particular, for their choice of Mr. Bart Winer as copyeditor, to whom I am indebted for a meticulous and brilliant job.

Montreux, 1963 VLADIMIR NABOKOV