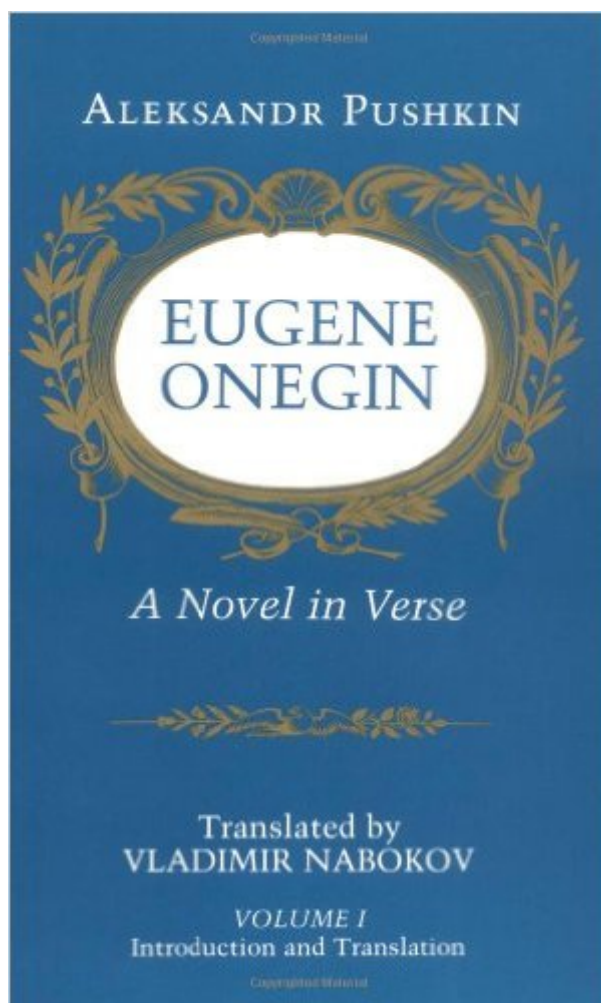


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Eugene Onegin: A Novel In Verse, Vol. 1



Synopsis

"In an era of inept and ignorant imitations, whose piped-in background music has hypnotized innocent readers into fearing literality's salutary jolt, some reviewers were upset by the humble fidelity of my version. . . ." Such was Vladimir Nabokov's response to the storm of controversy aroused by the first edition of his literal translation of Eugene Onegin. This bold rendering of the Russian masterpiece, together with Nabokov's detailed and witty commentary, is itself a work of enduring literary interest, and reflects a lifelong admiration for Pushkin on the part of one of this century's most brilliant stylists.

Book Information

Paperback: 362 pages

Publisher: Princeton University Press; 2nd ed. edition (January 1, 1991)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0691019053

ISBN-13: 978-0691019055

Product Dimensions: 4.9 x 0.9 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (15 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #105,208 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #9 inÂ Books > Literature & Fiction > Poetry > Regional & Cultural > Russian #37 inÂ Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Regional & Cultural > Russian #55 inÂ Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Literature > World Literature > European

Customer Reviews

There is an old, politically-incorrect adage regarding the translation of a literary work from one language to another. A translation is like a woman: if it's beautiful, it's not faithful; if it's faithful, it's not beautiful. This saw kept buzzing through my brain while I was reading Vladimir Nabokov's 1964 English translation of Alexander Pushkin's novel-in-verse "Eugene Onegin". The poem has a unique place in Russian literature, required reading in schools -- required memorization, from what I understand. It seems an odd choice for school rooms, being an ironic love story with a sardonic edge; but then American students are required to read "Silas Marner", George Eliot's tale of greed and redemption. Nabokov, the author of the dazzling "Pale Fire", was born in Old Russia in 1899 and became a master of his native language as well as English. His version of Pushkin's masterpiece doesn't attempt to maintain the meter or rhyming scheme of the original, thereby

leading to the danger of "piped-in background music", but presents a literal translation of "humble fidelity". There have been several English translations, and Nabokov sternly appraises them all. (Tchaikovsky's opera is dismissed as "slapdash".) He even goes so far as to compare his work with that of other translators. Thus, Onegin's flirtation with a serf in Book Four is translated by Nabokov as: "sometimes a white-skinned, dark-eyed girl's young and fresh kiss". In his notes Nabokov is amused by an earlier translator's "And, if a black-eyed girl permitted, sometimes a kiss as fresh as she" and is positively aghast at this rendering: "A kiss at times from some fair maiden, dark-eyed, with bright and youthful looks".

Ignorant Heersink ignobly writes, besides other trite nonsense, "But Nabokov's Pushkin is too literal to be any good. James Folen's trans. is far superior, ... Folen, while also literal, also is metered and rhymes. Nabokov's thuds." In reply, I quote Nabokov from his Foreword, "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." Later, Nabokov asks: "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!

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