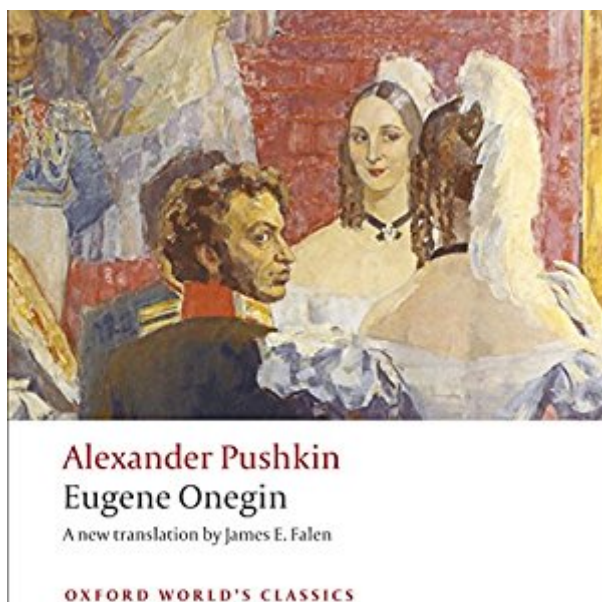


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Eugene Onegin: A Novel In Verse



Synopsis

Eugene Onegin is the master work of the poet whom Russians regard as the fountainhead of their literature. Set in 1820s Russia, Pushkin's novel in verse follows the fates of three men and three women. It was Pushkin's own favourite work, and this new translation conveys the literal sense and the poetic music of the original. Eugene Onegin is the master work of the poet whom Russians regard as the fountainhead of their literature. Set in 1820s imperial Russia, Pushkin's novel in verse follows the emotions and destiny of three men - Onegin the bored fop, Lensky the minor elegiac, and a stylized Pushkin himself - and the fates and affections of three women - Tatyana the provincial beauty, her sister Olga, and Pushkin's mercurial Muse. Engaging, full of suspense, and varied in tone, it also portrays a large cast of other characters and offers the listener many literary, philosophical, and autobiographical digressions, often in a highly satirical vein. Eugene Onegin was Pushkin's own favourite work, and it shows him attempting to transform himself from a romantic poet into a realistic novelist. This new translation seeks to retain both the literal sense and the poetic music of the original, and capture the poem's spontaneity and wit.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Nabokov's criticism of Arndt's translation is sometimes cited as evidence of Johnston's or Falen's version being superior to it. This is a misunderstanding: the thrust of Nabokov's arguments is in fact directed at any form-preserving translation of 'Onegin', and the only reason his wrath was not unleashed against later attempts at it is that Nabokov died in 1977 - the year Johnston's version was first published. It is true that the authors of more recent translations of 'Onegin' benefited from

access to Nabokov's literalistic rendering (which makes a very useful crib but cannot possibly be recommended to lay readers of poetry) and his painstakingly detailed commentary - but so did Arndt when he revised his translation in 1981. Form-preserving translations inevitably involve what Nabokov derisively called "arty paraphrase", and a common argument against such translations goes along the lines of "I prefer to know what the poet meant". The problem with this position is that Pushkin meant to create a work of art based on harmonious interplay between the sense conveyed by the words and the music of iambic tetrameters arranged in exquisitely rhymed stanzas. Approximating this interplay in English is a formidable challenge, but it is the only way to get anywhere near the intention of Pushkin. If some readers would rather enjoy the most precise English equivalents of his words, preferably placed in the same order as in the original (where this order, and even the words themselves, were often chosen for the sake of the metre and rhyme that have vanished in the literal translation) - well, that is their choice. Arndt dismissed translations of this type as "sad ritual murder performed for the purposes of an ever more insatiable lexical necrophilia".

Pushkin is to Russian literature what Shakespeare is to English literature. And the most important, the most influential, work of Pushkin's is EUGENE ONEGIN. So it is with Pushkin and ONEGIN that I begin a personal survey of Russian literature in translation (continuing on to Gogol, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Solzhenitsyn, with many stations in between - a multi-year project, no doubt). Many Russians born before the Bolshevik Revolution knew by heart lengthy excerpts from ONEGIN. (I wonder whether any born after say 1960 do.) Such memorization feats are facilitated by the fact that the novel was written in verse. And not free verse, mind you. All but a few of the approximately 5500 lines are written in very formal, structured stanzas with a consistent rhyming pattern (aBaBccDDeFFeGG) and four iambic feet per line. By this very formal structure there proceeds an unconventional, discursive, often informal narrative. The plot of the novel is disarmingly simple. Eugene (more properly "Yevgeny") Onegin is a young Russian man of comfortable inheritance. He is "sensitive", perhaps one of those new "Romantics" (the time of the novel is the 1820s), but he also is somewhat of a fop and a dandy, the sort of man liable to squander his youth in idleness. Curiously, he ends up being a not very attractive or sympathetic title character. A young woman, Tatyana, falls head over heels in love with him. Tatyana, on the other hand, is one of the more attractive and sympathetic women in literature. Onegin rejects her proffer of love but with time the tables are turned. In the course of the novel, there are several balls and parties, two lovesick letters, and a duel. That pretty much covers it. But in truth, the plot takes up only about a third of the narrative.

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