
(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren’t reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described [here](#), theorized [here](#). All comments and criticism are welcome!)

The Aesthetic Pleasure and Fictive Possibilities of Footnotes

I have just become one of only a few people, I think, who have read all four volumes of Nabokov's translation and notes on Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. Nabokov's edition has been notorious from the moment it appeared in 1964, both because it provides 1,200 pages of commentary for a slim 220 page novel, and because Nabokov insists on translating with literal fidelity, even when the results are awkward, archaic, or otherwise arguably unpoetic.

I read these four volumes as attentively as possible given that I don’t know Russian. That means I didn’t read the Russian facsimile of Pushkin’s poem that is reproduced in vol. 4, and I skipped the few untranslated transliterations. But I read Nabokov’s glosses on alliteration, his systems of transliteration, his 80-page study of Pushkin’s Abyssinian ancestor, and even the quixotic 100-page "Notes on Prosody." I did all this because I’m interested in footnotes, and especially in excessive footnotes. (Next I hope to read Pierre Bayle’s Dictionary in its entirety.) Nabokov’s practice in regard to footnotes is usually associated with *Pale Fire*, and there are also footnotes in his entomological publications, which have been collected and reprinted. But the notes in those texts can’t compare with the outlandish and apparently endlessly compulsive footnotes in his four-volume edition of *Eugene Onegin*. I’ve made notes on several topics here, and I’ll draw a general conclusion with the help of Edmund Wilson’s review.

What counts as boredom? When are explanations complete? It is interesting to contemplate what counted as boring for a person willing to spend thousands of hours in libraries and in correspondence (this was well before the internet), assembling 1,200 pages of footnotes. At one point he says "the boredom of reading through the English, German, Polish, etc., translations... was too great even to be contemplated" (vol. 2, p. 102), but he did read the other translations, and he often compares them to his own. Did he think of his activity as perverse? Possibly, at times. For example, he compiles every mention of the river that runs through Onegin’s estate; it takes him four pages. At the end he notes that Pushkin "took a perverse pleasure, it would seem, in finding various elegant Russian versions" of the 'eaux-et-forets' cliche" (vol. 2, p. 203). A line later we’re told "it would be pedantic to list the innumerable examples of this 'shady wood-murmuring brook' symbiosis in western European poetry." Fair enough, but also unbelievable enough, after four pages inventorying Pushkin’s brook, followed by the insinuation that Pushkin was "perverse" where he, Nabokov, wasn’t. There are a number of other such lists in the commentary; they are seldom dry and therefore boring, though of course some are, like the bare list of allusions to winter (vol. 2, p. 473). Overall there are remarkably few typically bibliophilic indulgences, like his complaint that a catalog of arms, issued by the Bulletin of the Public Museums of Milwaukee in 1928, misspells the name of a pistol manufacturer (vol. 3, p. 39).

Edmund Wilson thinks Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* shows "the Nabokov who bores and fatigues by overaccumulation," which "contrasts with the authentic Nabokov and with the poet he is trying to illuminate." But are they so different, or different at all? And is "boring" right here? ("Fatiguing," maybe.) Nabokov also warns himself against becoming "didactic" like some commentators, and
he praises "professional matters" (vol. 1, p. 48). All those terms could benefit from a closer reading.

In short: boredom, adequacy, didacticism, fatigue, and professionalism are all potentially intriguing traits. I find the 1,200 pages as interesting and energizing, in their different way, as 1,200 pages assembled from Pale Fire, Lolita, Pnin, and whatever other books would have to be strapped together to comprise an equivalent bulk.

Precision
There is also the trademark precision of observation, especially when it comes to flashing lights. Of the "rainbows" cast on snow by the light of horsedrawn coaches (One : XXVII : 9, in Nabokov's numbering of Eugene Onegin) he remarks: "My own fifty-year-old remembrance is not so much of prismatic colors cast upon snowdrifts by the two lateral lanterns of a brougham as of iridescent spicules around blurry street lights coming through its frost-foliated windows and breaking along the rim of the glass" (vol. 2, p. 110). Notice he is correcting Pushkin: the rainbows don't form on the snow, you see them through the coaches' windows; and they aren't rainbows, they're "spicules"; and note, Pushkin, that they break up along the rims of the glass—a detail you might have remembered, and which would have prompted you to be a bit more accurate.

Historiography
Scattered in these 1,200 pages is a wonderful essay on romanticism and neoclassicism, worthy of Arthur Lovejoy. Nabokov is good on passions (vol. 2, p. 256), and the "achromatic detail" of eighteenth-century nature poetry (vol. 2, p. 286), and there is a self-contained essay on the eleven (!) kinds of romanticism Pushkin would have recognized (vol. 3, pp. 32–37).

Criticism
Reviewers have noted that Nabokov tends often to give his own opinions about sources, even if they're not important or well-known authors, and even if Pushkin's opinion of them may have been quite different. "There are readers," he says, "who prefer Pushkin's Scene from Faust (1825) to the whole of Goethe's Faust, in which they distinguish a queer strain of triviality impairing the pounding of its profundities" (vol. 2, pp. 235–36). Rousseau's "Julie" was "total trash," and his mind was "morbid, intricate, and at the same time rather naive" (vol. 2, pp. 339–40). Virgil was "overrated," and his Eclogues are "stale imitations of the idyls of Theocritus" (vol. 2, p. 322).

(Not all these are one liners. There is for example a trenchant, even poignant, two-page long assessment of the poet Evgeniy Baratinski. Nabokov thinks he is a case of a poet suspended between minor and major. "His elegies are keyed to the precise point where the languor of the heart and the pang of thought meet in a would-be burst of music; but a remote door seems to shut quietly, the poem ceases to vibrate (though its words may still linger) at the precise moment that we are about to surrender to it" (vol. 2, p. 380). There is also a wonderful three-page biography of a critic named Vilgelm Kuechelbeker (vol. 2, pp. 445–48).

It's fascinating how little Nabokov praises Eugene Onegin: maybe a half-dozen times, but certainly less than the number of times he criticizes passages and entire chapters. Part of the reason is that what Nabokov treasures most is exactly what he cannot ever explain satisfactorily: "the only Russian element of importance," which is "Pushkin's language, undulating and flashing through verse melodies the likes of which had never been known before" (vol. 1, pp. 7–8). This passage is the crucial ending of his brief "Description of the Text," and it ends with the motto: "there is no delight without the detail": there are 1,200 pages of delight here, but none is total, because none is entirely in Russian.

As Wilson says in his review, Nabokov expends a lot of energy thinking about how Pushkin composed his novel in verse; Nabokov often mentions evidence that Pushkin hadn't made up his mind, at a given point, where he might go. In all this, Nabokov's concern is the accomplishment of the whole novel, which has coherence, unity, and symmetry: it's an unusual way of writing about art, and one of the book's most memorable contributions. It's of a piece with Nabokov's admiration for the way Pushkin puts himself into the poem, along with some of his real-life friends, and even has his (real) friends entertain his fictional ones, all without breaking the
poem's fabric. But none of this is my subject here. (See, for example, vol. 1, pp. 15-16, 19; for an "admission." p. 44.)

A last note on criticism: there are just a few, very subtle and evanescent, moments in which Nabokov acknowledges, implies, or can be read as admitting, that Pushkin is the greater artist. One of the most curious, because it's indirect, is the notes on the crucial scene in which Onegin kills Lenski in a duel. The first image we get of Lenski falling compares him to a snowball rolling down a slope. Nabokov patiently shows this is a cliche, not invented by Pushkin (vol. 3, p. 52). But then he goes on to say that the list of metaphors that then follows (Six : XXXI : 10-14) is an intentional parody of Lenski's poetic style: this seems improbable, simply because it would be so distracting if readers were to think of it. But it makes perverse sense as Nabokov's sincere attempt to defend his poet against more, and worse, cliches. And then—as if that wasn't enough—Nabokov claims Pushkin's final description of Lenski dead, as an empty house (One: XXII : 9) is showing off against Lenski's poetry! I'd like to read these two pages of commentary in a Bloomian way—as the agon of one writer against another, always thinking of writing—except that I think Nabokov probably experienced these pages as the most sincere flattery of a superior artist.

Vocabulary

An of course his vocabulary is outlandish. Leave it to Nabokov to find an expression for the gesture of swinging one's arms in front, clapping, and then swinging them in back: "to beat goose" (vol. 2, p. 96). Or to tell us that "a rusalka is a female water sprite, a water nymph, a hydriad, a riparian mermaid, and, in the strict sense, differs from the maritime mermaid in having legs" (vol. 2, p. 246). Not only do we get a disquisition on the difference between Russian blini and American pancakes, we're also told exactly how Russians ate their blini, including the number of bites per sitting ("as many as forty," vol. 2 p. 299).

Because Pushkin attributes a mild form of foot fetishism to Onegin, Nabokov spends pages schooling us in women's feet. "The associative sense of the Russian nozhki (conjuring a pair of small, elegant, high-instepped, slender-ankled lady's feet) is a shade tenderer than the French petits poid; it has not the stodginess of the English 'foot,' large or small, or the mawkishness of the German Fuesschen" (vol. 2, p. 115). He counts the feet, even in the different translations, and jokes that one translator, who counts six feet in one passage, is "entomologically minded" (vol. 2, p. 116).

Wilson's review of this book, which I'll say more about at the end, is especially harsh on Nabokov's choice of extremely obscure words. At times, Nabokov anticipates and defends himself in the notes; mainly he says he prefers exactitude to easy reading. But in the notes, where he's not translating, the same Nabokovian excesses recur. I stopped several times, for instance over the notion of a "cataptromantic stanza" (vol. 2, p. 499). But I always appreciated precision, and I did not think it got in the way of the poetry; I have a very strong sense of Pushkin, the kind of sense that can't be obtained if you don't know what counts, for the translator, as precision.

An aside, on Ithaca

Nabokov wrote this largely, I think, in Ithaca, which is my home town, and he wrote it right around the year I was born, living, I think, in a house very near my parents' house. The notes are full of remarks on America and American students. At one point he explains the differences between steaks: "The European beefsteak," he writes, "used to be a small, thick, dark, ruddy, juicy, soft, special cut of tenderloin steak, with a generous edge of amber fat on the knife-side. It had little, if anything, in common with our American 'steaks'--the tasteless meat of restless cattle" (vol. 2, p. 149). In another passage he introduces six entire pages dedicated to the analysis of two kinds of trees with the observation that his class of American students couldn't identify an elm tree outside their window (vol. 3, p. 9). When I was growing up, elms hadn't been decimated by the Dutch elm disease, and the ones outside the hall in which Nabokov taught had the characteristic ling branches reaching to the lawn, as typically mid-century American a sight as it's possible to imagine.

There is one mention of Talcotville, where Wilson lived (vol. 2, p. 391), and exactly one mention, I think, of Ithaca, in an especially meaningful place. It's at the end of his commentaries, and before his long addenda. He quotes a Pushkin poem called "The Work" as an epigraph and epitaph for his commentary; in the poem, Pushkin says he's finished with an exhausting work "of long years." Nabokov writes the following in a footnote asterisked to the poem's title: "Pushkin dated this
Wilson's review

Edmund Wilson's review, in the New York Review of Books, must count as one of the world's best book reviews (July 15, 1965). It is as clever as Gore Vidal in its tail-biting insincere self-deprecation, mingled with genuine friendship. And it is fearless: Wilson corrects Nabokov on his knowledge of his own language. But the review isn't just myopic philology. Midway through, Wilson makes a single devastating point: Wilson says Nabokov didn't understand the character Onegin:

"Mr. Nabokov's most serious failure, however—to try to get all my negatives out of the way—is one of interpretation. He has missed a fundamental point in the central situation. He finds himself unable to account for Evgeni Onegin's behavior in first giving offense to Lensky by flirting with Olga at the ball and then, when Lensky challenges him to a duel, instead of managing a reconciliation, not merely accepting the challenge, but deliberately shooting first and to kill. Nabokov says that the latter act is 'quite out of character.' He does not seem to be aware that Onegin, among his other qualities, is, in his translator's favorite one syllable adjective, decidedly злой—that is, nasty, méchant."

I think this is exactly right, and it is a masterstroke to place it in the middle of a generally quibbly review. Because I had never read Eugene Onegin before, I was the ideal reader of this passage; when I read the review, I had just finished Nabokov's four volumes, and suddenly several dozen of Nabokov's comments fell into place. He just couldn't see that part of Onegin's character. Here is an example, from many, of the kind of gloss that shows this lack. Nabokov is commenting on the word "inconsistencies," from One: LX : 6, in which Pushkin closes his first chapter by acknowledging "inconsistencies" in Onegin's character. Nabokov:

"Hardly an allusion to chronological flaws; perhaps a reference to Onegin's dual nature--dry and romantic, chilly and ardent, superficial and penetrating" (vol. 2, p. 215; for other misunderstandings see vol. 3, p. 16, vol. 3, p. 62, and also vol. 3, p. 40).

This just isn't quite enough, and Wilson's comment throws it into strong relief.

Sadly, Nabokov's reply, and Wilson's reply to him, are uncharacteristic, petty, and uninteresting (New York Review of Books, August 26, 1965). But the two squabbled throughout their friendship, and there is a very catty passage in the commentary in which Nabokov reproduces a translation of Wilson's, which he says is "good," but lards it with italicized words, which he calls "a few minor inexactitudes" (vol. 2, p. 474).

It's not the squabbling that makes Wilson's review so excellent, it's the balance between scrapping and large-scale assessments, not least his verdict that Nabokov's Eugene Onegin is of a piece with everything else of Nabokov's after his exile. It expresses "the situation, comic and pathetic, full of embarrassment and misunderstanding of the exile who cannot return, and one aspect of this is the case of the man who, like Nabokov, is torn between the culture he has left behind and that to which he is trying to adapt himself." Nabokov sees Pushkin from a distance, and that must be especially painful. It drives—that's the implication—even the most extreme performances of compulsive research. In that way even 1,200 pages of commentary, in all its microscopic kaleidoscopic telescopic excess, is not enough to convey the pathos of perpetual dislocation.