EUGENE ONEGIN

A Novel in Verse by Alexander Pushkin

A prose version of Chapter One

by Christopher Cahill

based on the literal translation

of Vladimir Nabokov

*Pétri de vanité il avait encore plus de cette espèce d’orgueil qui fait avouer avec la même indifférence les bonnes comme les mauvaises actions, suite d’un sentiment de supériorité, peut­-être imaginaire.*

Tiré d’une lettre particulière

ALEXANDER PUSHKIN

*To Petr Aleksandrovich Pletnyov*

With no thought of amusing the haughty world, preferring my attentive friends, I wish I could give you a token worthier of you — of a fine soul filled with holy dreams, with live and limpid poetry, with high thoughts and simple ones. Oh, well. Smile if you will on this collection of uneven chapters: half droll, half sad, pedestrian, ideal, the careless fruit of my amusements, insomnias, light inspirations, unripe and withered years, the intellect’s cold observations and the heart’s sorrowful remarks.

CHAPTER ONE

*To live it hurries and to feel it hastes.*

Prince Vyazemsky

I

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M

y uncle has extremely honest principles; when he was taken gravely ill, he forced us to respect him for the first time, as we’d never been able to find a reason to before. His example is a lesson to others; but, good God, what a bore to sit by a sick person day and night, not moving a step away! How deceitful to entertain someone half-alive, adjust his pillows for him, sadly serve him his medicine, sigh ― and think inwardly, ‘When *will* the devil take you?’”

II

This is what a young rake thought as he flew with post horses in the dust, the heir, by the most lofty will of Zeus, of all his relatives. Friends of Lyudrnila and Ruslan! I’d like to have you meet the hero of my novel without further ado: Onegin, a good friend of mine, was born on the Neva’s banks, where maybe you, dear reader, were born or used to shine. I’ve walked there too - but the North isn't good for my health.

III

Having served excellently, nobly, his father lived on debt, gave three balls a year, and squandered everything in the end. Fate guarded Eugene: at first, Madame looked after him; later, Monsieur replaced her. The child was boisterous but charming. Monsieur l'Abbé, a poor wretch. of a Frenchman, so as not to wear out the infant, taught him all things in jest, didn't bother him with stern moralizing, barely scolded him for his pranks and took him to walk in Letny Park.

IV

Then, when Eugene's tumultuous youth arrived, season of hope and tender melancholy, Monsieur was kicked out of the house. Now my Onegin is at large: hair cut after the latest fashion, dressed like a London Dandy ― and finally he saw the World. He could speak and write French impeccably, he danced the mazurka gracefully and bowed freely ― what more could you want? The World decided that he was clever and charming.

V

All of us had a little schooling in this and that: so it’s not hard, thank God, to flaunt one’s education in our midst. Onegin was, in the opinion of many (stern and resolute judges), well-read but a pedant. He had the happy talent to always touch lightly on everything in conversation, to keep silent, with an expert's learned air, during a weighty discussion, and to make the ladies smile with his quick wit.

VI

Latin’s out of fashion now; but, to tell you the truth, he knew just enough Latin to make out epigraphs, blather about Juvenal, and sign off his letters *vale*; and he had memorized, incorrectly, two lines from the *Aeneid*. He didn’t care to rummage in dusty books of history, but he did have a store of anecdotes running from the time of Romulus up to the present.

VII

Lacking the high passion by which we wreck our lives for the sake of measured sounds, he could not, despite our best efforts, tell an iamb from a trochee. He disparaged Theocritus and Homer; instead, he read Adam Smith and was a deep economist: which is to say that he could assess the way a state grows rich, what it subsists upon, and why it doesn’t need gold when it has simple products. His father could not understand him and mortgaged his lands.

VIII

I haven’t the time to tell you everything else Eugene knew; but where he was a true genius, what he knew better than all the arts ― what had been, since his youth, his prime roil, torment, and delight, what occupied his fretting indolence throughout each long day ― was the art of soft passion which Ovid sang, the reason why that poet ended his brilliant and unruly life suffering, in Moldavia, deep in the steppes, far from his Italy.

IX

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X

How early he’d learned to lie, conceal his desires, show jealousy, shake one’s belief, make one believe, seem gloomy, pine away, appear proud and obedient, attentive or indifferent! How languorously silent he was, how fierily eloquent, how casual in his love letters! How unselfconscious he could be when love inspired his breath, his heart! How quick and tender his gaze was, how bashful and daring, always ready to shine with an obedient tear?

XI

How able he was to seem original, to astonish the unsuspecting with a joke, frighten with feigned desperation, amuse with pleasant flattery, strike at a moment of softheartedness; to conquer young innocents with cunning and passion, wait for impulsive favors, beg or demand avowals, eavesdrop on a heart's first sound, pursue love ― and then suddenly win a secret assignation, and afterward, alone with her, to teach her love in some quiet place!

XII

How young he could trouble the hearts of admitted coquettes! Or when he wanted to annihilate his rivals, what vicious tales he'd tell! What snares he'd prepare for them! But you, lucky husbands, you stayed friends with him while he slept with your wives; and all the while the worldly man (a longstanding disciple of Faublas), the suspicious geezer, the pompous cuckold, would each remain pleased with himself, his dinner, and his wife.

XIII, XIV

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XV

Often he’d still be in bed when little billets would be brought to him. What? Invitations? Yes, indeed, three houses ask him to a soiree: Here, there will be a hall; somewhere else a children's party. So where is my rake to go? Whom will he start with? Never mind: its easy to get to all of them in time. Meanwhile, in morning dress, having put on a broad bolivar, Onegin drives to the boulevard and strolls in the open there until his vigilant Bréguet watch chimes for dinnertime.

XVI

It is already dark. He gets into a sleigh. The cry “Make way, make way!” resounds. Frostdust silvers his beaver collar. He has dashed off to Talon’s: he is sure that his friend Kaverin is waiting for him there already. Now he has entered ― and the cork is shot toward the ceiling, the flow of Comet wine spills out, a bloody roast beef is before him, and truffles (luxury of the young, the finest flower of French cooking) and a Strasbourg pâte between a ripe Limburg cheese and a golden pineapple.

XVII

He calls for more wine to drown the hot fat of the cutlets; but Bréguet’s chime tells them that a new ballet has begun. The theater’s harsh taskmaster the inconstant lover of enchanting actresses; a freeman of the greenroom, Onegin has flown to the theater, where every man is a critic prepared to applaud an *entrechat*, hiss Phaedra or Cleopatra, call out Moëna for an encore ― anything to be heard.

XVIII

A magic region? There in the old days Fonvízin ― the master of brave satire, freedom’s friend ― and the derivative Knyazhnín sparkled; there Ózerov shared the tributes of unprompted tears, of praise, with the young Sernyónova; there our Katénin resurrected Corneille’s majestic genius; there caustic Shahovskóy produced his noisy, swarming comedies; there, too, Didelot crowned himself with glory; there, there, in the wings, my youth swept past.

XIX

My goddesses! What’s become of you? Where are you? Listen to my sad voice: Are you still the same? Have other girls taken your place without replacing you? Will I ever hear your songs again? Will I see again the Russian ballerina’s soulful flight? Or will my mournful gaze see no familiar faces on the dreary stage, and having looked with disenchantment at its alien world, will I, indifferent spectator of pleasure, yawn silently and recollect the past?

XX

By now the house is full; boxes glitter; parterre and stalls ― all seethes; in the top gallery they clap impatiently and, soaring up, the curtain swishes. Resplendent, half ethereal, obedient to the magic bow, surrounded by a throng of nymphs, Istómina stands: while touching the floor with one foot, she turns the other slowly, and lo! a leap, and lo! she flies, she flies like fluff from Eol’s lips, now twines and now entwines her waist and beats one swift small foot against the other.

XXI

Everyone applauds. Onegin enters: he walks ― on people’s toes ― between the stalls; he trains his opera glass on the boxes filled with strange ladies; he has scanned all the tiers; he has seen it all; he’s dreadfully displeased with the faces, the clothes. He has greeted men on every side, then glanced at the stage abstractedly, turned away, and yawned, and said: “It’s time to change all this; for a long time I’ve suffered through ballets, but I’ve had enough, even of Didelot.”

XXII

Arnors, diaboli, and dragons still caper and make noise on the stage; at the carriage porch the weary footmen are still asleep on the fur coats; people still stamp, blow their noses, cough, hiss, clap; lamps still glitter everywhere, inside and outside; the chilly horses still fidget, bored with their harness, and round the fires the coachmen curse their masters and beat their palms together; and yet Onegin has left already; he’s driving home to dress.

XXIII

Shall I give you a faithful picture of the secluded room where fashion’s model student is dressed, undressed, and dressed again? Whatever, to satisfy the lavish whim, London the trinket dealer ships over the Baltic waves to us in exchange for timber and tallow; whatever useful items the insatiable taste of Paris invents for entertainment, for luxury, for fashionable pleasure ― all this adorned the room of our eighteen year old philosopher.

XXIV

Byzantine ambered pipes, porcelain and bronze paperweights, and ― delight of the pampered senses ― perfumes in cut crystal; combs, little steel files, straight scissors, curved ones, and thirty kinds of brushes ― some for the nails, others for the teeth. Rousseau (I shall observe in passing) couldn’t understand how the dignified Grimm dared to dean his nails in front of him, the eloquent crackpot. The advocate of liberty and rights was hardly right in this case.

XXV

One can be a capable man and still take care of his nails. Why pointlessly chafe against the way we live? Custom rules mankind. My Eugene, a second Chadáev, being afraid of jealous comments, was a pedant in his dress and what we’ve called a fop. He spent three hours, at least, in front of the mirror, and emerged from his dressing room like giddy Venus when, dressed in men’s clothing, the goddess drives to a masked ball.

XXVI

Having caught your curious attention with this fashionable toilette, I might describe here before the learned world his attire. This would, no doubt, be daring but, it's my business to describe. Still ― “dress coat,” “waistcoat,” “pantaloons” ― none of these are Russian words; in fact, I see (I admit it) that my poor style could do without so many foreign words, though I did used to flip through the Academic Dictionary.

XXVII

But this isn't our concern right now: we’d better hurry to the ball towards which Onegin has already sped off headlong in a hack coach. In front of darkened houses, the twin lamps of coupes pour forth rows of cheerful light along the sleeping streets and project rainbows on the snow. A splendid house glitters, studded with lamps. Shadows move behind its glazed windows: the profiled heads of ladies and of extravagant dandies come and go there.

XXVIII

Up to the porch our hero now has driven; past the hall porter, like a dart, he has flown up the marble steps, run his fingers through his hair, and entered. The ballroom is full of people. The crowd is dancing a mazurka to music already tired of itself. It is noisy, crowded. There the cavalier guard’s spurs clink; there the little feet of charming ladies flit; flaming glances follow after their captivating tracks and the jealous whispering of fashionable women is drowned by the sound of violins.

XXIX

In my frivolous, enamored youth I was mad about balls: there’s no safer spot for avowals or passing a love letter: Honored husbands! I’ll offer you my services; listen, I want to forewarn you. And you, mothers: keep your eyes on your daughters; hold your lorgnettes up straight. Or else... else ― God forbid! I’m only telling you this because I stopped sinning years ago.

XXX

Alas, I’ve wasted much of my life at one thing and another! But I would still like balls if they didn’t corrupt us. I like wild youth, the crush, the glitter, the gladness, the well-dressed ladies; I like their little fee but then I doubt that in all Russia you will find three pairs of shapely feminine feet. Ah me, for a long time I could not forget two little feed... Despondent, listless, I still remember them, and in sleep they disturb my heart.

XXXI

So when and where, in what desolate place, will you forget them, crazy fool? Little feet, little feet! Where are you now? Where do you walk on blooming flowers? Raised in Oriental softness, you left no prints on the sad Northern snow: you preferred the luxurious feel of yielding carpets. How long has it been since I was distracted by you from the thirst for fame and praise, from thoughts of my fatherland and even of imprisonment? The happiness of youth has vanished, just as your light trace on the meadows.

XXXII

Diana’s bosom, Flora’s cheeks, are charming, dear friends! But for me the little foot of Terpsichore is somehow more charming still. By offering the gaze a priceless reward it conjures a swarm of desires with its eloquent beauty. I love to see it, my dear Elvina, beneath long tablecloths, on the meadows’ turf in spring-time, on the hearth’s cast iron in winter, on the mirrory parquet of a ballroom floor, on the granite rocks of the shore.

XXXIII

I remember the sea before a storm: how I envied the waves running in turbulent succession to lie down, with love, at her feet! How much I wanted then to touch, kite the waves, those dear feet with my lips! Never, not even in my fervid youth, was I so tortured with longing to kiss the lips of young Armide, or any rose-flushed cheeks, or yielding breasts ― no, the surge of passions had never split my soul him this before.

XXXIV

I remember another time: now and then in fantasy I hold the happy stirrup and in my hands I feel a little foot. Again the imagination seethes, again that touch has fired the blood in my withered heart, again that ache, that love again! But enough of praising proud enchanting women with my garrulous lyre: they aren't worth either the passions or the songs they inspire; their words, the cast of their eyes, are as deceptive as their little feet.

XXXV

And my Onegin? Half asleep, he drives from ball to bed, while tireless Petersburg is roused already by the drum. The merchant's up, the pedlar’s on his way, the cabby drags himself to the hack stand, the Okhta milkmaid hurries with her jug, the morning snow creaks under het

Morning's pleasant noise has begun, shutters are opened, chimney smoke ascends in a blue column, and the baker, a punctual German in a cotton cap, has already opened his grate more than once.

XXXVI

But tired by the ball’s turbulence, having turned morning into midnight, the child of pleasure and luxury sleeps peacefully in blissful shade. He will awake past noon, and again till morning his life will be set on its course, monotonously varied, each day the same as the last. But was my Eugene happy ― free, in the bloom of his golden years ― for all his brilliant conquests, his daily pleasures? Was he, for all his parties, as carefree and vibrant as he seemed?

XXXVII

No, feelings cooled early in him. The social hum became tedious. Beauties couldn't distract him long. Betrayals finally fatigued him. Friends and friendship palled, since dearly he couldn’t go on sluicing down beefsteaks and pate with champagne, or scattering his usual piquant remarks when his head ached; and though he was a fiery rake, he finally grew tired of sword or pistol duels.

XXXVIII

A sickness (which should have been diagnosed long ago) similar to the English “spleen” ― in short, the Russian “chondria” ― took hold of him little by little. He didn't think to shoot himself; thank God, but he grew cold toward life. He would appear in drawing rooms like Childe Harold, ill-humored, languid. Nothing moved him ― neither gossip nor cards, neither a lively glance nor an alluring sigh ― he noticed nothing.

XXXIX, XL, XLI

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XLII

Capricious society belles! He dropped you first; and it *is* true that in our day the upper crust is something of a bore. Though the occasional woman can discuss Bentham or Say, in general their conversation is unbearable, harmless twaddle though it may be. On top of that they are so pure, so elegant, so intelligent, so pious, so circumspect, so scrupulous, so unapproachable, that the mere sight of them brings on the spleen.

XLIII

And you, young lovelies, whom late at night swift droshkies carry off over the streets of Petersburg, my Eugene abandoned you as well. Turning aside from all unsettling pleasures, Onegin locked himself indoors; yawning, he took up a pen; wanted to write; but hard work sickened him: nothing came from his pen, and he did not become a writer, that arrogant breed on whom I pass no judgment ― since I’m one of them myself.

XLIV

Once again given over to idleness, oppressed by emptiness of soul, he settled down with the praiseworthy aim of absorbing the thoughts of others; he put a troop of books upon a shelf, read, read ― and all to no end: here he found dullness; there, lies and raving; this lacked conscience, that lacked sense; they were each shackled with different chains; and the ancients had become old-fashioned, the moderns raged against the old. Just as he'd given up women, he gave up books and curtained the shelf and its dusty tribe with funereal taffeta.

XLV

Having cast off the burden of the *monde’s* conventions myself; having, as he had, put aside vain pursuits, I made friends with him at that time. I liked his ways, his helpless addiction to dreams, his odd originality and sharp, chilled mind; I was embittered, he was sullen; we both had known the play of passions; both, life oppressed; in both, the heart's glow had gone out; for both of us, just in the morning of our lives, the rancor of blind Fortuna was still in store.

XLVI

Anyone who has live and thought can’t help, in his soul, despising people; anyone who has felt stirs up the ghosts of irrecoverable days; for him there are no more enchantments; he is bitten by repentance, by the snake of end: here he found dullness; there, lies and raving; this lacked conscience, that lacked sense; they were each shackled with different chains; and the ancients had become old-fashioned, the moderns raged against the old. Just as he’d given up women, he gave up books and curtained the shelf and its dusty tribe with funereal taffeta.

XLVII

How often in summertime, when the night sky above the Neva is transparent and luminous, and the bright mirror of its waters doesn’t reflect Diana’s face - having recalled old inrrigues, old loves, impressionable, carefree again, we silently drank in the breath of the soft night! As to the greenwood a slumbering dogged convict is brought from prison, so would we be borne off by a dream, of the beginning of young life.

XLVIII

With his soul full of regrets, leaning on the granite parapet, Eugene stood pensive ― just as the Poet has described himself elsewhere. All was still; only the night sentries called to one another, and the far clip-clop of some droshky from the Mil’onnaya resounded suddenly; only a boat, oars swinging, swam on the dozing river, and in the distance, we heard a horn and a bold song. But it is even sweeter to hear, among the night’s sounds, the strain of Tassois octaves.

XLIX

Adrian waves, O Brenta! I’ll see you and, filled again with inspiration, I’ll hear your magic voice, sacred to Apollo’s nephews, known to me through the proud lyre of Albion, my kin! The sensuousness of golden Italy’s nights enjoy in freedom, with a young Venetian girl ― now babbling, now silent swimming in a mysterious gondola; with her my lips will touch the tongue of Petrarch, the tongue of love.

L

Will my hour of freedom come? It is time, it is time I call to it; I roam above the sea; I wait for the right weather; I signal the sailing ships. Under a canopy of storms, fighting with waves, when will start on my course over the free crossway of the sea? It's time to leave the dreary shore of this unfriendly land and, by the soft Southern waves, beneath the sky of my Africa, to sigh for somber Russia, where I suffered, where I loved, where I buried my heart.

LI

Onegin was prepared to travel abroad with me; but soon we were to be separated by fate for a long time. That was when his father died. A greedy host of creditors surrounded him. Every man has his own way. Hating lawsuits, contented with what he had, Eugene relinquished the

inheritance to them; seeing no great loss in this or maybe sensing in advance the death of his aged uncle..

LII

All of a sudden he did receive word from the steward that his uncle was near death in bed and wanted to say goodbye to him. Having read the sad letter, Eugene drove headlong to see him, traveling post (with this I began my novel), and yawned in anticipation as he went, preparing, for the sake of money, to suffer boredom, complaints, and deceit. But, having hurried to his uncle’s manor, he found him laid on the table, ready to be buried.

LIII

He found the grounds, full of attendants; friends and foes, devotees of funerals, had come from all over to see the dead man. 'The corpse was interred, the priests and guests ate, drank, and then gravely dispersed, as though their time had been well spent. Now our Onegin (up till now a unruly wastrel) is a country gentleman, absolute lord of mills, waters, forests, lands, and he is delighted to have changed his earlier course.

LIV

For two days the secluded fields, the coolness of the somber park, the bubbling of the quiet brook, seemed new to him. By the third day, the groves, hills, and fields no longer diverted him; instead, they put him to sleep. Then he saw that his boredom was the same in the country, even though there were no streets, no palaces, no cards, no balls, no fashionable poems. Ennui was waiting for him on the watch, and it kept running after him like a shadow or a faithful wife.

LV

I was born for the peaceful life, for rural calm; in the wild the lyre’s voice is more resounding, creative dreams are more alive. Given over to harmless pastimes, I wander by a desolate lake and *far niente* is my rule. I awake each morning into sweet idleness and freedom; I read little, sleep a lot, give no thought to evanescent fame. Isn’t this how, earlier on, I spent, in idleness and quiet, my happiest days?

LVI

Flowers, love, the country, idleness, fields ― my soul belongs to you! I’m always glad to note any difference between Onegin and myself, lest an ironic reader or some publisher of elaborate slander, recognizing my features, should afterwards claim shamelessly that, like Byron, the poet of pride, I have scrawled my own portrait - as if it were no longer possible to write a long poem about something other than oneself!

LVII

In this connection rll observe that all poets are attached to dreamt love. It used to be that I'd dream of beloved objects and my soul would preserve their secret image. The Muse would then revive them later: in this way, carefree, I would sing of a girl of the mountains, my ideal, or of harem slaves beside the Salgir’s banks. These days, my friends, you are always asking: “For whom does your lyre sigh? To which one, among the crowds of jealous girls, have you dedicated its music?

LVIII

“Whose gaze, exciting inspiration, rewards your pensive singing with a moist caress? Who is the idol of your verse?” Really, nobody, my friends, I sweats I went through love's mad anxiety joylessly. The man who first combined the fever of rhymes with love was fortunate: by doing so he doubled poetry’s sacred derangement, following in Petrarch’s tracks; he soothed the heart’s pangs and caught fame, as well ― but, in love, I was dull and mute.

LIX

Love passed, the Muse appeared, and my dart mind cleared up. Free at last, I seek again the harmony of magic sounds, feelings, and thoughts; I write, and my heart doesn't fret; the pen, lost in a trance, doesn’t sketch feminine feet or heads in the margins of unfinished poems; spent ashes won’t flare up again; I’m still melancholy, but there are no more tears and soon, soon there won’t be a trace of the storm left in my soul; then I'll start to write a poem in twenty-five cantos or so.

LX

I’ve already thought of the outline and my hero’s name. In the meanwhile, I have finished my novel’s first chapter; I’ve looked all this over closely; there are many inconsistencies but I have no wish to correct them. I'll pay the censors what they’re owed and feed the critics with the fruits of my labors. Go on, then, to the Neva’s banks, newborn book! And win me fame’s tribute, misreadings, buzz and abuser.