**On Translating Eugene Onegin**

1
What is translation? On a platter
A poet’s pale and glaring head,
A parrot’s screech, a monkey’s chatter,
And profanation of the dead.
The parasites you were so hard on
Are pardoned if I have your pardon,
O, Pushkin, for my stratagem:
I traveled down your secret stem,
And reached the root, and fed upon it;
Then, in a language newly learned,
I grew another stalk and turned
Your stanza patterned on a sonnet,
Into my honest roadside prose⎯
All thorn, but cousin to your rose.

2
Reflected words can only shiver
Like elongated lights that twist
In the black mirror of a river
Between the city and the mist.
Elusive Pushkin! Persevering,
I still pick up Tatiana’s earring,
Still travel with your sullen rake.
I find another man’s mistake,
I analyze alliterations
That grace your feasts and haunt the great
Fourth stanza of your Canto Eight.
This is my task⎯a poet’s patience
And scholastic passion blent:
Dove-droppings on your monument.

⎯Vladimir Nabokov, *The New Yorker* (1955 January 8)

Nabokov ironically uses tetrameter sonnets like those of Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin to defend his choice of translating Pushkin’s work into free verse.