*From:* Alexander Poushkin by William R. Morfill, *Westminster Review* **119** (1883), 420−451.

… In 1812 was completed the poem of Eugène Oniéguin, in which the author attempted a completely new style, moulding his work upon the lighter sketches of Byron, in the Italian manner. Oniéguin is a man of the world, fashionable and *blasé.* The poet will remind us somewhat of Byron, in the account he gives of his education:⎯ [CHAPTER 1]

[VI] “Latin is now out of fashion;

So, to tell you the truth,

He knew it fairly—

He could decipher an inscription,

Talk about Juvenal,

And write ‘*vale*’ at the end of a letter.

Moreover he remembered, though not without a mistake,

Two verses of the neid.

He took no pleasure

To grope in the chronological dust

Of the earth’s existence;

But some anecdotes of olden time,

From Romulus to our days,

He preserved in his memory.

[VII] Not being inclined to waste

His life on sounds,

He could not distinguish

An iambic from a choreus.

He found fault with Homer and Theocritus,

But read Adam Smith;

And was a deep economist,

That is to say, he could form opinions how

The empire becomes rich,

And upon what it exists, and why

It has no need of gold

When it has natural products.

His father could not understand this,

And so had to mortgage his estates.

[VIII] But I have no leisure to tell

All that Oniéguin knew ;

But the thing in which he was a real genius,

Which he knew better than any other art,

Which to him from boyhood

Was labour and pain and delight,

Which occupied the whole day,

Was the study of the tender passion

Which Naso sang.

For which he suffered and ended

His brilliant and turbulent life,

In Moldavia, in the wilds of the steppe,

Afar from his native Italy.”

After having spent some party of his life idly in the capital, Oniéguin has a fortune left him by an uncle, and goes on to take possession of his estate in the country. The second canto opens with a description of the property, which the young hero has inherited:⎯ [CHAPTER 2]

[I] “The country seat, where Eugène felt dull,

Was a charming little nest;

There the lover of innocent enjoyments

Might bless Heaven.

The manor-house was solitary,

Defended by a hill from the wind.

It stood by a little river. Far away

In front of it rippled and bloomed

The meadows and the green cornfields.

Here and there peeped the villages;

Herds of cattle wandered through the fields,

And a large carelessly arranged garden

Spread its thick shrubs,

A refuge for the pensive dryads.”

In the midst of his solitude in the country Oniéguin makes the acquaintance of a young neighbour, with whom he soon becomes a fast friend:⎯

[VI] “A new proprietor had come

Just then to his country-house,

And gave occasion for a good deal of talk

In the neighbourhood,

By name Vladimir Lenski,

With a soul thoroughly steeped in Göttingen:

A handsome fellow, in the flower of his youth,

An adorer of Kant and a poet.

He brought from misty Germany

The fruits of study,

Dreams of love,

A fiery and strange spirit,

A style of talking always enthusiastic,

And curly hair falling over his shoulders.

Among their neighbours were two young ladies, Olga and Tatiana, at the house of whose parents the young men frequently visited. These are separate types which the poet has described very accurately. With Olga Lenski falls in love. Poushkin tells us:⎯

[XXII] “She gave to the poet

The first dream of youthful ecstasy;

The thought of her inspired

The first echo of his harp.

Farewell, ye golden amusements;

He loved the thick groves,

Solitude and silence,

And the nightly stars and the moon.

\* \* \* \*

[XXIII] “Always gentle, always docile,

Always gay as morning;

Simple as the love of the poet,

Dear as the kiss of love;

So is Olga. Eyes as blue as heaven,

A smile, flaxen hair,

Harmony of motion and voice and figure,

All these are in Olga. She was

A living love-story.

There you will find the portrait of the sweet girl.

Well, I was some time in love with her myself,

But it ended in nothing.

And now permit me, reader,

To occupy myself with her elder sister.

[XXIV] Her sister was named Tatiana.

\* \* \* \*

[XXV] “Neither by beauty,

Nor by rosy freshness,

Nor by her eyes did she attract.

Shy, melancholy, silent,

Like a timid wild deer,

She in the midst of her family

Appeared a strange maiden.

She did not know how to please

Either her father or her mother.

A child herself, amid the troops of children

She did not desire to sport and gambol;

And often for the whole day

Sat silent at the window.”

As Lenski falls in love with Olga, who reciprocates his passion,, so, on the other hand, the romantic Tatiana is *éprise* with Oniéguin. The struggles of the young girl with this passion are admirably described: they remind one of the similar case of Elspie in Clough’s “Bothie,” a fresh and charming picture.

After a restless night the poor girl makes a confession of her love to her nurse, and then sits down to compose a letter to Oniéguin. Poushkin apologizes to his readers for making his heroine take this step, and has some very jocose remarks upon the custom of his countrymen at that time writing in French. During the first thirty years of this century, and the latter part of the previous one, nearly all Russian correspondence (diplomatic and otherwise) was conducted in French. An end was put to this shameful state by the Emperor Nicholas, who, by making the national language the medium of conversation at Court, restored it to its proper dignity. And, indeed, that so vigorous a language as Russian should give place to French seems to involve an absurdity. The letter, a very pathetic one, is sent with much reluctance and many tears by the unfortunate Tatiana; but it only elicits a cold answer from Oniéguin, who frankly avows that he is incapable of love and constancy. In the meantime nothing can be deeper than the mutual affection of Lenski and Olga; but, between Lenski and Oniéguin, on account of the former being jealous because his friend has danced too often with his betrothed. The quarrel leads to a duel, and in the duel Lenski is killed. Poushkin has very graphically described the fate which awaited himself a few years afterwards. The poet moralizes cynically when he speaks of the cold-blooded murder of his friend by Oniéguin. [CHAPTER 6]

[XXXV] “Torn by remorse of heart,

Grasping in his hand the pistol,

Eugène gazes on Lenski.

He is dead! said the Second.

Dead! Oniéguin, overpowered

At that dreadful word,

Departs, and calls away his companion.

Zaretski carefully lays

The corpse, cold as ice, on a sledge,

And bears home the sad burden.

Scenting the dead man, the horses

Neighed and bounded, with white foam

The steel bit was moistened,

And they flew like arrows.

[XXXVI] “My friend, you grieve for the poet.

In the flower of his joyous hopes,

He has not fulfilled them for the world.

Hardly out of the garb of boyhood,

He has passed away. Where is the glowing excitement,

Where is the noble struggle of the feelings,

And of tender, courageous young thoughts?

Where are the passionate longings of love,

And the thirst for knowledge and labour,

And the fear of vice and disgrace?

And ye, musings on the past,

Ye, visions of a celestial life,

Ye, dreams of holy poetry⎯

[XXXVII] “Maybe he was born for the good of the world,

Or at least for glory.

His lyre, now silent,

Might have made his voice

Echo boldly through the ages.

Perhaps as the world rolled on,

A high dignity awaited the poet.

His suffering spirit,

Perhaps, carried away with itself

A holy secret, and for us

A life-giving voice is buried.

But in the grave

The hymn of time

And the blessings of his race cannot reach him.

[XXXIX] “Maybe, also, the usual

Fate awaited the poet.

The years of youth would have gone by,

The glow of the soul would have grown cold;

A great change would have come over him.

He would have given up the muses and got married,

Happy at his country seat.

He would have worn a knitted dressing-gown;

He would have had practical experience of life;

At forty he would have had the gout,

Would have drunk, ate, been dull, grown fat,

And finally he would have died

In his bed, surrounded by his children,

Weeping old women, and surgeons.

The poet then in very tender verses describes the burial-place of the murdered enthusiast. In the next canto, the seventh, Poushkin shows us how soon the memory of Lenski is destined to be effaced:⎯ [CHAPTER 7]

[X] “My poor Lenski! Not long

Did Olga weep and languish.

Alas! the young betrothed

Was unfaithful to her grief.

Another attracted her regard,

Another succeeded in lulling

Her sufferings with the charm of love.

An Uhlan was able to captivate her,

An Uhlan was beloved by her,

And see, already with him before the altar,

She bashfully underneath the wreath

Stands with bended head,

With a sparkle in her downcast eyes,

With a soft smile on her lips.”

And now Tatiana is alone and melancholy. After some time has elapsed, she is taken to Moscow and married to a very aristocratic and rich general. Being a woman of great strength of character, she is easily able to shake off the traditions of country life, and to fulfil the duties of her more exalted station. Time goes on, and Oniéguin meets her at a ball, and is amazed to find in the stately princess the Tatiana who had once so naïvely confessed her attraction to him. He writes to her and receives a letter in reply, in which she tells him how much she once loved him, and would at one time have preferred a country life with him, but now all is over.

We consider this poem on the whole to be a very successful one⎯the metre consists of eight or nine-syllabled lines very skilfully varied in stanzas of fourteen lines, the last two of which always rhyme and close the verse with a couplet. The style is slight and sparkling, and well adapted for serio-comic verse; in fact, much more so than the Ottava Rima, which does not seem as suitable to the Russian as to the Polish language, for Slowacki has succeeded very well in his Beniowski. The characters of Lenski, Oniéguin, Tatiana, and Olga are drawn with a very fine pencil, and are each types. By the irony of fate the brilliant and sympathy-seeking Lenski loves the amiable but commonplace Olga, whereas the passionate and generous Tatiana wastes her love upon the artificial and narrow-hearted Oniéguin, a bad specimen of a bad class of man⎯the Russian dandy. But the end of the piece shows him the nemesis of his life; for the man who has repudiated the nobler impulses of existence, and who is satisfied by materialism and material pleasures, and leads a life “besotted in self,” there is nothing to prevent the consummation of a moral suicide. Such a person can only look (to borrow the forcible words of Tennyson [in ‘Love and Duty,’ 1842]) for

“The long mechanic pacings to and fro,

The eye glazed o’er with dull and sapless days,

The set grey life and apathetic end.”

No one can accuse Poushkin of want of nationalism in this poem; it is Russian in the backbone and in every fibre. He has made it the vehicle for the description of many customs and manners, such as the picturesque touches of the coachman round the huge fires in the streets while their masters and mistresses are at the ball, the various superstitious ceremonies which Tatiana, a true Russian girl, performs as auguries of her fate, reminding one of Zhukovski’s Svetlana⎯the sketch of the nurse, and the vigorous picture of Moscow. Here we have the *vera effigies* of Russia. And now a few words seems due to the metrical translation of the poem put forward by Colonel Spalding …

[This extract occurs on pages 438−443.]