

# Pushkin and Romantic Self-Criticism

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## **I - “What is Man Made of That He May Reproach Himself?”**

In a crucial episode of Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Werther meets someone not unlike himself. He is, of course, horrified, and he loses all self-control.<sup>(1)</sup> But not in the manner that we might expect a “suicide” to lose control. He reads in the face of Herr Schmidt, the love-lorn suitor of one of Lotte’s friends, an expression of stubbornness and ill humor, not any limitation of the mind, and launches into a diatribe against selfish and self-destructive urges. As Werther puts it, “I simply had to take over the conversation and hold forth against the moodiness of the man” (45). His lecture extols the goodness of life and attacks indolence as a sickness to be cured through pleasure in activity. “Get up and hum a few dance tunes,” Lotte happily adds (46). Herr Schmidt objects that “one is not always in control of oneself, least of all one’s feelings” (46); but Werther retorts that everyone should be thankful to be rid of disagreeable feelings, and calls ill humor a vice: “Anything that does harm to oneself or one’s neighbor deserves to be called a vice” (47). As the debate heats up, Werther grows more and more impassioned. He opposes the doctrine of self-control to the cult of feeling with such intensity and fervor that he breaks down and must leave the company.

The episode is complex and controversial for any idea of self-criticism, since Werther is blind to his own lucidity. He does not see the relevance of his remarks about Herr Schmidt to his own personality. Nevertheless, the critique does occur in a Romantic novel, giving us a glimpse of the Romantic tendency to critique Romanticism. Romanticism is the greatest skeptic of Romanticism. Rarely, however, have critics of Romanticism described this skepticism with any kind of clarity. The problem of Romanticism’s critique of itself is most often expressed in the form of personal self-criticism and self-injury—nothing like a critique of the movement from within itself. In the case of Rousseau, for example, critics note that his attempts to achieve self-sufficiency and power illuminate his failures and weaknesses. Indeed, Rousseau’s self-sufficiency seems to derive, paradoxically, from his insufficiency. He sacrifices mastery to master. This effect, however, is usually attributed more to

Rousseau's personality than to the structure of his writings.[\(2\)](#)

Similarly, Werther takes an autobiographical form that occults the critical nature of writing in the Romantic novel. Werther writes *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, it seems, with the help of an editor. But our glimpse of the editor is limited. It is only in the second part and at the conclusion that he surfaces. His dry and critical prose contrasts sharply with Werther's letter to Lotte and implies a critique of suicide. But what is the effect of this conclusion? Does it strive to salvage an optimistic world view and to condemn suicide as a desperate and insane act? Or is it the mirror image of Werther's own self-destructiveness? If the latter is true, the novel takes on the double aspect given to Werther's personality, and Werther, the novel and the man, are both killed by themselves. "What is man made of," we may ask ourselves with Werther, "that he may reproach himself?" (23).

## 2

Incidentally, if it sounds as if I am proposing a postmodern reading of the novel's self-deconstructive nature, let me be clear that I am tracing, rather, the origins of this kind of reading. Postmodern theorists have not developed the anthropology necessary to understand either their own idea of "self-reflexivity" or the human and ethical elements of Romanticism. Instead, they have entrenched their thinking in linguistic theories, in which language often acts as a rather unreliable instrument of illumination. According to the theories of Paul de Man, for example, language serves insight, but as soon as the self tries to reflect on itself in language, the insights dry up. The gap between word and object is just too wide to surmount. Consequently, the novel is doomed to irony, for language represents only its own limitations and never its object.

Romanticism is a self-critical movement, but theories of language in isolation cannot account for this phenomenon because it involves social and ethical structures that develop in history. Novels reflect upon other novels and upon the novel form in general as well as upon the weaknesses and strengths of their characters, but they do not do so through the ironic properties of language but through the ironic structure that has come to define the self in its contradictory embrace of center and periphery, of the roles of artist and critic, and of victim and victimizer.[\(3\)](#) First, the intense desire for originality and uniqueness characteristic of the Romantic attitude creates an atmosphere of rivalry, in which individual writers criticize others for inventions that they themselves would have prized had they been so fortunate as to discover them, and in which the failure to achieve uniqueness in art often drives artists to seek it by occupying extreme and self-destructive positions in society. Second and more important, the ironic structure of the Romantic novel derives from an ethical and political impulse. The Romantic

novel is the creation of the heirs of Rousseau, and it strives to attack the beliefs and understanding of readers, thereby inviting them to participate in a view critical of their own society.<sup>(4)</sup> Thus, on two counts, such novels manifest ironic human attitudes that have nothing to do with recent theories of language. Indeed, it is only when the self-critical nature of the Romantic character wins out completely over the human and drives it underground that textuality acquires, in anthropomorphic guise, the property of self-destructiveness or self-deconstructiveness—another metaphor for suicide, here textual suicide.

The Romantic character discovers itself in the representation of victims and marginals, and these positions, due to their critical relation to social organization, force the novel of the period to reflect upon both its status as a literary genre and as an ethical position. Herein lies the value of the Romantic contribution to historical and ethical consciousness as well as its gift to literature. Rousseau and his followers examine the relation between the individual and society, and grant more worth to the one by recording his or her suffering at the hands of the many. Romantic novelists criticize the tendency in society to undervalue, limit, and persecute individual desire, but they try to record their own stake in the same tendencies. This is why we can say that Romanticism is a critical and self-critical movement.

Yet the term “self-critical” may raise some problems, unless we understand that it embraces a wide spectrum of activities. The Romantics conceive of criticism as a form of philosophical thought, thanks to Kant, but they also lend to criticism the plainer sense of an attack. The emphasis on the suffering of the individual, peculiar to Romanticism, translates the idea of criticism into a much more aggressive attitude, and for the individual schooled in the paranoia of Rousseau, the most abstract of criticisms may offer a personal affront. Similarly, the idea of self-criticism takes on an ominous meaning akin to Werther’s self-reproach.

Romanticism begins as a critical and self-critical movement but often turns to self-cutting observations. The blood spilled from its self-inflicted wounds becomes the substance of a sacred baptism, a “blessing,” for “to bless” means “to bloody” and “to make holy.” The Romantic character actively exposes its own weaknesses, a process that gives it an air of ethical superiority; but this process may also begin to resemble the egoism of an old war horse who exhibits an ulcerated limb as a medal of heroism.

## **II - “The Poet’s Only Theme is ‘I’”**

By 1821, Pushkin had overtly associated himself with Romanticism, calling his *Prisoner of the Caucasus* “Romantic.” The later and celebrated novel in verse,

*Eugene Onegin*, shows Pushkin to be a more mature student of Romanticism, and consequently to possess the understanding necessary to put the idea of self-criticism into relief.<sup>(5)</sup> The overt narrative structure of *Onegin* encourages criticism of its hero by the narrator, and the plot includes a sufficient number of Romantic types to formulate some idea of how Romantics relate to Romanticism. The narrator, for example, loves to mock Onegin's belated Romanticism and to sing how he has become blasé and unoriginal, asserting, paradoxically, the Romantic doctrine of originality. The most radical reading of the novel therefore relies on the most unlikely of tendencies, given the current climate in literary theory. To understand Pushkin's use of self-criticism, we have to decide to read not for plot, philosophical issues, or formal devices but for characters. Indeed, it is only by describing their society that we will realize how the influence of criticism and competition works to diversify the meanings of Romanticism.<sup>(6)</sup>

The society of the novel is a highly charged world of desire, snobbery, insult, and self-criticism. For a "love story," *Onegin* dwells with surprising consistency on betrayal, back-stabbing, and rivalry. The principal characters—Onegin, Lensky, Tatyana, and the narrator—are in some way all versions of one another, and yet their criticism of each other strikes one as sufficiently valid to establish some difference among them. In the case of the male characters, this difference appears to fit into an evolutionary scheme, in which each character represents a stage in Romantic psychology. But Tatyana, I will argue below in section three, moves through every stage and eventually reaches the emotional and ethical limits of Romanticism.

The male characters are caught in a web of criticism and self-criticism, in which many actions are calculated to win prestige at another's expense. The narrator admits to being Onegin's "good friend" (1.2), although he tells us that his friends and enemies are all the same and that "Friendship, as I must own to you,/ blooms when there's nothing else to do" (2.13). Lensky is Onegin's good friend as well, but he dies at Onegin's hands in a duel. If we assume for a moment that the narrator represents a "stylized Pushkin" (which some critics argue but which I find to be untenable), then it is uncanny to think that Pushkin dies in a duel much in Lensky's fashion.<sup>(7)</sup> In short, just as a character seems to gain superiority over one character, a reversal occurs that places him in an inferior position with regard to another character. No one remains on top for more than an instant.

Who, then, are the characters involved? Onegin is, first of all, a dandy in the Romantic fashion: "when the hour of youthful passion/ struck for Evgeny, with its play/ of hope and gloom, romantic-fashion. . . ./ Eugene was free, and as a dresser/ made London's dandy his professor" (1.4). That the narrator can describe Onegin as a London dandy implies his belatedness and unoriginality. Indeed, Onegin is the accomplished storyteller and dissembler because he has learned his roles well:

“How early he’d learnt to dissemble/ to hide a hope, to make a show/ of jealousy, to seem to tremble/ or pine, persuade of yes or no,/ and act the humble or imperious,/ the indifferent, or deadly serious” (1.10). Onegin dons “new shapes and sizes,” amusing and flattering with the best, stalking the “momentary weakness,” and then afterwards, alone, “at ease,” he imparts “such lessons as you please” (1.11). He is, of course, a grand success in society, receiving trays full of invitations; but each new social occasion is the same, and he can hardly choose among them: “Which one comes first? It’s just the same-/ to do them all is easy game” (1.15).

Society believes that Onegin is an original, a model to imitate, and consequently it does not see his relationship to Romantic society. The place of Onegin in this society is nowhere more effectively revealed than in the narrator’s description of our hero’s dressing chamber. Onegin is a creature of fashion who astounds everyone with his taste, but the dandy, too, has his models:

4

A man who’s active and incisive  
can yet keep nail-care much in mind:  
why fight what’s known to be decisive?  
custom is despot of mankind.  
Dressed like [—], duly dreading  
the barbs that envy’s always spreading,  
Eugene’s a pedant in his dress,  
in fact a thorough fop, no less.  
Three whole hours, at the least accounting,  
he’ll spend before the looking-glass,  
then from his cabinet he’ll pass  
giddy as Venus when she’s mounting  
a masculine disguise to aid  
her progress at the masquerade.

Your curiosity is burning  
to hear what latest modes require,  
and so, before the world of learning,  
I could describe here his attire;  
and though to do so would be daring,  
it’s my profession; he was wearing—  
but pantaloons, waistcoat, and frock,  
these words are not of Russian stock. . . . (1.25-6)

The description overflows with the narrator’s irony and mockery. Onegin owes his

daring taste to his model dandy, but Pushkin leaves out this all important source, inflaming the reader's desire and concealing the unoriginality of his hero.<sup>(8)</sup> The image of Onegin before the mirror is "critical" because it exposes his foppery, but the narrator in no way expects that his critique will quench the reader's desire to imitate Onegin. Indeed, the narrator teases the reader, implying that Onegin and the reader are in parallel. Onegin looks into the glass to see his model, while the reader looks at Onegin to find his. That Onegin owes his originality to a model dandy is an accusation, but its violence lies dormant, merely inciting further the desire to be the object of accusation. The narrator understands that the Romantic reader would gladly trade places with Onegin and accept the barbs of accusation and envy as symbols of success: "Your curiosity is burning/ to hear what latest modes require" (1.26).

Unlike Werther or Rousseau, however, Onegin finds dandyism alone sufficient to make him an artist. This is, in fact, the meaning of dandyism, which transforms the artist into the work of art and dispenses with any other aesthetic medium. It may well be that Onegin's ultimate failure in the novel to establish himself as anything other than a creature of fashion and high society relies on the fact that he is unable to give his boredom and feelings of alienation artistic representation. He remains a Romantic artist who cannot abide art, for his attempts to enter the aesthetic world always end in lethargy and nausea. When he takes up his pen to write, the hard session of work makes him sick, and still "no word came flowing from his quill" (1.43). Nor can he support reading for very long: "with shelves of books deployed for action,/ he read, and read-no satisfaction" (1.44). Onegin appears at first simply too tired and too bored to avail himself of the various models open to him. He has no inclination, à la Werther, "to blow his brains out, but in stead/ to life grew colder than the dead" (1.38). He plays at Childe Harold but finds the highest circles a bore. He gives up the capricious belles of grand society and takes up the role of an underground man, spewing virulence and "epigrams topped up with bile" (1.46). In short, Onegin detests Romantic society but cannot abandon it, and so he becomes a veritable fixture of the salons, as a kind of catatonia overtakes him. But it would be a mistake to think that he lacks either the enthusiasm to play the Romantic game or the strength to rise above it. Onegin's strategy is to represent his uniqueness by maintaining himself in this paradoxical relationship to Romanticism. He is the Romantic who knows well the failings of Romanticism but he remains a Romantic all the same.

## 5

Onegin, then, is everything that Vladimir Lensky is not, or, rather, Lensky is the innocence that Onegin has lost. The relation between Onegin and Lensky is meant as a Romantic critique of a Romantic, and it serves in an almost facile way to reveal

further Onegin's character. This relation, we will see, gives another dimension to interactions between Onegin and the narrator as well. In contrast to Onegin, Lensky is the "sweet beginner" (2.7). He has read too much Kant and fancies himself a Romantic poet. The narrator, who finds him an easy target for his irony, describes Lensky's efforts as both sentimental and Romantic on a number of occasions. According to the narrator, Lensky:

. . . sang of grief and parting-time,  
of something vague, some misty clime;  
roses romantically blowing:  
of many distant lands he sang  
where in the heart of silence rang  
his sobs, where his live tears flowing;  
he sang of lifetime's yellowed page-  
when not quite eighteen years of age. (2.10)

Although the narrator uses the word "romantic" to attack Lensky's verse, we should not understand it as entirely distancing him from Romanticism. The narrator often uses the term "romantic" in two senses, signifying its good form, which he reserves for himself, and its bad forms, which he reserves for others.[\(9\)](#) At one point, he gives us a sample of Lensky's poetry but betrays his own allegiance to Romanticism:

"The morning star will soon be shining,  
and soon will day's bright tune be played;  
but I perhaps will be declining  
into the tomb's mysterious shade;  
the trail the youthful poet followed  
by sluggish Lethe may be swallowed,  
and I be by the world forgot;  
but, lovely maiden, wilt thou not  
on my untimely urn be weeping,  
thinking: he loved me, and in strife  
the sad beginnings of his life  
he consecrated to my keeping?...  
Friend of my heart, be at my side,  
beloved friend, thou art my bride!"

So Lensky wrote, obscurely, limply  
(in the romantic style, we say,  
though what's romantic here I simply  
fail to perceive-that's by the way). (6.22-3; emphases mine)

The narrator's assessment of Lensky's poetry may be correct, but it does not resolve the issue of Romantic self-criticism. For there is no Romantic ideal that is not mocked in some way within the Romantic novel. The "Romantic" always carries two senses; it is the most pejorative term that one can apply, and at the same time, it is upheld as a lofty ideal. Indeed, the relation between Onegin and Lensky returns to this dilemma repeatedly. Lensky is attracted to Onegin, just as Tatyana will be, because he is so "Romantic." Lensky pours out his heart to Onegin, hoping to find a soul mate, but, in fact, Onegin scarcely understands him and finds his talk absurd. On the one hand, Onegin smiles "as Lensky talked: the heady/ perfervid language of the bard" and thinks "it's sheer/ folly for me to interfere/ with such a blissful, brief infection-/ even without me it will sink" (2.15). On the other hand, Onegin catches the fever of Romanticism from Lensky and feels its belated urgings. Onegin mocks Lensky at every turn but falls into competition with him for the very objects that he thinks are beneath him. The superior "Romantic" criticizes the debilitated "Romanticism" of his rival only to adopt this debilitation as his model. At the end of the novel, of course, it is as Lensky with a difference that Onegin reapproaches Tatyana and throws himself, romantically, at her feet.

The perverse mirroring between Onegin and Lensky is most dramatically exposed in two splendid episodes: the ballroom scene and the duel. The first concerns Onegin's seduction of Lensky's beloved Olga. Even though Olga is an obvious Romantic choice, the kind of woman whom one finds in any number of Romantic novels (2.23), Onegin decides maliciously to steal her from his friend. He "whispers some ballad of the hour,/ squeezes her hand-and brings to flower/ on her smug face a flush of pleasure" and takes her for a turn around the ballroom (5.44). Onegin becomes Lensky to win Olga, and she is charmed to find a "new" Romantic hero, and equally charmed to distress her former suitor. This girl from a novel is excited to find herself at last in a novelistic *mise en scène*, in which men of desire struggle over the woman of their dreams. But after Lensky challenges Onegin to a duel and leaves the ball, she grows bored with Onegin, just as he is wracked afresh by ennui. Romantic love in the novel continually feeds on these kinds of scenes, demanding dramatic episodes to enflame passion, while at the same instant denouncing these very episodes as passionless deceptions of fiction.

The duel presents a similar picture. Dueling is naturally disposed to the problem at hand. It proposes the identity of two rivals and designs a way of differentiating one. The face-off presents the two competitors as mirror-images of each other, until one stands at the end. Pushkin establishes the symmetry of the combatants, as might be expected, by recounting how they fire on each other simultaneously and with the same movements. But once Lensky has fallen, he develops the symmetry between



the winner and loser in an unexpected way by drawing on the image of the mirror itself:

With a sharp epigram it's pleasant  
to infuriate a clumsy foe;  
and, as observer, to be present  
and watch him stubbornly bring low  
his thrusting horns, and as he passes  
blush to descry in looking-glasses  
his foolish face; more pleasant yet  
to hear him howl: "that's me!" You'll get  
more joy still when with mute insistence  
you help him to an honoured fate  
by calming aiming at his pate  
from any gentlemanly distance. . . . (6.33)

7

The object of the contest is to force one's rival to recognize his hideousness in the mirror; but if one is present for this recognition and has brought it about by being a rival to the rival, is not the face in the mirror a double image? Does not one's own face find its likeness in the rival's hideousness? This is the ultimate effect of any duel, in which two individuals stand against each other, until one sees in the awful face of death both what he is and could have been. Indeed, as we shall later see, Onegin will from this point on identify himself as a victim of his victimization of Lensky: he pleads the case that his murder of his friend leads to such isolation and anguish that he, not Lensky, must be considered the real victim of the duel.

The narrator, however, does not place much store in Lensky's martyrdom. For him, it presents two options: Romanticism and the truth. The Romantic scenario of Lensky's death demands that it hold a secret desperation and meaning for the world. "Perhaps to improve the world's condition," the narrator muses, "perhaps for fame, he was endowed;/ his lyre, now stilled, in its high mission/ might have resounded long and loud/ for aeons. . . . / His shade,/ after the martyr's price it paid,/ maybe bore off with it for ever/ a secret truth, and at our cost/ a life-creating voice was lost" (6.37). Lensky's death and his martyrdom are one; the poetry of his death replaces his poetry, now lost to the world. But the narrator also presents another scenario, and it is "normal": "at forty he'd have got the gout,/ drunk, eaten, yawned, grown weak and stout,/ at length, midst children swarming round him,/ midst crones with endless tears to shed,/ and doctors, he'd have died in bed" (6.39). Ironically, the banality of Lensky's other fate makes his Romantic death all the more attractive, at least to a reader, although we might shy to claim that

Lensky finds it so himself, now dust in the grave. But, perhaps, Lensky has found what he wanted: at least, his surroundings are Romantic, for the narrator spends three cantos describing the picturesque setting of his grave site, replete with two lonely pines, girl reapers, quivering shadows, singing shepherds, and a young city-bred woman who reads the inscription on his stone and begins to cry over his grave, wondering “Olga . . . what fate befell her” after “Lensky’s doom?” (6.41).[\(10\)](#)

The narrator’s remarks would seem to indicate that he has himself risen above the choices made by Onegin and Lensky. But his criticisms do not amount necessarily to self-consciousness. Rather, they exist to differentiate him from the others, as if he were in some kind of contest with them. He attacks Onegin as a creature of fashion, but he is likewise a social butterfly. He celebrates the “atmosphere of youth and madness,/ the crush, the glitter and the gladness,/ the ladies’ calculated dress” (1.30). Indeed, the narrator is a Romantic poet in the style of Lensky, although he fancies himself the true Romantic. His great verse work, dedicated to ladies’ feet, deserves every reproach that he flings at Lensky:

Oh, when, and to what desert banished,  
madman, can you forget their print?  
my little feet, where have you vanished,  
what flowers of spring display your dint? . . .  
The happiness of youth is dead,  
just like, on turf, your fleeting tread.

On the seashore, with storm impending,  
how envious was I of the waves  
each in tumultuous turn descending  
to lie down at her feet like slaves!  
I longed, like every breaker hissing,  
to smother her dear feet with kissing. . . .

But, now I’ve praised the queens of fashion,  
enough of my loquacious lyre:  
they don’t deserve what they inspire  
in terms of poetry or passion—  
their looks and language in deceit  
are just as nimble as their feet. (1.31, 33-4)

I present an excerpt of the narrator’s deliciously silly rhyme: it is more witty than Lensky’s fugue celebration of Olga in the key of doom and gloom, but its motivations are as Romantic. It reveals his desire to be the slave of passion, to be

the underdog, to find himself at someone's feet. Lensky dies of this fate, we know, and Onegin precipitates himself toward it as the novel closes. And yet the narrator does break off his verse to comment on it, and his self-critique, if we may call it that, recognizes that the grandes dames of society do not deserve what they inspire. Apparently, the narrator has the advantage of age; his celebration of ladies' feet is an early effort upon which he can now look back with more mature eyes. The narrator was once "Lensky" but has now matured to capture the blasé attitude of an "Onegin," realizing that society is undeserving of him. Onegin, on the contrary, passes through Lensky's stage rapidly and assumes a critical eye, only to fall back in the end into Lensky's persona.

One is tempted to say that these characters meet in crossing, although this is a simplification of Pushkin's organization. Their criticisms of each other as well as the critical force of the novel would not have such a puzzling and cutting quality, if Pushkin had obeyed a linear scheme. Pushkin's goal is not to describe the psychological evolution of the Romantic type but to immerse these types in a society in which they must interact, and out of this interaction springs their characterizations and all that we may know of their capacities for criticism and self-criticism.

Indeed, there is no evolution properly speaking but only a set of position that characters may occupy in order to compete with others. The narrator strives to separate his desires from Onegin's, but his desires do not involve a chronological or qualitative advance of any kind. For example, at one point, Eugene turns "countryman" for a change of pace: "It all seemed new—for two days only—/ the coolness of the sombre glade . . . the third day, wood and hill and grazing/ gripped him no more; soon they were raising/ an urge to sleep" (1.54). Onegin plays Rousseau but ends up being Baudelaire. The narrator, however, is quick to insist that he really does love nature: "No, I was born for peace abounding/ and country stillness: there the lyre/ has voices that are more resounding,/ poetic dreams, a brighter fire./ To harmless idleness devoted,/ on waves of far niente floated, I roamed by the secluded lake" (1.55). Pushkin had many models of Romanticism to choose from, and he must have realized that the cult of Nature was being challenged by the cult of artifice and art, and that the alienation of city-life was proving as appetizing a subject as the solitude of nature.[\(11\)](#) That he chooses to have the more critical and mature narrator express his love of nature to prove his superior Romanticism is therefore not a conservative gesture but a statement exposing that these Romantic themes are relative to each other and to the Romantic artist's need to find distinction. Indeed, it is only because Onegin does not like nature that the narrator adores it, for we know from many other passages how helpless he really feels when he is not pursuing fame in high society.

Nor can the narrator help exposing his need to separate himself from Onegin. His position changes too often not to raise suspicion, and so he must present arguments for his originality. The narrator's adoration of natural solitude leads directly to a self-defense; the canto is in many ways the central passage of the novel in verse:

O flowers, and love, and rustic leisure,  
o fields—to you I'm vowed at heart.  
I regularly take much pleasure  
in showing how to tell apart  
myself and Eugene, lest a reader  
of mocking turn, or else a breeder  
of calculated slander should,  
spying my features, as he could,  
put back the libel on the table  
that, like proud Byron, I can draw  
self-portraits only—furthermore  
the charge that poets are unable  
to sing of others must imply  
the poet's only theme is "I". (1.56)

## 9

The "poet's only theme is 'I'" is a beautiful line because it exposes that the first-person of Romanticism is necessarily in contradiction with itself.[\(12\)](#) The poet creates a character in the first person, but this first person is always plural, a "we," in which the representative character is run through exercises by the writer. Any attack, any blow, and any humiliation that the character experiences affects the writer as well, but because the writer places the character in this situation, he or she necessarily plays a game of self-reproach or self-devotion. One could say that it is from the possibility of this self-centeredness that Romanticism develops as an ethical and aesthetic force. Self-criticism is privileged with respect to moral consciousness because it asks how the accuser shares a stake in what he or she condemns, but the Romantic novelist also discovers that the self-reproach entailed by such moralizing has an aesthetic dimension because its suffering is affective—it attracts and pleases an audience—and this social fact permits the writer to transform a moral position into an aesthetic success. Of course, this transformation means that the ethical insight must be sacrificed to aesthetics, but the artist's consciousness of this fact merely lends greater anguish and suffering to the choice, and thus invigorates the poetics of suffering with added rebound.

It is neither mockery nor calumny to suggest that Romantic authors take

themselves as subjects, despite what the narrator says; it is the only way to expose the character or ethos of Romanticism. This ethos cannot be explained by the nature of language or intertextuality. It remains a psychological and ethical problem, and it simply cannot be formulated unless we posit a continuity of a human kind between writers and their characters. Nor can we reach an understanding of Romantic aesthetics, if we fail to trace its relation to a fundamentally ethical and human origin.

A final example may place the problem of self-criticism in historical perspective. The narrator, literary man that he is, is prone to launch into all varieties of criticism, and at one point, he offers us his version of literary history. His history is warped by his own desire, of course, but it is not so far from the truth that it does not capture for us the extent to which the history of literature relies on violence. It carries the requisite nostalgia for the past but expresses through the lens of the past an accurate view of the present, so that the achievements of the past merge with the utopic desires of the future:

Lending his tone a grave inflection,  
the ardent author of the past  
showed one a pattern of perfection  
in which his hero's mould was cast.  
He gave this figure-loved with passion,  
wronged always in disgraceful fashion—  
a soul of sympathy and grace,  
and brains, and an attractive face.  
Always our fervid hero tended  
pure passion's flame, and in a trice  
would launch into self-sacrifice;  
always before the volume ended  
due punishment was handed down  
to vice, while virtue got its crown.

Today a mental fog enwraps us,  
each moral puts us in a doze,  
even in novels, vice entraps us,  
yes, even there its triumph grows.  
Now that the British Muse is able  
to wreck a maiden's sleep with fable,  
the idol that she'll most admire  
is either the distraught Vampire,  
Melmoth, whose roaming never ceases,  
Sbogar, mysterious through and through,

the Corsair, or the Wandering Jew.  
Lord Byron, with his shrewd caprices,  
dressed up a desperate egoism  
to look like sad romanticism. (3.11-12)

10

The fear of decadence and its accompanying moralizing casts the present in the guise of evil, whereas the past represents the golden age of virtue, self-sacrifice, and honorable suffering. This golden age presented characters as a picture of perfection, a picture apparently strictly opposed to the evil incarnate of the vampire or Melmoth. And yet do not these virtuous characters and the Gothic ones suffer ultimately the same fate? The former are wronged in a “disgraceful fashion” but possess the virtue to sacrifice themselves at the drop of a hat. The characters of the Gothic, however, are equally prone to sacrifice themselves, as their progeny, Werther, proves so well. Nor does it take too much effort to discover their disgrace, which frequently bears upon them as a result of some social transgression or personal flaw. The heroes of the Gothic are cast as misfits, but the image of their faults almost always relies on some honorable trait that society in its perversity has refused, making continued existence among others a disgrace and humiliation for the hero.[\(13\)](#)

There is no escaping the problematic of the victim in the Romantic novel. The best an author can do is take the victim’s side, while refusing both to become one and to celebrate those who feign the pose. The narrator dreams for an instant of a better solution: that he might be possessed by a “different devil” and write a novel in another genre: “No secret crimes, and no perditions,/ shall make my story grim as hell;/ no, quite naively I’ll retell/ a Russian family’s old traditions; love’s melting dreams shall fill my rhyme,/ and manners of an earlier time” (3.13). This different devil is, then, a pastoral novel, or some future form of literature that dispenses with vice and invents the angelic. It is a catalogue of “each simple saying in father’s or old uncle’s book” and tells “of children’s plighted playing/ by ancient limes, or by a brook;/ and after jealousy’s grim weather/ I’ll part them, bring them back together . . ./ then to the altar, to be crowned” (3.14).

This dream is, unfortunately, doomed to fail. We recognize in it a reverie of ethical perfection, love’s reconciliation, and universal harmony, where the aesthetic and the ethical merge in a vision completely free of vice and persecution. In other words, it would be a work of literature in which no victim appeared. But the narrator does not write this novel. He returns to the Romantic tale of Onegin’s fall from grace and leaves the angel for another Jacob to wrestle. Nor did any number of other Romantic hopefuls successfully capture this vision of harmony and

nonviolence for the novel. Here is the perfection that Tolstoy sought when he turned to the children's fable or to the Bible. In short, the Tolstoy whom we do not read today and whom we consider to be flawed. Here is the use to which Lukács puts Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in *The Theory of the Novel*, whose fugue-like conclusion announces the coming of another and entirely different literary form that will leave behind "the age of absolute sinfulness" and weave a "great unity."[\(14\)](#) In short, the Lukács whom Lukács himself denounced. Or have we not found Gogol's vision of his greatest work of art? For the second part of *Dead Souls*, Gogol designed to write a comedy that would be celestial and free of the slightest malice—a task so vexing that he burned his manuscript in despair and abandoned himself to madness.

### III - I Myself Am Tatyana

I neglected in the last section to provide an important detail about the narrator's literary history. He tells it for the specific purpose of accounting for Tatyana's love of Onegin. Tatyana, it seems, falls in love with Onegin precisely because he appears to resemble the mysterious men whom she has met in novels. According to the narrator, then, Tatyana has succumbed to the vice of modern readers who model their every desire and self-image on the novel. Indeed, Tatyana becomes a Romantic heroine in order to attract her Romantic hero. She mopes in her bed all day and night, detests any friendly voice, and sinks into dejection. She composes herself as a Romantic: "Seeing herself as a creation—/ Clarissa, Julie, or Delphine—/ by writers of her admiration,/ Tatyana, lonely heroine, roamed the still forest like a ranger,/ sought in her book, that text of danger" (3.10). Similarly, her model suitors complement her Romantic self-image and blend into Eugene alone:

11

Now, she devours, with what attention,  
delicious novels, laps them up;  
and all their ravishing invention  
with sheer enchantment fills her cup!  
These figures from the world of seeming,  
embodied by the power of dreaming,  
the lover of Julie Wolmar,  
and Malek Adel, de Linar,  
and Werther, martyred and doom-laden,  
and Grandison beyond compare,  
who sets me snoring then and there—  
all for our tender dreamy maiden  
are coloured in a single tone,

all blend into Eugene alone. (3.9)

As a heroine of a Romantic novel, Tatyana can look for models in no better places than Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Goethe's *Werther*, Richardson's *Clarissa*, or Madame de Staël's Wertherian imitation, *Delphine*. But, of course, although Tatyana is a character who wants to be the heroine of a Romantic novel, she is not actively pursuing this role for the sake of Eugene Onegin. This purpose more properly belongs to Pushkin. And yet Tatyana shares in common with Pushkin a fundamental feature: she is above all a reader of the novels that Pushkin has read, and her reading assumes a critical dimension just as her author's reading does. I will venture to raise Tatyana's role as reader to an even higher plane. My conclusion will be that Tatyana acts as if she has read *Eugene Onegin*.

One idea essential to explaining how Romantic novels work is to recognize that the Romantic "I" is equal to the state of mind expressed by the novel itself. We can see this in the case of *Werther*, in which the novel and the character turn upon themselves to produce a self-criticism. This movement is equally powerful in the creation of any character in whom an author has invested his or her self-image and upon whom a title is bestowed, and it accounts for the difficulties of autobiography within the Romantic context. The state of mind expressed by the novel, for lack of a better phrase, encompasses the many and contradictory attitudes invested by the novelist in different characters and languages. It represents what the novelist has learned about various situations, languages, attitudes, emotions, and characters, but this knowledge does not always direct his or her own life in a consistent fashion, even though it may be greatly prized by the writer and certainly represents a sum of what he or she thinks about a variety of thorny issues.<sup>(15)</sup> But this state of mind offers itself as well to the reader of a Romantic novel, and this situation is crucial to an understanding of Tatyana. The only way to account for her evolution as a character is to posit that she reads the novel in which she is found. She is educated by the readings through which Pushkin composes his novel; and she learns by experiencing the novel's sentimentality in her love for Onegin and by absorbing its irony and coldness through her success in society. She embodies the two meanings of "Romantic" and manages, as much as any personality can, to exist within their contradiction.

To make this claim is to argue that Tatyana is a true Romantic character and not a prop for Pushkin's development of the plot or of Onegin's characterization. She is not merely a silly reader of novels, like many characters in Romantic novels, who is duped into a sentimental seduction by "some ballad of the hour." She is not Flaubert's Madame Bovary or Pushkin's own Lizaveta Ivanovna from *The Queen of Spades*. Nor is she the primitive and beastly femme fatale, the Belle Dame Sans Merci, of Romantic poetry, who, like the sphinx, eats men alive. She is, rather, an



exemplary figure, expressing the weaknesses and strengths of the Romantic self in many of its configurations, and equal in her development to any male character. She begins as a reader of novels who is wounded and writes her first poem (the letter to Onegin); later, she learns from novels, after a descent into hell, to dissemble and to play the coquette. She makes herself into a work of art. Finally, she attains through her reading of Onegin's library and character an understanding of herself and of her relation to the society around her that ruptures the Romantic model of character. And yet she retains sufficient nostalgia for her time of suffering, without returning to it and without succumbing to the ennui of lost innocence, to become a sympathetic personality, one whose specific refusal of Onegin has nothing to do with either revenge or coquetry but with an ethical understanding of what she must do for her own good and for the good of others. Indeed, given her development in the novel, one wonders how Pushkin managed to keep the title that he did. Perhaps to rename his work would have manifested too severely Tatyana's rejection of Onegin as well as the astonishment with which she struck her own creator. "Do you know my Tatyana has rejected Onegin?," Pushkin himself remarks, expressing the surprise that one generally owes to real people and not to literary characters: "I never expected it of her" (18).

12

The initial description of Tatyana, however, promises nothing of this surprise. Like Olga, she is the type of woman found in any number of Romantic novels. Vladimir Nabokov, in fact, argues that Pushkin's ideal and enigmatic heroine was merely divided in two to produce Tatyana and Olga, an interesting idea because it demonstrates once more the similarity between Onegin and Lensky. [\(16\)](#) Tatyana plays the dark beauty to Olga's fragile, demure, and poetic lightness. Whereas Olga is clearly beautiful, Tatyana's attractiveness relies on a certain savage and wounded disposition: "she lacked her sister's beauty, lacked/ the rosy bloom that glowed so newly/ to catch the eye and to attract./ Shy as a savage, silent, tearful,/ wild as a forest deer, and fearful,/ Tatyana had a changeling look/ in her own home. . . ./ and in all the play/ of children, though as young as they,/ she never joined, or skipped, but rather/ in silence all day she'd remain/ ensconced beside the window-pane" (2.25). When we first encounter Tatyana, then, she is already cut off from others, behind the window pane, under glass, so to speak. Her wounded nature plays perfectly into the Romantic sympathy for the victim and adds to her mystery and loveliness. Here is a woman, one might say, who is unhappy and with whom one might attain unhappiness.

Tatyana prefers looking out the window to looking at the people around her. She plays the coquette without realizing her coquetry. Or, rather, her reading of Romantic novels has instructed her that sadness is attractive. When Lensky brings

Onegin around to meet Olga, he yawns and asks about her sister. "She was the one who looked as still/ and melancholy as Svetlana,/ and sat down by the window-sill," Lensky reminds him (3.5). Onegin cannot understand Lensky's preference for Olga because, for him, Tatyana is by far the more poetic: "I'd choose the other quarter/ if I, like you, had been a bard./ Olga's no life in her regard" (3.5). Tatyana evidently feels the same way, only more powerfully, and she falls in love with Onegin. Indeed, the narrator suggests that she had long been rehearsing the part of the pining heroine: "Her feelings in their weary session/ had long been wasting and enslaved/ by pain and languishment; she craved/ the fateful diet; by depression/ her heart had long been overrun:/ her soul was waiting ... for someone" (3.7).

Tatyana is in love with the idea of love, and when the opportunity of love presents itself, she grasps it eagerly, immersing herself in emotion, anguish, and longing. Suffering has been the very image of herself for a long time, and now at last provided with an interlocutor in Onegin, she may declare herself as the suffering heroine whom she longs to be. She decides to write a letter confessing her love to Onegin. It is her "masterpiece" of Romantic art, and she hopes that it will be sufficiently attractive to tempt Onegin to play a part in it.

Strangely, however, it is the narrator who responds most "romantically" to Tatyana's "masterpiece." He at once attacks it as twaddle and venerates it as a religious object. The narrator's introduction of the letter delights in exposing Tatyana's desires as Romantic clichés, and yet his desires are ultimately just as false. Reading the letter fills him with pain, and yet he treasures it and can never read it too often. Whereas the letter presents the confusion of Tatyana's pain and self-delight, the narrator's introduction blends fascination and repulsion. Both are caught in the contradiction of Romantic self-criticism. Here is an abbreviated version of the introduction and the letter:

13

Tatyana's letter, treasured ever  
as sacred, lies before me still.  
I read with secret pain, and never  
can read enough to get my fill.  
Who taught her an address so tender,  
such careless language of surrender?  
Who taught her all this mad, slapdash,  
heartfelt, imploring, touching trash  
fraught with enticement and disaster? . . .

TATYANA'S LETTER TO ONEGIN

"I write to you-no more confession  
is needed, nothing's left to tell.  
I know it's now in your discretion  
with scorn to make my world a hell.  
But if you've kept some faint impression  
of pity for my wretched state,  
you'll never leave me to my fate. . . .  
Why did you visit us, but why?  
Lost in our backwoods habitation  
I'd not have known you, therefore I  
would have been spared this laceration.  
In time, who knows, the agitation  
of inexperience would have passed,  
I would have found a friend, another,  
and in the role of virtuous mother  
and faithful wife I'd have been cast.  
Another! ...No, another never  
in all the world could take my heart!  
Decreed in highest court for ever ...  
heaven's will-for you I'm set apart;  
and my whole life has been directed  
and pledged to you, and firmly planned;  
I know, Godsent one, I'm protected  
until the grave by your strong hand. . . .  
At this midnight of my condition,  
was it not you, dear apparition,  
who in the dark came flashing through  
and, on my bed-head gently leaning,  
with love and comfort in your meaning,  
spoke words of hope? But who are you:  
the guardian angel of tradition,  
or some vile agent of perdition  
sent to seduce? . . .  
I weep, and pray for your protection ...  
Imagine it: quite on my own  
I've no one here who comprehends me,  
and now a swooning mind attends me,  
dumb I must perish, and alone.  
My heart awaits you: you can turn it  
to life and hope with just a glance-  
or else disturb my mournful trance  
with censure-I've done all to earn it! . . . (3.31ff)

The letter is a declaration of self more than one of love. Its very existence serves to announce that Tatyana exists as a subject, and it insists on the significance of her person, opening with the by then classic “I” of the Romantic text. Like Rousseau’s *Confessions*, the letter creates the self by declaring its insufficiencies and exhibiting its wounds. Tatyana is alone and beyond the comprehension of others, and every agent or object that invades her solitude must be the sign of a greater power, of fate, of God, of Onegin–angel, demon, Godsent. Her confession announces guilt of the most ambiguous variety, but she readily accepts the burden of punishment and fate nevertheless. Indeed, given the attitudes of the day, it is not excessive to argue that the letter seeks greater misfortune for the already unfortunate Tatyana, since such exposure admitted of a higher probability of shame than of success. Her feelings consequently oscillate between hopefulness and hopelessness, but both emotions betray the attitude of a victim, leaving Onegin to play the role of either savior or torturer.

Onegin, of course, does not chose to accept her love. Ironically, however, he manages to reject her not by condemning her unworthiness or lack of appeal but by usurping her position as victim. To her confession, he adds his own confession: he pleads that he would choose no one else to share his “sad existence” (4.13), if the decision were really left to him. But, in fact, he “is simply not intended/ for happiness—that alien role” (4.14). Happiness must be alien to Onegin because of his alien nature. Everything opposes their future happiness together: custom, society, and the institution of marriage. Onegin does not fail to invoke all the unnatural forces of society that stand in the way of his natural love for Tatyana. Onegin is so much the victim of his world, so alien to it, that his existence with Tatyana could only turn into a brutalization, and he does not want her to suffer such a cruel fate.

But Tatyana, at this particular moment, desires just this fate. It is the fate of all Romantics in love, and she does not want to be the exception to a race of exceptions. She is stung to the quick by Onegin’s rejection of her pure love, and she lapses further into despondency. If she cannot play the role of unhappy heroine in real life, she will find another domain in which to achieve her desires. She will live in the world of dreams. “Tatyana’s Dream” represents precisely this desire; it enacts her wish to be the heroine of a Gothic romance with Onegin as her Jean Sbogor or Melmoth. Her dream is therefore a case of the Romantic inserted within the Romantic. Within Pushkin’s Romantic novel in verse, we find a Gothic romance of the most familiar kind. It plays a role similar to that of Ossian in *Werther* and allows Pushkin to create a mood of somber Romanticism, without, however, embracing its less critical and refined aspect.

I am not arguing that the dream is a hack creation. In point of fact, it is delightfully composed and fully integrated into the novel. It is, rather, the Romantic nightmare at the heart of Pushkin's critique of Romanticism. It is, in short, the nightmare that self-criticism can sometimes be. It exposes Pushkin's dependence on a Gothic Romanticism, despite his attempts to go beyond it, and it reveals the self-defeating nature of Tatyana's desires.

Since it is her dream, Tatyana plays the victim, whereas Onegin, now truly demonic, reveals his villainy. As the dream begins, an enormous bear pursues Tatyana through a snowy forest. The dream images enact a rape fantasy, in which the bear, a symbol of raw sexuality, and the physical world contrive to undress and to possess her:

There's powdery snow up to her knees;  
now a protruding branch assails her  
and clasps her neck; and who she sees  
her golden earrings off and whipping;  
and now the crunchy snow is stripping  
her darling foot of its wet shoe,  
her handkerchief has fallen too;  
no time to pick it up—she's dying  
with fright, she hears the approaching bear;  
her fingers shake, she doesn't dare  
to lift her skirt up. . . . (5.14)

15

Tatyana is the "object" of desire in every sense. Everyone and everything tries to possess her. She exists to be exposed. When the bear catches her, it carries her off to a solitary hut in the forest, and she finds herself at the center of a witches' coven. Various monsters of the most Gothic kind, led by Onegin, menace her, and he deliberately exposes her to the eyes of the monstrous mob, who bellow out in unison, "she's mine, she's mine" (5.19). But Onegin cries out the loudest, and drives the others off to have her for his own. Later, when she awakes in horror, she turns to dream interpretation to discover the meaning of this nightmare; but Martin Zadéka's *Oraculum*, unfortunately, does not include the necessary symbols in its index, so her experience remains untranslated into prophecy. The dream is the closest that Tatyana gets to becoming a Gothic heroine of the typical kind, except in the mind of the newly smitten Onegin in the final cantos of the novel.

Tatyana's dream is Romantic in its conclusions, but it also calls to mind another episode that presents a critique of Romanticism. Tatyana's dream demands to be

compared with the later episode in which she stalks Onegin in his library. In the dream sequence, Pushkin makes Tatyana the hunted, and he expresses her fantasy in the most Romantic clichés. In the library episode, however, Tatyana hunts Onegin, and Pushkin's use of Gothic and Romantic tropes has an almost parodic effect. Whereas the bear carries Tatyana to the witches' hovel, her thirst for knowledge brings her to Onegin's "haunted" house, haunted, that is, by Onegin's ghosts: "Through country gleaming/ silver with moonlight, in her dreaming/ profoundly sunk, Tatyana stalked/ for hours alone; she walked and walked .../ Suddenly, from a crest, she sighted/ a house. . . ./ She entered the deserted yard./ Dogs howling, rushed in her direction .../ Her frightened cry brought running out/ the household boys in noisy rout. . . ./ she went into the empty shell/ in which our hero used to dwell" (7.15-17).

The opening sequence parallels that of Tatyana's dream, but instead of finding herself the heroine of a book, she finds herself in Onegin's library, face to face with the books in which she wants to live. While Onegin is long departed, Tatyana nevertheless finds his self-erected memorial: all remains exactly as it was when Onegin used to sit there alone, the rooms cluttered with fashionable objects and likenesses of Byron and Napoleon. But being the quintessential reader, Tatyana is most attracted to Onegin's books, marginalia, and album (the scrapbook in which he has collected passages from his favorite readings), and from them she watches "a different world unroll" (7.21): "Her eyes along the margin flitting/ pursue his pencil. Everywhere/ Onegin's soul encountered there/ declares itself in ways unwitting-/ terse words or crosses in the book,/ or else a query's wondering hook" (7.23). Books provide the portrait of the real Onegin, exposing his models and tastes at their origins. As Tatyana follows Onegin's thought, she comes to understand that he is an imitation, and that his feelings of alienation are the design of a Romantic eccentric:

And so, at last, feature by feature,  
Tanya begins to understand  
more thoroughly, thank God, the creature  
for whom her passion has been planned  
by fate's decree: this freakish stranger,  
who walks with sorrow, and with danger,  
whether from heaven or from hell,  
this angel, this proud devil, tell,  
what is he? Just an apparition,  
a shadow, null and meaningless,  
a Muscovite in Harold's dress,  
a modish second-hand edition,  
a glossary of smart argot...

a parodistic raree-show? (7.24)

16

As the narrator once watched Onegin before the mirror, Tatyana now sees the images by which her ideal man composes himself. It is as if Tatyana finds a book entitled *Eugene Onegin* next to the many familiar Romantic volumes in the library. Pushkin does not, of course, include such a volume: he is not sufficiently schooled in German Romanticism to delight in this vertiginous paradox.<sup>(17)</sup> But the point remains that Tatyana's reading of *Eugene Onegin* represents a moment of epiphany in which she sees the nature of her own desires. She comes to understand in a conscious way what her desires inferred earlier: that Onegin wants to be the hero of a novel. But now Tatyana can no longer consider this role to be Romantic; it is too "Romantic," that is, too overtly modeled on the world of books, to be wholly attractive. *Eugene Onegin* (the man and the book) is a Romantic story, but not the first or the most inventive one. Onegin may be a work of genius, but it is a sad genius composed of a strange mixture of nostalgia and irony, of Romantic idolatry and satire, of desire and desire for desire.

And yet we cannot fail to observe that Tatyana's epiphany about Onegin is rendered in indirect speech.<sup>(18)</sup> Who precisely is the source of this knowledge? Is it not expressed more in the narrator's style than in Tatyana's? On the one hand, Tatyana experiences a conversion to the narrator's critical point of view, and her comments about Onegin are caustic and derisive. On the other hand, as we shall see, she continues to love Onegin and takes no opportunity for revenge. What is the status of her understanding?

Tatyana and Onegin are not involved in the kind of competition that characterizes the relationship between the narrator and Onegin. She may compete in Pushkin's and the reader's minds for the center of the novel, but within the novel itself, she does not have the power to compete with either Onegin or the narrator. But competition is a strange phenomenon. One may compete to win, or to lose, and in the Romantic novel, most contestants aim to fail. Both the narrator and Onegin struggle by design to prove their alienation from the world; they take up the cloak of failure to prove their uniqueness. But a woman in a novel of this period has already lost in some respects, which explains why Romantic male characters in search of marginality repeatedly represent themselves as "feminine." Tatyana cannot choose her own destiny in the way that a male character can. She may confess her love and suffer shame; she may refuse marriage and present herself as an outcast, but none of these choices is really recognized as "Romantic." Indeed, the only choice open to a woman in the novel who wishes to be a Romantic is to play the wronged or adulterous woman. But this role, too, demands that she be the

object of a man's desire, not his rival or equal.

It is in this context that Tatyana's understanding of Romanticism must be measured and not by her criticisms of Onegin. Women characters are already less Romantic, by and large, than male characters because they are not permitted to express their desires as freely, and fewer opportunities for being Romantic are recognized for them. Tatyana's rejection of Onegin for her fat husband does not have to be an original gesture to rupture the limits of the Romantic character because female characterization as such already begins to stretch its limits. Thus, Julie's rejection of Saint-Preux or Lotte's of Werther clearly resonate in Tatyana's final decision, but they are as incomprehensible for Romantic male desire in general as Tatyana's choice is for Onegin. It is sufficient merely that Tatyana step outside the established models of the Romantic heroine and that she express her consciousness of this choice for her very existence in the novel to be construed as a critique of Romanticism. In sum, Romanticism's marginalization of feminine identity, in contradiction to its almost universal privileging of the marginal, assumes the form of an implicit critique, and whenever a woman character exposes this marginalization, the critique is made explicit.

There is, then, a fundamental difference between Tatyana's disgust with Romantic society and that of Onegin and the narrator, and although the narrator often inhabits his heroine's thoughts, we should try to see how her actions critique the words that he gives her. After reading Onegin's library, for example, Tatyana enters the Romantic society of Moscow, and the move stings her with feelings of regret at leaving the countryside of her childhood. She also finds herself dreaming of it while surrounded by the dancing and din of the ballroom. This is, of course, the very countryside that she detested earlier for its lack of Romantic society. But her desire for her home does not represent the nostalgia for Nature that the narrator suffers. It represents her feelings of alienation within Romantic society. Once overlooked as the less desirable of two sisters, she has become Moscow's ideal—"One melancholy fob, declaring/ that she's 'ideal', begins preparing/ an elegy to her address" (7.49)—but she now understands the logic responsible for her ascent, and it relies too much on "dull trash that can't cohere" (7.48).

17

Tatyana has longed her entire life to be the belle of the ball. That she rejects this desire just as she attains it makes sense only if we see her actions in the context of her reading. We have seen the model of Romantic ballroom behavior in Onegin's malicious ennui, and it does not fit Tatyana. Romantic society bores him, and he takes to victimizing his friends for sport. But Tatyana's impatience with ballroom society breeds no such behavior. Her boredom with its boredom is neither a self-



defeating posture, designed to represent her as a victim, nor a spur to aggrandize herself by attacking her admirers in society, although she certainly finds them tedious. Instead, she clings to fidelity, and in a sense, it is fidelity to both her husband and Onegin.

Thus, the narrator's sampling of the ballroom conversation describes Onegin as a freak, but Tatyana in no way treats him as one. This is our first view of Onegin upon his return to society after a long and restless journey: "For what charade is he apparelled?/ Is he a Melmoth, a Childe Harold,/ a patriot, a cosmopolite,/ bigot or prude? or has he quite/ a different mask? is he becoming/ someone like you and me, just nice?/ At least I'll give him some advice:/ to drop all that old-fashioned mumming;/ too long he's hoaxed us high and low ..." (8.8). It is not clear whether this view is supposed to describe Onegin accurately or merely in terms of ballroom conversation. One thing is certain: its form and content carry the imprint of the narrator's disposition. The attention to fashion in the description places it firmly within the narrator's contest with Onegin, reproducing criticisms only too easily associated with earlier remarks.

My point is that we have a great deal of difficulty seeing Tatyana through the fog of desire surrounding her. The ballroom fops describe her as an "ideal," and the narrator uses her to continue his attack on Onegin. Onegin as well, now overwhelmed by youth's distemper, love, sees only the Romantic heroine whom he desires. He adopts the vision of those fops whom Tatyana finds ridiculous. Newly returned to society, Onegin now plays the Romantic outcast à la Rousseau. He has become the butt for the malicious, suffers from *dépaysement*, and has lost his former confidence to Romantic paranoia. When he sees Tatyana, therefore, he envisions only what he wants to see: the icy and serene face of his executioner: "His head is lost in obstinate reflection;/ and obstinate his look. But she/ sits imperturbable and free" (8.22). Indeed, Onegin sees in Tatyana only the *femme fatale* whom his self-hatred requires.

Onegin's love letter to Tatyana presents the awful symmetry of his paranoia. He is now the victim to her victimizer. He adopts a series of roles—Lensky, Saint-Preux, Werther, Byron—but now he plays them with passion. He hopes, in the same way that Tatyana earlier hoped for a hero, that his letter will tempt her to play Medusa, and it consequently provides a vivid description of what is expected of her: "stern regard" or "proud glance," the wrath of reproach, and "scorn." He, for his part, pretends to expect nothing. Rather, he plays the outcast, alien to everybody. He goes so far as to compose himself as the real victim of the duel: Lensky's death forces him to separate himself from Tatyana and from everything important to his heart: "And then, to part us in full measure,/ Lensky, that tragic victim, died .../ From all sweet things that gave me pleasure, since then my heart was wrenched

aside . . . ./ What folly! and what retribution!" (8.32). Nothing is left him now, and as Tatyana's willing slave, he surrenders all power: "But so it is: I'm in no state/ to battle further with my passion;/ I'm yours, in a predestined fashion,/ and I surrender to my fate" (8.32).

The letter, in fact, differs little from Tatyana's note, and the fact of the repetition is significant. First, it reveals the singular importance of the victim for the Romantic character. Second, it is designed for failure because it mimics the very letter that he himself rejected—a fact that cannot escape a reader such as Tatyana. It is, in effect, a statement designed to place her in a double-bind. If Tatyana accepts to play the role of Lotte, Onegin will play Werther. If she takes her revenge for the earlier rejection, she fulfills the whims of his persecution complex. If she admits that she does love her husband, she will be accused of not being Romantic enough.

18

Tatyana's reaction bears the weight of this double-bind. But her burden should not blind us to the intuitions revealed by her choice. Tatyana is a Romantic character. She loves Onegin, despite her understanding of who he is. She loves him with the love of an adolescent, although she is now fully grown. Moreover, she does not love her husband. Now she is asked by Onegin's letter to give expression to her Romanticism and to play one of the limited roles designed for her. She has every reason to do so, as long as she remains within the Romantic universe. But she does not accept Onegin's offer. She rejects him not for himself but as a Romanticism:

"Bliss was so near, so altogether  
attainable! ... But now my lot  
is firmly cast. I don't know whether  
I acted thoughtlessly or not:  
you see, with tears and incantation  
mother implored me; my sad station  
made all fates look the same ... and so  
I married. I beseech you, go;  
I know your heart: it has a feeling  
for honour, a straightforward pride.  
I love you (what's the use to hide  
behind deceit or double-dealing?)  
but I've become another's wife—  
and I'll be true to him, for life." (8.47)

Tatyana does not neglect to express her choice in the Romantic language of destiny; she is, after all, Romantic. But her fate has a social limitation not found in

the fate announced by Onegin, when he surrenders himself to his destiny. That she accepts her marriage as a limitation but not as a scene of victimization places her one small step outside the Romantic universe. She confesses her love and remains dutiful without suffering the contradiction. Indeed, it defines her virtue: “what’s the use to hid/ behind deceit or double-dealing?” (8.47). Everything remains cliché, comprehensible only in terms of the Romanticism of the novel, but this is only because the Romantic character composes its choices within this circle of clichés, its inability to escape cliché being another great source of anguish. The fact that Tatyana does not seem to “suffer” this cliché reveals the force of her convictions and an unromantic disposition.

The traditional reading of Tatyana’s choice, Dostoevsky’s for example, concludes that she proves herself to be the ideal of the virtuous and altruistic Russian woman. This reading is offensive, especially to a modern sensibility, because it seems to say that Tatyana is important because she is a good wife, and a good wife only. But the reading is inescapable, and all the more imposing for the reason that its contradiction always lapses once more into Romanticism. First, it could be argued, as Nabokov does, that Dostoevsky is wrong because Tatyana is merely following Romantic models: Julie and Lotte, before her, rejected their lovers for their husbands and in the same language and gestures. But Nabokov’s own Romanticism makes the unromantic nature of this genealogy unintelligible to him; he exhumes Tatyana’s ancestors only to argue that her rejection of Onegin contains so many expressions of desire that we cannot consider her decision to be final. Indeed, he posits that her words must have made Eugene’s “experienced heart leap with joy” at the expectation of an adulterous fling.[\(19\)](#) Second, it could be argued that Tatyana’s choice is a grander gesture than it is, successfully demonstrating her freedom from her ancestors in the novel. But this reading succumbs to the very desire for uniqueness that Tatyana rejects when she decides not to use her “fate” to represent herself as a victim. It is more surprising, given Romantic prejudices, to believe in wifely duty over passion, and from this conviction springs, no doubt, the astonishment with which Pushkin views his heroine.

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Pushkin’s surprise at Tatyana’s rejection of Onegin betrays his inability to see the marginality of women at the heart of Romantic marginality. Ironically, Tatyana provides Pushkin with his denouement, and when the episode concludes, the narrator bids the reader an abrupt good-bye, as surprised by the conclusion as Pushkin later confessed to be.[\(20\)](#) Indeed, where in a Romantic novel written by a man do we find anything other than surprise (or chauvinistic admiration) when faced with such a choice? For all the apparent interest in femininity in the male Romantic novel, rare is the man who can identify with his women characters.

Flaubert, of course, makes his celebrated confession of identity, “Madame Bovary, c’est moi.” But Emma is the adulterous woman, and Flaubert’s statement merely carries Romantic self-criticism to the heights of self-hatred and stupidity. “Madame Bovary, c’est moi” belongs to the history of such self-alienating expressions as Rousseau’s “L’Autre, c’est moi,” Nerval’s “Je suis l’autre,” or Rimbaud’s “Je est un autre.” For when Flaubert identifies himself with Emma Bovary, he accuses himself of being the most lamentable cliché. To pronounce “I myself am Madame Bovary” is to represent oneself as the Romantic outcast once more.

Madame Bovary remains a stupid and bovine creature, but Pushkin gave Tatyana a unique character, and she demonstrates that she knows how to read the Romantic novel. She understands her own genealogy, and she steps into the only viable position left to a woman in the novels of the time. That her choice should have surprised Pushkin reveals the limitation of his reading of Romantic self-criticism as well as the fatal limitation of his own self-consciousness. Pushkin, of course, died in a duel fought with an admirer of his wife, his sister-in-law’s husband, the young and handsome Baron d’Anthes (or Dantès). As the story goes, Pushkin was upset by rumors that d’Anthes was having relations with his wife, although he trusted her and she was certainly innocent, and he forced the Baron to challenge him to a duel to save face in society. The duel took place the next morning. D’Anthes fired first and hit Pushkin. Lying prostrate on the ground, the poet managed to fire his pistol and wounded the Baron slightly; but Pushkin’s injury was severe, and he died two days later in torment.

Is it too cruel, too hard, to ask whether Pushkin would have died at d’Anthes’s hands, had he not been so very surprised by Tatyana, had he not failed to read *Eugene Onegin* in the way that she did, had he not played Lensky to d’Anthes’s Onegin? Perhaps Pushkin’s own life’s novel would have ended differently had he been able to say à la Flaubert, “I myself am Tatyana.” Vertiginous thought to consider that the surprise of d’Anthes’s shot and of Tatyana’s character might be one and the same.

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## Notes

1. Parenthetical references are to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and *Selected Writings*, trans. Catherine Hutter (New York: Signet, 1962).[\(back\)](#)
2. Paul de Man’s now classic reading of Rousseau, in “The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida’s Reading of Rousseau,” *Blindness and Insight* (1971; revised,

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 102-141, argues that critics have mistaken Rousseau's self-reflexive textuality for a variety of mental problems.

[\(back\)](#)

3. I have explored this idea in great depth elsewhere: see my *The Romantic Fantastic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984; *The Ethics of Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), chaps. 4, 5, and 6; "Rousseau and Autonomy," *Stanford French Review* 17.1(1993): 7-24; and "The Werther-Effect: The Esthetics of Suicide," *Mosaic* 26.1(1993): 15-34. [\(back\)](#)

4. Speaking of Tolstoy in particular, Mikhail Bakhtin calls this tendency to attack the reader's presuppositions an "internal politics of style." Bakhtin's definition of the dialogic is useful to describe how novels contribute to critiques of their time, but his idea of language, while correctly tuned to social forces, still relies too much on the idea of style. Thus, he frequently tries to describe the "life of language" rather than that of society, in effect, producing a social theory of language, devoid of society. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 283-84.

[\(back\)](#)

5. References to Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, trans. Charles Johnston (New York: Penguin, 1979) will be given parenthetically in chapter and canto numbers.

[\(back\)](#)

6. The world of the Romantic novel is the world of Romantic society, and it is misleading to try to divide this world and the form of the novel. The narrator of *Onegin* assumes that Romantic novels pervert their readers' sensibility, and while his remarks represent a critique of Romanticism similar to those found in Stendhal or Flaubert, he is never able to disengage himself sufficiently from Romanticism to remove himself from its problematic of self-criticism. Indeed, criticism of the novel is a predominant theme of the Romantic novel. René Girard fixes on this theme and reverses it, claiming that the "novelistic" (romanesque) implies a striking and superior critique of the "romantic" (romantique). See his *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (Paris: Grasset, 1961), translated by Y. Freccero as *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965). [\(back\)](#)

7. See, for example, Vladimir Nabokov's characterization of the narrator as a "stylized Pushkin" in the "Translator's Introduction" to *Eugene Onegin*, trans. Vladimir Nabokov, 4 vols. (New York: Bollingen Series, Pantheon Books, 1964), 1:6. On the problem of the narrator in general, see J. Thomas Shaw, "The Problem of Unity of the Author-Narrator's Stance in Pushkin's *Evgenij Onegin*," *Russian Language Journal* 35.120 (1981): 25-42. [\(back\)](#)

8. Nabokov notes, in his commentary on *Eugene Onegin* 2:104-5, that the dandy in question is Colonel Pyotr Chadaev, and a more interesting model for Onegin could not be imagined. Chadaev was a brilliant character, fop, and philosopher, who wrote *Lettres philosophiques* in French in the early 1820's. When one was published in Russian in the *Telescope* in 1836, Chadaev was declared officially insane. [\(back\)](#)

9. Pushkin's own use of "Romantic" tends to represent two positions as well. On the one hand, Pushkin writes to his brother Lev in early 1824 that Nikolai Raevski berates Eugene Onegin because he "expected Romanticism from me, found Satire and Cynicism." But in May of the same year, he tells the poet Küchelbecker that he is writing a "romantic poem." One year later, he writes to Bestuzhev, defending his novel in verse as nonsatirical: "Where do I have a satire? There is not the ghost of it in Eugene Onegin. With me the embankment would crack if I touched satire." See Nabokov's "Pushkin on 'Eugene Onegin'" in his *Eugene Onegin* 1:68-74. [\(back\)](#)

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10. The addition of the city-bred woman works as an allusion to the scene of victimization. Despite Lensky's failed Romanticism, the very fact of his martyrdom qualifies him to become the subject of emotions that cause others to romanticize him. [\(back\)](#)

11. Pushkin, of course, presents his own version of citified alienation in both *The Queen of Spades* and "The Bronze Horseman." The point to realize is that the cult of nature serves the Romantic in stating the desire to flee from the life of the salon and the duties of society, whereas the cult of the city serves equally well at a later date to transgress the existing cult of nature by demonstrating a preference for the isolation and infectious atmosphere of the city's swarming masses. Each cult in its context celebrates the difference of the Romantic artist. [\(back\)](#)

12. Most unfortunately, this line is the beautiful fiction of the translator, Charles Johnston, for Pushkin does not use the Russian first person in the same way. The point remains, however, that the canto takes as its subject the problem both of the narrator's relation to Onegin and of any author's relation to a character, and it formulates the problem in terms of identity.

The canto achieves a critical dimension in another important respect. The narrator's critique of the "reader of mocking turn" relies on sympathy for the persecuted. We are forced to separate the narrator and Onegin, lest we be accused of slander and maliciousness. If we are coerced by this logic, the narrator wins. If we victimize the narrator with our slander, he still wins because he gains the general sympathy accorded to the victim. [\(back\)](#)

13. See my exposition of the relation between persecution and fantastic literature in *The Romantic Fantastic*. [\(back\)](#)

14. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), 152-53. [\(back\)](#)

15. I use the phrase, “state of mind,” purposefully to indicate my belief that a human being composes the novel and reads it. While this is itself obvious, many current theories of literature do not stress it, preferring to attribute the over-all effect of literary works to language systems, intertextuality, or historical forces. The effects of language and social forces are great, but they are given the individual stamp of the author. Cf., Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*: “When heteroglossia enters the novel it becomes subject to an artistic reworking. The social and historical voices populating language, all its words and all its forms, which provide language with its particular concrete conceptualizations, are organized in the novel into a structured stylistic system that expresses the differentiated socio-ideological position of the author amid the heteroglossia of his epoch” (300). Despite all the power that he gives to language, Bakhtin returns insistently to the idea that novels are “artistic systems,” that is, systems created by authors. In short, the novel is not only heteroglossia—merely language—but the language of someone, and as such, we may analyze it for its ability to transmit knowledge. [\(back\)](#)

16. Nabokov, ed., *Eugene Onegin* 1:15. [\(back\)](#)

17. Indeed, Tatyana’s reading sharply contrasts with those episodes in German literature in which a character finds the book in which he or she is a character. In Novalis’s *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, for example, the hero finds a book in which he is described reading the book in which he finds himself. The effect is an infinite regress that leads to stupefaction and paralysis. Tatyana’s discovery of Onegin’s models and thoughts, in contrast, sheds light on her desires, resulting in a new ability to understand how Romantic society works. [\(back\)](#)

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18. See Mikhail Bakhtin’s analysis, in *The Dialogic Imagination* 43-50, 321-23, 329-30, of Pushkin’s use of “double-voicedness.” For Bakhtin, it is Pushkin’s heteroglossia that produces the self-critical aspect of *Eugene Onegin*: “Pushkin’s novel is a self-critique of the literary language of the era, a product of this language’s various strata (generic, everyday, ‘currently fashionable’) mutually illuminating one another. But this interillumination is not of course accomplished at the level of linguistic abstraction: images of language are inseparable from images of various world views and from the living beings who are their agents—people who

think, talk, and act in a setting that is social and historically concrete” (49). [\(back\)](#)

19. Nabokov, ed., *Eugene Onegin* 3:240-43. On Tatyana’s decision, see also J. Douglas Clayton, *Ice and Flame: Aleksandr Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 128-37, who traces the reception of Tatyana’s action and argues that she is a Diana figure, both “ideal and faithful”; and William Mills Todd III, *Fiction and Society in the Age of Pushkin: Ideology, Institutions, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 128-35, who stresses Tatyana’s creativity in playing with sexual roles and conventions. Todd also notes that Onegin’s development reverses Tatyana’s and that her reading is responsible for her understanding of Onegin’s behavior. [\(back\)](#)

20. Interestingly, Donald Fanger, in “On the Russianness of the Russian Nineteenth-Century Novel,” *Art and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Russia*, ed. Theofanis George Stavrou (Bloomington, In: Indiana University Press, 1983), 40-56, argues that the abrupt conclusion of *Onegin* resonates with many other novels of the period, and he gives several explanations for the effect. First, Fanger notes that the authors in question, Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, and Tolstoy, consider themselves writers and not novelists, and that they do not consequently adhere to the closed formal pattern of the novel. Second, he argues that this particular form addresses the rise of the masses characteristic of the period in Russian history. [\(back\)](#)