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“FOOTNOTES REACHING UP LIKE SKYSCRAPERS”:

OPEN TEXTUAL SPACES IN NABOKOV’S

TRANSLATION OF *EUGENE ONEGIN*

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I want translations with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page so as to leave only the gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity

—Vladimir Nabokov, “Problems of Translation: *Onegin* in English”

**N**abokov’s annotated translation of *Eugene Onegin* is notorious for the criticism it has provoked since the moment of its publication in 1964. Reviewers and critics find various faults with Nabokov’s monumental project — from its lexical and syntactical monstrosities to its unreadability, contempt of the reader, or deliberate fictionalization of what is deemed to be scholarly material.<sup>1</sup> Their judgment of Nabokov’s project as catastrophic seems to be caused by the translator’s profound dedication to literalism, which, he claims, is the only true method of translation.<sup>2</sup> On numerous occasions, Nabokov insists that he is “incorruptible

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Edmund Wilson, “The Strange Case of Pushkin and Nabokov,” *The New York Review of Books*, July 15, 1965, accessed April 15, 2016, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1965/07/15/the-strange-case-of-pushkin-and-nabokov/>; Vladimir Nabokov, “Reply to my Critics,” in Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (Penguin Classics, 2012), 313-47; Alexander Dolinin, “Eugene Onegin,” in *Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), 117-30; or Douglas Hofstadter, “Nabokov Hopes for yet Greater Ugliness,” in *Eugene Onegin*, trans. Douglas Hofstadter (New York: Basic Books, 1999), XXIII-XXV. Renate Lachmann and Mark Pettus (2011) compare Nabokov’s project to that of Kinbot’s because “the commentator usurps the place of the original” (30). Judson Rosengrant (1994) seems to have reservations about Nabokov’s contribution to the theory and practice of translation because Nabokov did not carry his literalist theory “far enough” (25).

<sup>2</sup> Nabokov of course was not the only writer who favored literal translation. Literal translation goes back to antiquity, and it was practiced during the Middle Ages. Another, more close in time, fervent defender of literalism

literalist”<sup>3</sup> and uses the word “paraphrast,”<sup>4</sup> among others, to describe those translators whose guiding principle is closer to what another translator of *Eugene Onegin*, Douglas Hofstadter, calls “poetic lie-sense.”<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this essay is not so much to respond to the attack on Nabokov’s annotated translation. Brian Boyd has done so by brilliantly writing on Nabokov as a controversial but exceptional translator.<sup>6</sup> Instead, my purpose is to speculate on how one can approach Nabokov’s unique project differently — by contextualizing it in an ongoing debate about the practice of translation that does not easily allow for the overlap between literal translation and interpretation, at least not in the way Nabokov understands it. Can a literal translation of a poetic text cross cultural and linguistic boundaries? What is the role of commentary in fulfilling this crossing? I intend to show that in his annotated translation of *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov goes beyond his programmatic literalism by implementing a unique translation format with a different dynamic between the original, the translation, and the reader. Through commentaries, this format allows for the amplification of meaning by activating the reader’s sensory experience of the text. The reader’s sensory imagination responds to how the annotations render the associative auras of the words, including those evoking color, sound, taste, or texture, and explain their formal elements. Not only do the commentaries bring into a sharper focus the formal elements of the original, but also they bring into agreement Nabokov’s formalism and historicism. The annotations become a bridge between the reader and the world of the original when they, for example, offer the vignettes of the influential people of the time, describe the dishes, visualize the costume, refer the good reader to paintings and artistic techniques, or discuss the meanings of words and their

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was, for example, Robert Browning, whose “transcription” of Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* defines principles of literal translation. See E. E. Benitez, “On Literal Translation: Robert Browning and the *Agamemnon*,” *Philosophy and Literature* 28, no. 2 (October 2004): 28. Mikhail Gasparov (М. Гаспаров) points out that in the history of Russian literature and translation, foreignizing tendencies in translation were more pronounced during the romantic and modernist eras and that at some point Briusov wholeheartedly defended the alterity of the source language text and the foreignizing, literal conception of translation (М. Гаспаров, “Брюсов и буквализм,” *Поэтика перевода* (М.: Радуга, 1988), 29-62, accessed December 12, 2017, <http://www.philology.ru/linguistics1/gasparov-88.htm> ).

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*, vol. 2, part 2, *Commentary and Index* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Hofstadter, “Analogy as the Core of Cognition,” *Stanford Presidential Lectures in the Humanities and Arts*, accessed August 25, 2017, <http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/hofstadter/analogy.html>.

<sup>6</sup> See Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov. The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 318-55 or Brian Boyd, “Nabokov as Translator: Passion and Precision” (lecture, University São Paulo, Brazil), accessed April 20, 2016, [http://www.usp.br/rus/images/edicoes/Rus\\_n01/04\\_BOYD\\_Brian\\_-\\_Nabokov\\_as\\_Translator\\_-\\_Passion\\_and\\_Precision.pdf](http://www.usp.br/rus/images/edicoes/Rus_n01/04_BOYD_Brian_-_Nabokov_as_Translator_-_Passion_and_Precision.pdf).

sound forms. In doing so, these comments become the metonymical extension<sup>7</sup> of the main text and inform its reading with open-endedness through listing the possibilities of interpretation rather than setting the translation as final and through connecting the translation to other literary and cultural realms. Nabokov's explanatory notes bind together the original, its translation, and these other texts in a network that forms a new literary space.

To approach the problem of Nabokov's unique translation format, the essay engages with one of the project's thematic and stylistic concerns. It specifically analyzes how Nabokov renders senses in Pushkin's text — both in translation and commentary. What necessitates us to turn to senses?

In "Translator's Introduction," Nabokov says that his strategy in translating *Eugene Onegin* was to make Pushkin's invented world "exist in the reader's mind,"<sup>8</sup> and in his 1962 BBC interview, the writer describes his translation as a search for "the right way of doing things and a certain approach to reality, to the reality of Pushkin."<sup>9</sup> Yet, in Nabokov's dimension, to exist this imaginary world has to be perceived. Given Nabokov's famous engagement with senses, the essay explores how senses permeate and animate objects and words of this imaginary world and how they engage the reader in the polymodal perception required by the original. This case study is based on the analysis of the scenes — both in translation and commentary — that recreate the surroundings such as, for example, a ballroom and a dinner table or describe Russian landscape.

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<sup>7</sup> Drawing on Paul de Man's understanding of allegory and Benjamin's work on translation, Julia Trubikhina defines both Nabokov's mode of writing and translation as "allegorical (metonymical)" (89) and connects it with Nabokov's metaphysics of uncertainty. See, Julia Trubikhina, *The Translator's Doubts: Vladimir Nabokov and the Ambiguity of Translation* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2015). My treatment of the "metonymical" is rather inspired by Roman Jakobson's explication of metaphor/metonymy. Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language," *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan, 91-95 (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*, vol. 1, *Introduction and Translation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 22.

Reviewers have commented on the unusual format of Nabokov's annotated translation of *Eugene Onegin* many times. In his 1963 interview with Alvin Toffler, the author states:

I have just finished correcting the last proofs of my work on Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* — four fat little volumes which are to appear this year in the Bollingen Series; the actual translation of the poem occupies a small section of volume one. The rest of the volume and volumes two, three and four contain copious notes on the subject. This opus owes its birth to my disgust with rhymed paraphrases of *Eugene Onegin*, every line of which I had to revise for my students — 'Why don't you translate it yourself?' This is the result. It has taken some ten years of labor. The index alone runs to 5,000 cards in three long shoe boxes... My translation is, of course, a literal one, a crib, a pony. And to the fidelity of transposal I have sacrificed everything: elegance, euphony, clarity, good taste, modern usage, and even grammar. (*Strong Opinions*, 54)

Nabokov describes his translation as "transposal." "Transposal" can be understood as literal rendering of the meanings of the words from Russian to English — "a paradigmatic word-for-word translation"<sup>10</sup> that immensely irritated both critics and translators. However, translation may become a transposal when it relocates the reader, mentally, of course, to a different place — that of *Eugene Onegin*'s world as mediated by Nabokov's translation and annotation.

Nabokov's "right way of doing things" bewildered the critics as it did not fit into any conventional framework of translation. Writing benevolently in 1967, A.F.B. Clark says that Nabokov belongs "to the very modern school" (304). Searching for literary precedents, Clark names "the medieval thesauri" and Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (306). Clark's examples portray Nabokov's annotated translation as a text that blends the literary and the scientific and allows for the overlap between the fictional and the scholarly. Nabokov works in a genre that creates a unique literary space with multiple reference points. One needs a thorough knowledge of detail and imagination to travel through this space — imaginative and scholarly at the same

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<sup>10</sup> Alexander Dolinin, "Eugene Onegin," 120.

time — using, in Nabokov’s words, his translation as a “pony.” Already the epigraph to “Translator’s Introduction” alerts the reader’s interpretative powers as it names different texts the reader needs to be aware of to navigate through this space of annotated translation. We see Nabokov referring to Pushkin citing Chateaubriand translating Milton:

Nowadays — an unheard-of case! — the foremost French writer is translating Milton word for word and proclaiming that an interlinear translation would be the summit of his art, had such been possible. PUSHKIN, from an article (late 1836 or early 1837) on Chateaubriand’s translation *Le Paradis perdu*, Paris, 1836.<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, as translator and scholar of literature Nabokov does not participate in mainstream practices.

Along with Nabokov’s references to numerous texts and authors in the notes,<sup>12</sup> it is a sensory detail and evocation of senses by the translator that function as reference points allowing for the metonymical extension of the original. Nabokov extensively develops the sensory detail in the notes. By doing so, he invites a good reader — the one who cares for detail — to enter the literary space of *Eugene Onegin* and to explore it using the translation as “a pony” or maybe as his “magic carpet,”<sup>13</sup> which is another metaphor for the possibility of the impossible. Although reading is a process extended in time, Nabokov describes Pushkin’s and his texts in spatial terms. Thus, both have a geography and landscape that need to be perceived: “Pushkin’s composition is first of all and above all a phenomenon of style, and it is from this flowered rim that I have surveyed its sweep of Arcadian country, the serpentine gleam of its imported brooks, the miniature blizzards imprisoned in round crystal, and the many-hued levels of literary parody blending in the melting distance.”<sup>14</sup> By mapping out the geography of the literary space of “Pushkin’s composition” and the translation (“I have surveyed...”) in this pictorial way, the translator prepares the reader for its detailed perception. Let us discuss several

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<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 1, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Brian James Baer’s *Translation and the Making of Modern Russian Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015) helps situate the intertextual tendencies in both Pushkin and Nabokov in the unique cultural development of Russian literature seen as a constant tension between hybridity and otherness.

<sup>13</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1970), 139.

<sup>14</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 1, 7.

examples of how Nabokov treats sensory detail in his annotated *Eugene Onegin* to illustrate the dynamic bond between the original, translation, and commentary.

The introductory notes to the translation prepare the reader for the authentic perception of Pushkin's world as inscribed both in the way the words sound and the way material facts look, taste, or smell. The function of the notes, Nabokov says, is "to fix the reader's attention" on these details because "in art as in science there is no delight without the detail."<sup>15</sup> Nabokov insists on a focused perception as an exclusive instrument of knowing: "Let me repeat that unless these [details] are thoroughly understood and remembered, all 'general ideas' (so easily acquired, so profitably resold) must necessarily remain but worn passports allowing their bearers short cuts from one area of ignorance to another."<sup>16</sup> One cannot, for example, know Pushkin's world without having an idea of how the original print copy looks like or how Russian words sound. To help the readers cope with these tasks of perceiving foreignness, Nabokov reproduces the 1837 edition of *Eugene Onegin* and provides the table of transliterations used in the translation. Although Clark chastises Nabokov for the unreadability of the reproduced 1837 copy, the translator stresses its value in the way it lets the reader actually see the old orthography used by Pushkin and his publishers.<sup>17</sup> It is the typographical image of the text that Nabokov wants to imprint on our minds. Nabokov's table of transliterations not only tunes the reader to the musicality of the Russian language, but it also encourages the reader to start looking or rather listening beyond the text's territory. Thus, Nabokov explains the Russian pronunciation by making us listen to other languages: French, German, or Italian ("o like the Italian o, ... ya as in the German ya)."<sup>18</sup> Nabokov's own phonological tastes leak into the commentary when in the note to "o," he reveals his dislike of Moscow dialect whose unaccented "o-s" are pronounced as "ah-s." Nabokov obviously felt strongly about Moscow speech patterns as he, first, says that one pronounces "o" differently in "ordinary good Russian"<sup>19</sup> and, secondly, in note 4 to Two: XXXIII he comments on Pushkin's way of mimicking "the Moscow way, especially on the part of women, of intoning syllables in speech as to produce a kind of musical drawl...."<sup>20</sup> The introductory notes to the translation contain an indirect invitation for the readers of the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., XI.

<sup>18</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 1, XXII-XXIV.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., XXII.

<sup>20</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*, vol. 2, part 1, 296.

translation to project themselves into the original by assimilating both intra- and extraliterary elements of the original. By doing so, they prepare the readers for a unique kind of Nabokov's historicism that aspires to transcend the alterity of the foreign text.

Once an attentive reader starts assimilating the way the original looks and sounds, this reader is ready to proceed with the main text. In my exploration of polymodal detail and its broader implications, I will look first at the description of Onegin's day in winter 1819. The series of scenes in the original, its translation, and the commentary as if transpose us into that day by putting all our five senses at work.

Polymodal perception is a versatile and simultaneous perception of the world through several or all of the five senses. We all have it; the problem with literature, however, is that narratives unfold consecutively rather than present their images simultaneously. Although the authors try to compensate for the linearity of narratives through spatial form or associative imagery,<sup>21</sup> the strict simultaneity of perception in literary texts is not possible. It rather has to be constructed. In literature, polymodal perception may find its expression, for example, in a holistic image of a winter night, such as the winter night of 1819 in One: XVI of *Eugene Onegin*. The stanza describes how on that particular winter night, Onegin leaves his house and arrives at a salon. Pushkin celebrated those intensely cold but beautiful Russian winters many times. Nabokov did so as well, for example, in his *Speak, Memory*. Stanza XVI makes us feel just how cold it was — so cold that one had to wear a beaver collar coat. One can see frostdust on the fir and the way it “silvers” in the dark. These visual and at the same time tactile images additionally synchronize with the sound image of the coachman's cry and the feeling of sudden change from stillness to movement:

It is already dark. He gets into a sleigh.

Уж темно: в санки он садится.

The cry “Way, way!” resounds.

"Пади, пади!" - раздался крик;

With frostdust silvers

Морозной пылью серебрится

His beaver collar.

Его бобровый воротник.

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<sup>21</sup> The concept of spatial form was suggested by Joseph Frank, *The Idea of Spatial Form* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1991) and further developed by W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994).

To Talon's he has dashed off: he is certain	К Talon помчался: он уверен,
That there already waits for him [Kavérin];	Что там уж ждет его Каверин.
has entered — and the cork goes ceilingward,	Вошел: и пробка в потолок,
the flow of comet wine has spurted,	Вина кометы брызнул ток;
a bloody roast beef is before him,	Пред ним roast-beef окровавленный,
and truffles, luxury of youthful years,	И трюфли, роскошь юных лет,
the best flower of French cookery,	Французской кухни лучший цвет,
and a decayless Strasbourg pie	И Стразбурга пирог нетленный
between a living Limburg cheese	Меж сыром лимбургским живым
and a golden ananas. <sup>22</sup>	И ананасом золотым. <sup>23</sup>

Nabokov's "Way, Way!"<sup>24</sup> reproduces both the singing intonations and functionality of the words "Padi, padi!" that, as Dobrodomov (Добродомов) and Pilshchikov (Пильщиков) demonstrate in their hermeneutical reading of the line, evolved from the imperative of the Russian verb for "go" into an interjection "padi/podi."<sup>25</sup> In Nabokov's interpretation, "Padi/podi" is "the crack coachman's traditional warning cry, aimed mainly at foot passengers."<sup>26</sup> Yuri Lotman's (Ю. М. Лотман) commentary to Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* provides us with additional clues to how "Padi, padi!" had to sound. Lotman explains that "Padi, padi!" was a postilion's high-pitched warning cry.<sup>27</sup>

Starting with line 5, the outdoor cold gives way to the coziness of a salon and its delicious food. The list of dishes — wine, roast beef, truffles, pie, cheese, and pineapple — all

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<sup>22</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 1, 101.

<sup>23</sup> А.С. Пушкин. *Сочинения в трех томах*, т. 2 (Москва: Художественная литература, 1986), 192.

<sup>24</sup> Johnston, for example, translates the same line as "'Make way, make way,' goes up the shout..." and turns a laconic but functional "padi" into a longer, two word phrase. Hofstadter uses a two syllable word: "It's dark by now: Eugene steps lightly/ Into his chase. 'Away! Away!'" (5).

<sup>25</sup> For the discussion of the etymology of the word "padi/podi," see: И. Г. Добродомов and И. А. Пильщиков. *Лексика и фразеология "Евгения Онегина."* *Герменевтические очерки* (Москва: Языки славянских культур, 2008), 59.

<sup>26</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 2, part 1, 70.

<sup>27</sup> Лотман, Ю. "Роман А. С. Пушкина "Евгений Онегин": Комментарий: Пособие для учителя, in *Лотман Ю. М. Пушкин: Биография писателя; Статьи и заметки, 1960—1990; "Евгений Онегин": Комментарий* (СПб.: Искусство-СПб., 1995), 472-762, accessed August 25, 2017, <http://feb-web.ru/feb/pushkin/critics/lot/lot-472-.htm>, 563.



activate our gustatory faculty. Nabokov calls this listing “the inventory technique.”<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the alliterations in the original create rhythm, thus rendering the excitement, merriment, and comfort of the moment. Although Nabokov says that he has sacrificed Pushkin’s rhythms and sound orchestration to the fidelity of meaning, they keep reappearing in his translation: energizing “d”-s and “s”-s in the first part of the stanza are followed by languid, relaxed, and warm assonances in the list of dishes. There is another function that alliterations and assonances fulfill. Because of the sound repetition throughout the stanza, the words, which in ordinary speech have quite unrelated meanings, now enter new associative rows. Poetic texts are dense,<sup>29</sup> and word meanings can be amplified due to a close interaction of words within the line. Thus, for example, in the original lines “Морозной пылью серебрится / Его бобровый воротник” (“Maroznoj pyljyu serebritsa / Jivo babrovij varatnik” / “With frostdust silvers / his beaver collar”), the rippling “r” from “serebritsa” projects the sememe, or the unit of meaning, denoting “silver” on other words containing the same “r”. Now the words “babrovij varatnik” / “beaver collar” also acquire silver overtones. Despite what he claims, Nabokov renders Pushkin’s alliterations that become suggestive of both the color silver and severe cold. However, Nabokov does so through the repetition of different sounds: “s” and interchanging “f/v” in “With frostdust silvers / his beaver collar.” Nabokov never failed to notice the effect that alliterations may have on the meanings of the words. In his notes, he draws our attention to the semantic complexity of words and to their “onomatopoeic value”<sup>30</sup> as he does, for example, in comment 14 to One: XXI. In this comment, he reconstructs for the reader Onegin’s “alliterative yawn”: “No i Didlo mne nadoel” (“but even of Didelot I’ve had enough”).<sup>31</sup>

As a translator, Nabokov insists on our immersing into Pushkin’s world. Through his stunning notes, he makes us experience this world even more intensely. The notes as if zoom in the details of the original, thus inviting us not only to savor these details but to look and feel beyond the text. In this respect, the two themes from Nabokov’s notes to stanza XVI — that of a coat and food — become of particular interest. Notes 3 and 4 fill us in on the details absent from the original. Specifically, we come to know that Onegin’s beaver collar “is the collar of the deep-

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<sup>28</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 2, part 1, 95.

<sup>29</sup> Yuri Tynianov famously refers to the “density” of the verse line. Yuri Tynianov, *The Problem of Verse Language*, tr. M. Sosa and H. Brent (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1981). See also Yuri Lotman, *Analysis of the Poetic Text*, tr. D. Barton Johnson (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976).

<sup>30</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 2, part 1, 166.

<sup>31</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 1, 104.

caped, ample-sleeved *shinel'* of Alexander I's era, which was a cross between a civilian greatcoat (or box coat) and the army cloak of the period; a glorified capote or, quite exactly, a furred carrick — the English homecoming from France....<sup>32</sup> Nabokov's goal is to warn us that we should not confuse Onegin's coat style with later coat styles — Nikolayevskaya *shinel'* or the later army coat. Why does Nabokov supplement Pushkin by describing Onegin's costume? He does so again in comment 4 to One: XXVI:

4/ his attire: I imagine he wore to that particular ball (winter, 1819) not simply a black *frac* but (following London rather than Paris), a brass-buttoned, velvet-collared, sky-blue coat—with skirts enclosing the thighs—over a very close-fitting white waistcoat; quite certainly, his Bréguet repeater, with a dangling fob seal, was carried in the right front pocket of the trousers; these, I imagine were blue pantaloons (also termed “tights”—nankeen tights with three buttons at the ankle) strapped over varnished *escarpins*. There were thirty-two styles of tying a cravat.<sup>33</sup>

Both descriptions of Onegin's costume — his beaver-collared coat and the dress he wears to the ball — are not in Pushkin's text. It is Nabokov rather than Pushkin who creates a detailed costume image and invites us not only to see the dress details but also to feel the texture of brass buttons, the watch, or the velvet collar. Nabokov urges the reader to actively participate in his mental reconstruction of Onegin's costume when, instead of describing the tie knot, he just mentions that “there were thirty-two styles of tying a cravat.” By metonymically extending the original into the commentary, Nabokov also prolongs our perception of the original passage. He gets our senses and minds creatively involved with the text and the world it constructs by urging us to use our imagination to provide the missing details. Similar to the costume theme, Nabokov's notes on Onegin's diet extend the original text and make the reader look — or even taste — beyond what *Eugene Onegin* offers. Thus, Nabokov invites us “to compare Onegin's diet with the dinner, a ‘tumult of fish, flesh, and fowl, / And vegetables, all in masquerade,’ described by Byron in octaves LXII-LXXXIV of *Don Juan*, can. XV....”<sup>34</sup> Now shuttling between Byron, Pushkin, and his own love of detail, Nabokov adds that “the fare in *Don Juan* is

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<sup>32</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 2, part 1, 70.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 72-73.

more profuse and more specific.” Nabokov would clarify and expand Pushkin’s references to food throughout his notes many times. He does so, for example, in his comment to Two: XXXI. The comment, first, creates a polimodal image of the Russian white mushroom (“a succulent toadstool with thick white stem and a tawny cap, which, fried or pickled, are much prized by European gourmets”) and then refers the reader to Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory* for a better understanding of mushrooms and their role in Russian culture.<sup>35</sup>

Nabokov’s rendering of the sensory detail as inscribed in material facts or texture of the words indicates his departure from literalism. Nabokov’s “literalism” undergoes a transformation through commentaries that let in other voices and discourses into the translation project. These other voices and discourses help the reader to perform the mental reconstruction of the *Eugene Onegin* world by alerting the reader’s textual awareness and senses. One can illustrate the open mode of interpretation by Nabokov’s work on Two: V, which presents Onegin as seen by his countryside neighbors. The translation goes: “they all ceased to be friends with him. / ‘Our neighbor is a boor; acts like a crackbrain; / he’s a Freemason; he drinks only / by the tumbler red wine....”<sup>36</sup> Nabokov comments on the lines “he drinks only / by the tumbler red wine” (“p’yòt odnò stakànom kràsnoe vinò”):

The implication is presumably that Onegin prefers a beaker of foreign wine to a jigger of national, right-thinking vodka. However, it is possible to understand the word *odno* [only] as meaning not “only” but “straight”

he’s a Freemason, drinks red wine

unwartered in tumblerfuls.

But in those days the one to dilute his drink would have been the jaded beau from St. Petersburg rather than the provincial tippler. It would seem that Onegin has graduated, like Pushkin, from champagne to Bordeaux. (see Four: XLVI).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 2, part 1, 294.

<sup>36</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 1, 127.

<sup>37</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 2, part 1, 226.

The openness of suggested interpretation, however, goes beyond several possible contexts for the word “*odno* [only].” The commentary opens up Pushkin’s lines through references to other cultural contexts and texts and through cross-referencing. First, the note sends us to Four: XLVI of *Eugene Onegin*, in which the narrator discusses his wine preferences: “But it [Veuve Clicquot] betrays with noisy froth/ my stomach,/ and I sedate Bordeaux/ have actually now preferred to it.”<sup>38</sup> If we follow Nabokov through the note to these lines, we learn that, according to Nabokov, Pushkin in fact uses trite wine imagery coming from French or British poetry of the time. The quoted stanza XLVI will also refer us back to stanza XLV of the same chapter, with an extensive note on the founder of French champagne firm, on Pushkin’s disguised dialogue with Baratinski, and, through it, on the Decembrist uprising and censorship in Pushkin’s Russia. All of these topics cluster around gustatory imagery. In addition, the note to Two: V puts culture of wine-drinking into historical and literary perspective. We learn that

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, ripe gentlemen watered their wine. Anthologically, Pushkin advocated it in stylized little pieces of 1833 and 1835 (*Yunosha skromno piruy*, “Youth, feast modestly,” *Cto zhe sùho v chàshe dnò*, “Why is the bottom dry in the cup”); and, biographically, added seltzer to his champagne, as Byron did to his hock. According to a remark of Wellington’s (1821) reported by Samuel Rogers in his *Recollections* (1856), Louis XVIII mixed water with his champagne.<sup>39</sup>

This little tour through the habits of wine-drinking takes the reader to multiple cultural and historical destinations. One more time, we are reminded that a piece of literature is not a fossilized deposit and that it can be brought back to life through multiple readings and interpretations. It also gains vitality by participating in a dialogue with other texts. Nabokov initiates this dialogue through his open mode of translation and, by doing so, presents the idea of reading not as linearity but rather as an arrangement of textual space. We of course remember Nabokov’s own multiple references to his technique of composing that does not rely on linearity

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<sup>38</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 1, 196.

<sup>39</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 2, part 1, 226-27.

but rather is spatial. In his 1964 interview with Alvin Toffler, the writer compares novel to painting, thus presenting composing and its outcomes in spatial terms (*Strong Opinions*, 45). The idea of textual space also informs Nabokov's exegetical techniques. Not only do they illustrate his gift of scholarly and scientific observation, but they also become a compositional mechanism that binds together Pushkin's text and its translation and makes them cohere in one literary space.

The textual space that Nabokov creates through his translation and commentary allows for rendering in succession of multiple sensory perceptions and cultural associations that all together create our instantaneous, unified awareness of an object. One category of objects recreated by Nabokov in this spatial way is plants, shrubs, and trees. Our example will come from Six: VII that characterizes a "reformed rake"<sup>40</sup> Zaretsky who "beneath the racemosas and the pea trees/ from storms ... at last found shelter...":<sup>41</sup>

... Daredevilry	... Удалость
(like love's dream, yet another caper)	(Как сон любви, другая шалость)
passes with lovely youth.	Проходит с юностью живой.
As I've said, my Zaretsky,	Как я сказал, Зарецкий мой,
beneath the racemosas and the pea trees	Под сень черёмух и акаций
from storms having at last found shelter,	От бурь укывшись наконец,
lives like a true sage,	Живёт, как истинный мудрец,
plants cabbages like Horace,	Капусту садит, как Гораций,
breeds ducks and geese,	Разводит уток и гусей
and teaches his children the ABC. <sup>42</sup>	И учит азбуки детей. <sup>43</sup>

At the first sight, these lines are neither particularly pictorial nor rich in assonances and alliterations. Thematically, they describe a change from the recklessness of youth to tranquility preferred in mature age. Pushkin's wit shines when, by mentioning a bower formed by

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<sup>40</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 2, part 2, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol.1, 230.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> А.С. Пушкин. *Сочинения*, 192.

racemosas and pea tress, he juxtaposes Zaretsky's present life in rural tranquility and his former daredevilry. Although the novel's translator Douglas Hofstadter describes Nabokov's commentary on the line "beneath the racemosas and the pea trees/ Pat sen' cheryomuh i akatsiy" as "botanicolinguistic paroxysm" and "ranting,"<sup>44</sup> this extensive comment fulfils an important function. Step by step, it recreates the way "cheryomuha" and "akatsiya" look, the fragrance and texture of racemosa's blossom, and an array of cultural associations and overtones this tree has for the Russian reader. In his commentary, Nabokov talks about cultural associations along the lines of sensory perception, "We all know that the popular name of a plant may strike the imagination differently in different languages; its stress may be on color in one country and on structure in another; it may have beautiful classical connotations; it may be redolent of unbelievable Floridas...."<sup>45</sup> Nabokov further explains that "cheryomuha" has "creamy-white, musky, Maytime bloom" that "is associated in Russian hearts with the poetical emotions of youth."<sup>46</sup> It is precisely because the Russian reader easily recognizes this association, the image of this tree with its dreamy and tender blossom reads out of context when juxtaposed with the image of Zaretsky. In addition, it makes retired Zaretsky look somewhat sentimental. Nabokov admits that his own invention "musk cherry" captures well both the sound form and the bloom of "cheryomuha." However, taking a complete sensory image of the tree into consideration, Nabokov decides against "musk cherry." He explains that it "unfortunately evokes a taste that is not characteristic of its [cheryomuha's] small, grainy, black fruit."<sup>47</sup> The sound form of the word "cheryomuha" is no less important than visual, tactile, and olfactory perception of the tree's blossom and gustatory perception of its fruit. Nabokov says that "cheryomuha's" syllables are "fluffy and dreamy."<sup>48</sup> Most probably, it is the "ch" that triggers the image of "fluffiness," and it is the vowels "yo," "u," and "a" all in open syllables that give us an impression of dreaminess.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, trans. Douglas Hofstadter (New York: Basic Books, 1999), LV. Hofstadter translates the line as "Beneath the shelter of acacias / And cherries..." (87).

<sup>45</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 2, part 2, 10.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>48</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 2, part 2, 11.

<sup>49</sup> For the explanation of the nature of musicality and aesthetic qualities of sounds, see, for example, Reuven Tsur, *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive? The Poetic Mode of Speech Perception* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992).

Following the etymologies of the phytonyms in the original line “pat sen’ cheryomuh i akatsiy” helps one arrive at an understanding of Nabokov’s unusual lexical choice of “the racemosas and the pea trees.” “Cheryomuha” is an originally Slavic term, whereas “akatsiya” is a borrowing from Greek through Latin. Thus, the original line combines a phrase of native origin and a Latinism: “Pat sen’ cheryomuh i akatsiy.” Nabokov’s translation “beneath the racemosas and the pea trees” reproduces the same pattern. Thus, in addition to the sensory images of the phytonyms, Nabokov recreates their etymological and cultural contexts. Further, the commentator describes in every detail the geographic and botanical environment of “cheryomuha” and “akatsiya,” arguing that Pushkin’s “akatsiya” is not “white acacia” of the Ukraine. However, it is Pushkin’s direct quotation from Batyushkov’s “Bower of Muses” (“Besedka Muz”) that “settles the identity of the plant.”<sup>50</sup> Batyushkov describes the color of his “akatsiya” flower as “golden-glistening,” from which Nabokov concludes, “The epithet in the second line of the poem suits the bright flower of *Caragana* well and does not suit the white blossoms of the false acacia at all. Consequently, the correct way to translate EO, Six: VII: 9, is: beneath the racemosas and the pea trees....”<sup>51</sup>

Nabokov’s commentary situates racemosas and pea trees as growing not only in Russia but in the space of the novel. The phytonyms connect to this space through their inner form, and their explication through the commentary creates a literary space, or, in Nabokov’s words, their contextual habitat.”<sup>52</sup> Nabokov’s “contextual habitat” blends the scientific and the literary allowing for the reader’s immersion into the hermeneutics of literary space.

Nabokov’s translation format sets the reader on a back-and-forth journey between the original and the translation. Comments negotiate the crudeness of literal translation by opening it up for the readers’ interpretation. Because Nabokov believes that nothing in the original is accidental and everything is informed with authorial intentionality, he prefers, to use Yves Bonnefoy’s words, “to reduce a poem to its clarity.”<sup>53</sup> This reduction means losses in terms of musicality, inner rhythm, and even grammar. Nabokov honestly calls his literal translation “a crib” (*Strong Opinions*, 54). We know that “cribs” and “ponies” are literal translations prepared

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<sup>50</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 2, part 2, 13.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 2, part 2, 12.

<sup>53</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, “Translating Poetry,” in *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, ed. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet, 186-92 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 186.

for the writers who work with the language they do not know. Cribs mediate translations by providing textual material for further interpretation and expression in the target language. By offering his readers a crib, Nabokov activates their creative impulses and urges them to continue his work on *Eugene Onegin*.<sup>54</sup> And he himself sets the stage for this ongoing process of interpretation by providing extensive and provoking notes that complement the translation.

Despite what critics of Nabokov's translation claimed, his open translation mode demonstrates that he is not negligent of his readers. In his lectures, essays, and interviews, Nabokov acknowledges the importance of his readers. Nabokov's "Good Readers and Good Writers" articulates the author's refusal to talk down to his audience and his trust in the readers' ability to be meticulous interpreters of texts they truly enjoy. We also know that it is a consideration of the readers that in part triggered Nabokov's translation project, which grew out of the necessity to provide his students with a high quality translation of *Eugene Onegin*. In this respect, it is interesting to observe how Nabokov's translation mode, which relies on detailed commentaries, mirrors his teaching strategies. Nabokov recollects, "In my academic days I endeavored to provide students of literature with exact information about details, about such combination of details as yield the sensual spark without which a book is dead."<sup>55</sup> Seemingly chaotic or even irrelevant, copious notes to *Eugene Onegin* carry a rather demanding agenda: they provide good readers of Pushkin with an opportunity to interact with the original in a dynamic way. They become a metatext about Pushkin's text, both of which resist final and unequivocal resolution. Approached on Nabokov's terms, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, its translation and commentary all are in need of the readers who should be able to fill in informational gaps through their imaginative reconstruction and further reading. Nabokov's technique of translation opens up Pushkin's novel in verse to the delight of scientific exploration and artistic discovery. It also engages the readers through the embodiment — by activating their senses and by prolonging the length of perception of the text. Most importantly, it urges the readers to dwell longer in the newly created literary space where they can now shuttle between

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<sup>54</sup> Julia Trubikhina argues that Nabokov's comparing of his translation to a crib, or line-by-line translation, is not a gesture of modesty but rather a factual statement. The main translation unit, consciously chosen by Nabokov, is a poetic line (128).

<sup>55</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 204.



the original, the translation, and the commentary. Not only the translator but also the readers become active participants in the text's interpretation.

If we accept Nabokov's open translation mode that relies on commentary, we can explore the connections and associations marked by Nabokov further to reconstruct better the world of the novel. This world will grow more tangible and recognizable for us also due to Nabokov's explication of sensory detail. Moreover, other readings and translations of Pushkin's novel will extend Nabokov's interpretation as it happens, for example, in Dobrodomov and Pilshchikov's (2008) hermeneutical reading of "Padi, padi!" In a similar way, Yuri Lotman comments on "a decayless Strasbourg pie"<sup>56</sup> from One: VI, providing an explanation that differs from that of Nabokov's. In Lotman's interpretation, Pushkin refers to Russian "pashtet" that receives an adjective "decayless" because it was exported as preserves.<sup>57</sup> In their 1998 review article on the Russian translations of Nabokov's commentary, Dobrodomov and Pilshchikov stress the functional importance of the mode of commentary for both Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin* and the Russian translations of Nabokov's commentary. The scholars urge the Russian translators to use commentary to clarify and correct Nabokov's philological mistakes, such as, for example, Nabokov's usage of "Hazaran" instead of "Khazar" (411).<sup>58</sup>

It is when we approach Nabokov's translation as an invitation to explore the literary space of the novel, first with the translator and then on our own, we begin to appreciate honesty and mastery of Nabokov's translation project. As the participants of this process, we no longer need to search for the best possible translation of *Eugene Onegin*. As Natalia Nesterova (Н. М. Нестерова) puts it in Pushkin's words, all translations are "S zhivoi kartiny spisok blednyi // an incomplete, feeble translation // the pallid copy of a vivid picture...."<sup>59</sup> However, they all complement each other to create a unified and more accurate picture of the original.<sup>60</sup> By creating a unique translation format that blends literalism and historicism, Nabokov, translator and commentator, reaches out to his readers to reconcile the eternal openness of the literary text

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<sup>56</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol.1, 101.

<sup>57</sup> Ю. М. Лотман, "Роман А. С. Пушкина 'Евгений Онегин'," 563.

<sup>58</sup> I. G. Dobrodomov and I. A. Pil'shchikov, "V. Nabokov, Kommentarij k romanu A. S. Pushkina 'Evgenij Onegin'; V. Nabokov, Kommentarii k "Evgeniiu Oneginu" Aleksandra Pushkina," *Philologica*, 5, no. 11/13 (1998): 403-24, accessed December 19, 2017, [http://rvb.ru/philologica/05eng/05eng\\_nabokov.htm](http://rvb.ru/philologica/05eng/05eng_nabokov.htm)

<sup>59</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, trans. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol.1, 164

<sup>60</sup> Н. М. Нестерова, " 'С живой картины список бледный': об английских переводах 'Евгения Онегина' А. С. Пушкина," *Вестник Пермского научного центра*, 4 (2014): 32.

with the considerations of authorial intentionality. In many ways, it is for this reason that he calls for “translation with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page so as to leave only the gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity.”<sup>61</sup> And as a configuration of this open textual space, Nabokov’s translation of *Eugene Onegin* continues to remind us that, as Boyd points out, our senses only help us make sense. To reach out for truth, one also needs curiosity, imagination, and knowledge.<sup>62</sup> The good readers who are eager to explore Pushkin’s world through and beyond Nabokov’s translation are able to enjoy the openness of Nabokov’s translation.

How should these good readers read Nabokov’s translation, which, in Julia Trubikhina’s words, is “the unyielding literal behemoth..., fascinating to study but barely possible to read.”<sup>63</sup> In choosing a reading strategy for Nabokov’s fascinating and challenging text, I would follow Lawrence Venuti’s advice. In “How to Read a Translation” (2004), Venuti suggests that one should read “a translation as a translation, as a work in its own right” by not only savoring the qualities that belong to the original but also by looking into the translator’s work.<sup>64</sup> Because the original is, to use Gilles Deleuze’s words, “non-exchangeable and non-substitutable” singularity,<sup>65</sup> the translation and the original can never be identical. To compensate for the inevitable loss in translation, a translator, Venuti says, has to be a writer of a special kind — the one who possesses both “an art of mimicry” and an art of interpretation.<sup>66</sup> Nabokov’s interpretative translation of *Eugene Onegin* reminds us about these two vital talents with staying power.

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<sup>61</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, “Problems of Translation: Onegin in English,” in *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, ed. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet, 127-43 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 143.

<sup>62</sup> Brian Boyd, “Do the Senses Make Sense?” Keynote address, Colloque International, Société Française Vladimir Nabokov, April 28, 2016.

<sup>63</sup> Julia Trubikhina, *The Translator’s Doubts*, 88.

<sup>64</sup> Lawrence Venuti, “How to Read a Translation,” *Words without Borders*, July 2004, accessed December 19, 2017, <http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/how-to-read-a-translation>

<sup>65</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 1.

<sup>66</sup> Lawrence Venuti, “How to Read a Translation.”

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