

2014

Eugene Onegin the Cold War Monument: How Edmund Wilson Quarreled with Vladimir Nabokov

Tim Conley

Brock University, tconley@brocku.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [Intellectual History Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), and the [Slavic Languages and Societies Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Conley, Tim (2014) "Eugene Onegin the Cold War Monument: How Edmund Wilson Quarreled with Vladimir Nabokov," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 38: Iss. 1, Article 4. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1002>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Eugene Onegin the Cold War Monument: How Edmund Wilson Quarreled with Vladimir Nabokov

Abstract

The tale of how Edmund Wilson quarreled with Vladimir Nabokov over the latter's 1964 translation of *Eugene Onegin* can be instructively read as a politically charged event, specifically a "high culture" allegory of the Cold War. Dissemination of anti-Communist ideals (often in liberal and literary guises) was the mandate of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, whose funding and editorial initiatives included the publication of both pre-Revolution Russian literature and, more notoriously, the journal *Encounter* (1953-1990), where Nabokov's fiery "Reply" to Wilson appeared. This essay outlines the propaganda value of the *Onegin* debate within and to Cold War mythology.

Keywords

Nabokov, Wilson, translation, Pushkin, Onegin, Cold War

Cover Page Footnote

My thanks to Marshall Brown, Stephen Cain, Claire A. Culleton, and Alexander Scala, all of whose comments on earlier drafts of this essay were to its benefit. I am also obliged to STTCL's anonymous readers, who offered useful corrections and suggestions.

Eugene Onegin the Cold War Monument:
How Edmund Wilson Quarreled with Vladimir Nabokov

Tim Conley
Brock University

How can you, or any other writer, make better propaganda than by books that get translated because they have something to say to people in other countries?

Edmund Wilson, in a 1956 letter to William Faulkner turning down the invitation to join President Eisenhower's anti-Communist propaganda initiative, the "People-to-People" program (qtd. in *Mitgang* 181)¹

BOOKSELLER

Fine. Here is my advice to you.
Hark to a useful truth:
our time's a huckster. In this iron time
where there's no money there's no freedom.
...
That lyre of yours, quite frankly speaking,
much good is going to fulfill.

POET

You are perfectly right. Here, take my manuscript.
Let us come to terms.

Aleksandr Pushkin, "Conversation of Bookseller with Poet" (a prefatory poem to *Eugene Onegin*), trans. Vladimir Nabokov (2.18-19)

The incendiary quarrel between former chums Vladimir "Volodya" Nabokov and Edmund "Bunny" Wilson over the former's 1964 translation of *Eugene Onegin* is certainly among the most notorious intellectual rows of the past century, and may well be its most famous "literary" one. Yet it is perhaps more instructively read—as I propose to do here—as a political event, stage-managed for public consumption, an ideologically-loaded allegory. This particular clash between titans is part of a continuum of such allegorical Cold War narratives, which materialize both in cultural products (films and books) and events (consider the popular example of the 1972 Fischer-Spassky chess match),² implicitly assign

roles of hero and villain, and afford its audience the primal conclusion: a clearly observed victor, emblematic of a winning ideology or set of values.

The dispute between Nabokov and Wilson can be easily viewed as a collision of narcissistic and pedantic personalities, a foreseeable conclusion to a friendship filled with prickly exchanges about correct pronunciation and the merits of Jane Austen and André Malraux. As Jeffrey Meyers puts it in his 1995 biography of Wilson, “their quarrels also turned into a duel, fought on various points of honor, between the patrician American critic who had great prestige and influence in the Anglo-American literary world, and the uprooted, dispossessed Russian novelist who quickly established a considerable reputation with his magical English prose” (261). Lewis M. Dabney, in a more recent biography of Wilson (2005), likewise casts the scene as a duel:

[Nabokov had] told the American [Wilson] it was naive to envision duels in Russia as gentlemanly affairs in which men started back-to-back, marched in opposite directions, then turned and fired, not necessarily to kill. The Russian duel was the fierce “duel à volonté” of the Napoleonic code. Leaving a no-man’s land of “say ten paces” between them, the combatants marched toward each other and fired at will. (407)

The romantic fancy of the metaphor stems from a shared, ironic awareness of how life imitates art in Pushkin: a duel is as central to *Onegin* as a real duel in 1837 was terminal for the poet.

However, the duel between these two writers is of more than just biographical interest, just as it is not a typical tiff between men of letters.³ It is worth remembering that most fallings-out between American writers, if or when they occur in writing (and not, say, over cocktails), are limited to private correspondence, and even among public outbursts the issue at hand is seldom so rarefied, so seemingly “non-political” as the translation of poetry.⁴ With these facts in mind, what and whose “points of honor” were at stake in this unusual duel—both the fighting of it and its staging—become more intriguing to consider.

The Nabokov-Wilson controversy involves troubling issues of sponsorship, of ulterior publication mandates, and of cultural and political authority. An awareness of the ideological impetus behind the production and reception of what is often tellingly referred to as “Nabokov’s *Onegin*” affords as much and as valuable insight into readings of that text as any technical or formal analysis of the translation. Indeed, implicit in the argument that follows is the larger suggestion that the historicization of works of translation is both complementary to and—especially in this instance, given its political reverberations—as urgent a project as any such formal or linguistic analysis.

Nabokov, the Bollingen Foundation, and American Cultural Politics

Nabokov's multi-volume *Onegin* was published in 1964 by the Bollingen Foundation, whose history is worth examining here to understand the politics behind this publication. The Bollingen Foundation is an organization perhaps best known for its poetry prize first awarded in 1949 to Ezra Pound, at the time a resident of St. Elizabeths Hospital for the Insane.⁵ If the name of the foundation seems curious or elliptical—it comes from the Swiss town where Carl Jung liked to summer—that may reflect the character of its origins. Paul Mellon, a fan of Jung and experimental, modernist art, is usually recognized as a philanthropist, but he had also been an overseas agent of the OSS, precursor to the CIA (Saunders 34). This is not a coincidence: by putting together the Bollingen Foundation, the politically conservative Mellon had contributed to a concerted and diversified effort by American intelligentsia (in the most militant sense of the term) to shape postwar cultural discourse in their political and economic interests, an effort best documented by Frances Stonor Saunders's incisive 1999 book, *Who Paid the Piper?*, a source I will often draw upon in this essay. The Bollingen Foundation, an American-funded, American-run, and American-based institution with a European name, chose Pound out of concern that too many American writers were leftists and revolutionaries and because, as Richard M. Elman explained, Pound “represented the ultimate in the mandarin culture that [Mellon, along with right-minded writers Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom] were trying to preserve and promote” (qtd. in Saunders 250).⁶

That Bollingen's literary initiatives after the Pound controversy are no less ideologically charged grows clear if we examine them in their specific political-historical context, just as we cannot help but view Pound's prize in relation to the war, the Holocaust, and his Italian radio broadcasts. René A. Wormser's 1958 report on the “power and influence” of non-profit American foundations, written in the wake of the Congress-appointed Reece Committee's investigation of such tax-exempt institutions (1953), is worthy of study in this case. Ominously titled *Foundations: Their Power and Influence*, it is a compendium of anxieties about any and all imaginable influences of socialist thought and ideals—as conceived, of course, within the widest possible range of definitions—upon American foreign policy, education, and culture. Wormser reprimands both the “fog-bound intellectuals who have advocated change on the theory that things are not as rosy as they should be” and the various foundations he sees supporting and financing enterprises which may reflect a bias other than the “traditions and established values” and “national pride and national ambitions” which they ought to promote (198). Although “those foundations which have acted

as the financial underwriters of socialism in the United States” are to be deplored, Wormser includes among his short list of right-minded foundations the Bollingen Foundation, cited for its publication of “unusually interesting books” that are “usually neglected by other foundations” (199). This mention of “neglect” is a reiteration of a theme of Wormser’s, allegations of the sinister exclusion of conservative, anti-socialist voices from intellectual discourse; it may be readily supposed, therefore, that Bollingen’s “unusually interesting” publications are by implication of an agreeable political stripe.⁷

Given this desperate need to produce “unusually interesting” yet “usually neglected” books and to celebrate and uphold a “mandarin culture,” it is not difficult to see why Nabokov, to whom and to whose style the term “mandarin” is often applied, would attract the attention of members of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, whose secretary was Nabokov’s own cousin, the composer Nicolas Nabokov. In the course of the Cold War and the Congress’s struggle to disseminate anti-communist ideals, the cultural capital attributed to those Eastern European and particularly Russian literary works and writers who stood outside or apart from, if not in direct opposition to, Soviet politics and ideology steadily climbed. The propaganda battle would be decided by which side could most convincingly define the culture of the other. This involved sometimes contradictory oscillations between depicting the cultural artifacts and attitudes of the enemy as decadent, exploitive, and thus anathema, and embracing certain artists and works as emblems of the most venerable dimensions of and possibilities within their respective nations.⁸ American propagandists adopted—at least for the intellectual audience—an approach suggestive of patrician interest in Slavic history and lore. Hundreds of books of Russian literature were published under CIA sponsorship. These included Patricia Blake’s anthology of contemporary Russian writing, *Half-Way to the Moon* (1964, “an Encounter book” published in connection with the journal of that name), Pasternak’s much-lauded *Doctor Zhivago*, and the works of Chekhov (Saunders 245-46). Nabokov’s *Onegin* translation fits the pattern; indeed, such an ideological impetus may help explain the publishing risk of producing four volumes filled largely by pedantic and occasionally digressive notes.

Pushkin represents in this context a highly contested commodity. Evgeny Dobrenko, in a cheerfully scabrous account of the poet’s value to Soviet culture, calls him “a barometer of freedom . . . lacking in a Russia that is undoubtedly the least free of those European countries with whom it identifies” (203). Just as Pushkin himself conceived of *Onegin* as a kind of poetic monument, the strategic cultural value of both poet and work became inspiration for celebratory (and effectively proprietorial) monuments. Saunders reports how “when [Russian] artists were told to enter a competition for a statue to celebrate Pushkin’s centenary, the first prize went to a sculptor whose statue showed Stalin reading Pushkin’s

work” (181). The veracity of this anecdote is difficult to ascertain, for the real excesses and absurdities of Stalinism compete with the mythical ones (variously shaped by propaganda, jokes, and so on), and there are in fact different versions of this theme in other accounts.⁹ Nabokov’s translation is itself poised as an intimidating monument, a tall and forbidding statue of Nabokov reading Pushkin, though Alexander Gerschenkron offered the most acute judgment when he wrote that it “can and should be studied, but despite all the cleverness and occasional brilliance it cannot be read” (340).

In 1962 Edmund Wilson had encouraged “bringing out in a complete and compact form the principal American classics,” specifically with the Bollingen Foundation’s participation, but by the end of the decade, he was sternly questioning the value and purpose of superfluous make-work presented as scholarly apparatus to editions of these classics (e.g., works by authors such as Melville, Hawthorne, and Twain), effectively denouncing this “sign of the academic pedantry on which American Lit. has been stranded.” (“Fruits of the MLA” 155, 174). Wilson envisioned a literature for an “average reader,” the portable form of which would take after the fashion of French Pléiade editions. He did not completely reject the importance of bibliographical information, but supposed that very large sections of books devoted to textual data and notes will only gratify a “very small group of monomaniac bibliographers” (“Fruits of the MLA” 172). Significantly, in this context of publishing classics Wilson contrasts “the case of the Russian writers, such as Pushkin and Tolstoy,” who faced censorship under the Czar, with the way in which the “Soviets, in excellent editions, have now published those cut or altered passages — though they have made some suppressions of their own in the case of Chekhov’s letters” (173). To the eye of Wilson, a critic fond of exhorting “common sense” and imagining an average reader as an intelligent one, the ungainliness of the Bollingen *Onegin* bespeaks a selectively narrow readership and a rather undemocratic approach to publishing. Though different from the censored Soviet editions of classics, Nabokov’s *Onegin* is not the kind of classic Wilson hopes for, either: it is more an aggressive, overcompensating bid for scholarly recognition than a way to access the Russian poem, albeit secondhand.¹⁰

Yet, as I am trying to suggest, it is also more than one translator’s bid for respectability. Wilson makes an incisive remark upon Nicolas Nabokov in a letter to his fourth wife, Elena, dated 2 August 1948: “I get the impression that his ideal for the arts is not merely that they should be practiced by an elite, but that they should also be enjoyed only by an elite” (Castronovo and Groth 156). This snob factor was integral to the mandate of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, whose machinations helped contain and isolate all kinds of intellectual discourse and effectively remove them from a popular demotic environment. Wilson’s dissension from the policies of the MLA represents his resistance to this trend, buttressed by

his faith in and identification with what Nabokov rather scornfully refers to as the “average reader” (“Nabokov’s Reply” 83-84).¹¹

Wilson in fact opens his review of *Onegin* by remarking upon Nabokov’s impervious sense of superiority:

Since Mr. Nabokov is in the habit of introducing any job of this kind which he undertakes by an announcement that he is unique and incomparable and that everybody else who has attempted it is an oaf and an ignoramus, incompetent as a linguist and a scholar, usually with the implication that he is also a low-class person and a ridiculous personality, Nabokov ought not to complain if the reviewer, though trying not to imitate his bad literary manners, does not hesitate to underline his weaknesses. (“The Strange Case”)

Brian Boyd does his best to defend Nabokov from this “fierce personal attack” (492) in his 1991 biography but, as any reader of *Strong Opinions* knows and as Nabokov’s insistence on referring to other English renderings of *Onegin* as “translations” with scare quotes attests, Wilson has hit a mark.¹² This haughtiness (both Nabokov’s and Wilson’s own) is important for more than biographical reasons, since the pivot of their disagreement (politicized, whether the authors wish it or not, by its forum) is the question of ordinariness. Wilson wants exceptional literature in plain and accessible form; Nabokov presents his translation as exceptional and even the venerable Pushkin is in some ways plain by comparison.

One of their chief disagreements concerns Pushkin’s abilities with other languages, English in particular. Nabokov does not seem to tire of making this point about English in his *Onegin* commentary, and fits it in wherever he can: “I cannot imagine Pushkin, who, at the time, had no English”; “I doubt very much that at the time this was written . . . Pushkin had acquired enough English not only to read through an English poem of almost two thousand lines but to catch niceties of English rhythm” (2.8 and 3.77). Nabokov is at his most absolute when he declares: “Like most Russians, Pushkin was a poor linguist” (“The Servile Path” 98). Whether or not the specific or, more strikingly, the general claim here is true or even defensible is but one side of this pronouncement’s coin; Nabokov is also presenting himself as unlike “most Russians” and even, in this regard at least, superior to Pushkin, who was born exactly one hundred years before himself. Wilson had himself observed, in a diary entry covering a visit to see his friend at Cornell in the spring of 1957, that Nabokov habitually

denies that Russians deserve their reputation of being remarkably good linguists and says of every Russian who speaks good English that he or she must have had the advantage of a governess or a tutor—though I met in the

Soviet Union a number of young Russians who had learned to speak excellent English without ever having been out of Russia. These false ideas, of course, are prompted by his compulsion to think of himself as the only writer in history who has been equally proficient in Russian, English, and French, and he is always hopping people, with accents of outrage, for the pettiest kinds of mistakes... (*Upstate* 159-60)¹³

It is Nabokov the Exceptional Russian, then, who remarks of Wilson that he “complains I do not want to admit that Pushkin’s competence in languages was considerable, but I can only reply that Mr. Wilson’s notion of such competence and my notion of it are completely dissimilar,” the snide implication being that Wilson’s own “competence in languages” is not up to Nabokov’s lofty standards (“Nabokov’s Reply” 89). Although the strength of Pushkin’s English remains a matter of some debate,¹⁴ of greater note for this discussion is how the marketing of both Nabokov the Exceptional Russian and the elitist literary product are part of the American cultural Cold War operation. Indeed, in the microcosm of this one front of debate—whether Pushkin could, say, “not only . . . read through an English poem of almost two thousand lines but . . . [also] catch niceties of English rhythm” (*Onegin* 3.77)—and the larger metacosm of the cultural value bestowed upon Nabokov’s “English” *Onegin* we find reflected an oft-overlooked element of the Cold War itself. However intrigued agents of the Bollingen Foundation¹⁵ and other Cultural Congress affiliates were by the value and uses of Russian culture, the discourse of the study and appreciation of that culture (and thus the playing field for the rhetorical and ideological battles of that war) would be in *English*.

Reviews and Replies

Unlike my novels, [my translation of *Onegin*] possesses an ethical side, moral and human elements. (“Nabokov’s Reply” 80)

Nabokov’s “Reply to My Critics” has been reprinted in collections like *Nabokov’s Congeries* (1968) and *Strong Opinions* (1973), but it first appeared in the February 1966 issue of *Encounter*. Four years before, Paul Goodman had correctly asserted in *Dissent* that *Encounter* was an instrument of the CIA, a funded and carefully monitored mouthpiece for anti-Communist propaganda (Saunders 365). Frances Stonor Saunders is frank in her assessment of *Encounter*: “Promiscuous in its attention to cultural subjects, it was strangely silent, or simply obscure, on many political issues. In all cases, it was resolutely ideological, an integer of anti-Communist Cold War thinking” (165).

Perhaps the best representative voice of *Encounter*’s more politically outspoken side is that of Leslie A. Fiedler, who in the journal’s very first issue

appraised the execution of the Rosenbergs which had taken place that same year, and found the victims wanting: “they failed in the end to become martyrs or heroes—or even human beings. What was there left to die?” (“Postscript” 21). That Fiedler was commissioned to write this incendiary article points to the modus operandi of the Congress for Cultural Freedom and its instruments: the cultured voice, the aesthetic or literary poise could be used to express sentiments which, without such a respectable imprimatur or high-minded, seeming detachment, might otherwise be recognized as intemperate or loathsome agitprop. This is reflected in Humbert Humbert’s famous remark in *Lolita*, the novel Nabokov was writing at this time: “You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style” (9). Sometimes you can count on a fancy prose stylist to justify murderous acts.

Although the Rosenberg article is infamous—it was intended to sell copy, and succeeded—it provides only one glimpse of Fiedler’s contribution to the magazine’s ideological design. In a 1954 *Encounter* article Fiedler exhorted Europe to “surrender” what he calls its “anti-Americanism”:

The self-distrust of the intellectuals, their loss of faith in their function and in the value of their survival, blends with the Marxist dogma that one’s own bourgeoisie (if you are a bourgeois, yourself!) is the worst enemy. Conditioned by this principled self-hatred, the European intellectual finds it hard to forgive America for being willing and able to let him live... (“The ‘Good American’ 53)

Fiedler’s argument runs like this: European intellectuals hate the United States because they hate themselves (there is apparently no distinction between criticism and outright hatred). The implication—fleshed out by the cheerful promise to tolerate, or at least not kill, the nervous European intellectual—is that American interests and intellectuals’ interests are the same, and the proper “function” of the intellectuals, that in which they should place their “faith” (and of which they should thus not be critical) is American policy itself. Irony is lurking in a letter from a London reader, published in a later issue, which enthusiastically agrees with Fiedler: “I feel that Washington should organise some body like the British council to propagate modern American culture abroad” (Patmore 69). The decision to print this letter reveals an otherwise undetected editorial sense of humor at *Encounter*.

Nabokov’s “Reply” is, as I’ll further explore below, legendary for its rhetorical brutality, and as such belongs entirely with the sort of polemic *Encounter* favoured, even though the “Reply” may not seem particularly “political.” This discursive separation of political and literary, a trademark of the “mandarin” legacy of Eliotic high modernism and the pursuant New Criticism, operates selectively, so that Nabokov, for his part, may on the one hand contend that he is content “being labeled an old-fashioned liberal” (*Strong Opinions* 96) and deny that his novels

have any political dimension(s) at all while on the other hand he can be regularly expected to denounce or belittle all Soviet and Communist initiatives and institutions. Nabokov's entirely uncritical view of American government policies, by contrast, is only occasionally but vigorously affirmed, such as when he avows that "[l]isting in one breath Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Vietnam is seditious *poshlost*" (*Strong Opinions* 101). That is, it is not simply a matter of bad taste to dare to compare atrocities, it is tantamount to treason; the favored state operates on a different moral register than its enemies. Nabokov's politics then, not really much different from Fiedler's, made him an excellent proxy-hero for the pro-American, anti-Soviet mythology the publishers of *Encounter* sought to promote.¹⁶

In a letter responding to Nabokov's "Reply," Wilson very reasonably wonders why Nabokov chooses to change the forum of debate from the *New York Review of Books* to *Encounter*: "It is unfortunate—though not perhaps for Mr. Nabokov—that the readers of ENCOUNTER may not have seen my original article or the correspondence which followed it" (Letter 92).¹⁷ Nabokov's decision to move the argument from the *NYRB* to *Encounter* needs to be understood in a political context.¹⁸ While *Encounter*'s CIA backing and pro-American hegemony were in many respects one of the worst-kept secrets in intellectual circles by 1965-6, the *NYRB* was a very different creature. Begun in 1963, the arrival of the *NYRB*

clearly signalled that not all American intellectuals were happy to act as Cold War legitimists orbiting around the national security state. As the ruling consensus began to fragment, the review signalled the emergence of a newly critical intelligentsia, free to speak on those issues on which magazines like *Encounter*, bound, as it was, to a consensual discipline, were virtually mute. . . . Far from being apologists for American power, [the *NYRB* writers] were thinkers who rallied to the review's readiness to denounce imperialism just as it denounced Communism. (Saunders 361)

As Wilson saw, Nabokov's abrupt re-location of the debate worked in his favor rather in the same way that a complete change of jury midway through a trial, after the prosecution's case has been made, is bound to see the defense's prospects brighten. More specifically, Nabokov was now playing to an audience more ideologically attuned to his own views and "mandarin" style.

Nabokov's rise to fame and prestige in the United States was never blocked or hampered by his (from the point of view of patriotic publishers and editors) very opportune condemnations of Communist oppression. His "liberal" preference to remain silent, to offer no public comment on any other political question, likewise does not seem to have hurt his reputation. In a 1958 Cornell address, Nabokov takes noteworthy pains to carve out a distinction between forms of coercion:

A staunch determinist might argue that between a magazine in a democratic country applying financial pressure to its contributors to make them exude what is required by the so-called reading public — between this and the more direct pressure which a police state brings to bear in order to make the author round out his novel with a suitable political message, it may be argued that between the two pressures there is only a difference of degree; but this is not so for the simple reason that there are so many periodicals and philosophies in a free country but only government in a dictatorship. It is a difference in quality. (*Lectures on Russian Literature* 2-3)

Quality of what, one wonders, and one is left to conclude that *quality of life* is what Nabokov means. It is unarguably more comfortable and likely more lucrative to be an American novelist, as Nabokov habitually identified himself, than a commissar's flunky under the eye of Stalin, but Nabokov (whose American publishers range from *Playboy* to Hollywood) evades the point that greater freedom and greater choice entail greater moral responsibility. One does not need to be “a staunch determinist” to see that what message or ideology the magazine or publisher does “exude” is the really important question for the prospective writer, and the willingness of the free writer to align himself with any one of the “many periodicals and philosophies in a free country” represents a political decision, a commitment born of conviction rather than intimidation or subjugation.

It is also well worth remembering that the Nabokov-Wilson controversy was played out at the same period of time in which Ho Chi Minh was breaking off peace talks with Lyndon Johnson and Charles de Gaulle publicly exhorted the U.S. to pull out of Vietnam, for not only did Wilson and Nabokov differ in their interpretations of Russian history, literature, and language, they also found themselves on opposite sides concerning the Vietnam conflict. Wilson, against, had pointedly snubbed a White House invitation to dinner in June 1965 (when he was very probably hard at work on his review of *Onegin*); later the same year Nabokov wrote a telegram of support to President Johnson for his “admirable work” (Boyd 503).¹⁹ Rather than publish any serious note of dissent about Vietnam and the rising toll of victims, or even to advocate such horrors with full honesty, *Encounter* champions Nabokov, the Exceptional Russian. Vietnam, like the larger ideological backdrop of the Cold War, was in *Encounter*'s pages sublimated into allegory.

Aftermath and Myth

Walter Benjamin's justly famous essay, “The Task of the Translator,” opens with the categorical assertion: “In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful” (253). This is the closest Benjamin ever comes to sounding like a proponent of New Criticism, suggesting

that the aesthetic moment or effect occurs in a vacuum. It is not only somewhat startling to find such a conventional idea—at least as old as the Romantics—flourished by an avowed student of dialectical materialism and a writer whose thinking is suffused with so much of what we understand as “modern,” but stranger still to find that two writers so diametrically opposed in their politics as Benjamin and Nabokov might well agree on this point.²⁰ To disallow discussion of readership is to keep separate the realms of ethics and of art, while it also conveniently protects the critic or reader from having to weigh his or her own subjectivity, with all its attendant ethical, political, and social dimensions. The exact contrary of Benjamin’s assertion, a riposte as careworn as its target, is concisely expressed by the Soviet scholar M. P. Alekseev: “one cannot, apparently, judge the aesthetic merits of any translation without considering the nature of the audience for whom it is intended” (qtd in Friedberg 108). Alekseev’s statement appeared almost ten years after Benjamin’s, in the very decade of “the victory of free translation” in Russia, after which “[l]iteralism in the Soviet Union was held in nearly universal dispute” (Friedberg 87, 84).

More recent critical thinking about translation has taken into consideration the responsibilities of the translator not simply to the text but for the specific cultural meanings, effects, and consequences a given act of translation—such as which text, from which language, to which language, for what receiver, for what purpose—may have, most particularly in the current context of “globalization.” Lawrence Venuti has argued that shaping an ethics of translation “will eventually force the evaluation of the translated text to take into account its social effects, possibly the economic and political interests it serves” (24). In reading the *Onegin* debate as a political event, a clash of ideologies, we can see how ideologically charged both the theory and practice of translation are.

A translator’s fingerprints are to be seen if they are looked for, and Nabokov’s rendering of *Onegin* itself displays translation as both theme and anxiety: how and if experience (love in particular, but jealousy, too) is to be expressed in another language. Consider this passage, the conclusion to the fourth chapter:

Blest hundredfold who is to faith devoted;
 who, having curbed cold intellect,
 in the heart’s mollitude reposes
 as, bedded for the night, a drunken traveler,
 or (more tenderly) as a butterfly
 absorbed in a spring flower;
 but pitiful is he who foresees all,
 who’s never dizzy,
 who all movements, all words

in their translation hates,
whose heart experience has chilled
and has forbidden to be lost in dreams! (1.199)

Here we find Nabokov's signature totem, the butterfly, between praise for those who reject intellect for faith and scorn for those who may have qualms about "words / in their translation." Fiedler's rebuke to the suspicious and doubtful intellectuals for "their loss of faith" curiously resounds here: the exaltation of translation, and perhaps translatability, is also a celebration of the victory of faith and dreams over sober doubt. Nabokov's emphasis on "translation" in these lines is just one of several self-referential winks: the translator and his wondrous act are always on show, never "invisible," the quality which has concerned Venuti as well as other translators and theorists. Part of Nabokov's exceptional status is his aggrandizement of the translator even within the translation itself.²¹

Nabokov's articles about Pushkin and his own strident notions of translation have often been reprinted in collections of essays and books on translation theory (a recent example is Venuti's *The Translation Studies Reader* [2000]). Wilson's review and his other contributions to the *Onegin* debate—despite the debate's notoriety—have not enjoyed the same status. Nabokov's veneration of "footnotes and the absolutely literal sense" ("Problems of Translation" 83)²² is so outrageous that it is a sure-seller, bound to upset or amuse academics, just as Fiedler's liberal-baiting vilification pieces insured boosted sales of *Encounter*. The essay I have just quoted may be Nabokov's second-most notorious text (after *Lolita*). It is short on nymphets, but long on belligerence, and it is interesting to note that it first appeared in *Partisan Review* (the left-liberal journal recently killed by John Silber) in 1955: the appropriation of Nabokov's *Onegin* project and of the cultural status of the author himself by managers like the Congress for Cultural Freedom can be seen in his changing publishers. The path from the *Partisan Review* to *Encounter*, from the Olympia Press to the Bollingen Foundation, is a story of political positioning.

Nabokov's cultural capital, as measured by the kind of MLA-centered academic system which Wilson deplored, has generally risen very high since 1967. While it is rare not to find Nabokov's name mentioned, his wit and playfulness celebrated in essays and books about postmodernism or even studies of literature and politics, a citation of Wilson seems almost an eccentricity at this point, his style of criticism, with its use of biographical and historical background and appeal to the "average reader," out of fashion amid specialized journals. If Nabokov can be said to have "won" their duel over *Onegin*, Wilson "lost." As Meyers has it:

Wilson, unfortunately, lost most of the battles he fought. *Memoirs of Hecate County* was suppressed, the Iroquois' land was flooded, the IRS

fined him for tax evasion, the French-Canadian separatists fizzled out, his precious friendship with Nabokov was destroyed, the MLA got the grant money and the Vietnam war raged on. (466)

Melodramatic though that sounds, Wilson's star definitely faded while his former friend's was rising, and whatever demagogic connotations the phrase "man of letters" may have had in American usage were replaced with ones of oligarchy and specialization.

The issue of *Encounter* which followed that with Wilson's letter about Nabokov's "Reply" included a lengthy assessment of "Edmund Wilson's Achievement" by Frank Kermode. It is a very backhanded sort of tribute, recounting "the tale of Edmund Wilson's deficiencies" and judging him "a very difficult and occasionally somewhat ludicrous critic" (61). The article serves as an editorial last word, in the guise of a denouement, on the *Onegin* battle, though that particular battle is notably left unmentioned. This "most modest of tributes" (70) to Wilson—poor Wilson, misguided leftist and maverick intellectual, judged to have "grown less and less useful over the last thirty-five years" (62) in the quoted and approved words of Norman Podhoretz—is comparable to a post-match review of a defeated contender's athletic career.

That Nabokov "won" the *Onegin* duel has become received wisdom, an enduring element of Cold War mythology for the literati.²³ Martin Amis, whose adoration of Nabokov approaches piousness, recounts in his book *Koba the Dread* how in 1966 [*sic*] "Wilson went into print with a hostile (and ignorant) review of Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin*" (38). Amis's own ignorance of Russian does not prevent him from presuming to judge Wilson "ignorant"; Nabokov's victory is judged by his wit and condescension, the panache of the Exceptional Russian, and the facts and details of the disagreement over translation are not worth examining. (This is like knowing that Black beat White in a chess game, without knowing the moves, based on Black's account of the result.) Amis's use of the story is significant in a book designed to correct what its author bizarrely deems an oversight by historians: the horrors of Stalinism. For Amis, whose drift to the political right has become clear sailing in recent years, the leftist sympathies of someone like Wilson represent an evil which cannot even be laughed at, and so the anecdote of the Nabokov-Wilson duel, raised to myth in which the Exceptional Russian and American patriot is the clear and objectively-determined winner, serves as a miniature allegory of the Cold War and the decisive "defeat" of Communism.

Such simplified narratives beg for closer critical inspection, and study of the politics driving the *Onegin* debate reveals a more disturbing narrative as much about power and authority as it is about whether Pushkin understood English. Rather, the material details of the quarrel—the economic and ideological

exigencies behind literary translation, editing, and publication—are illustrative of how Cold War myths are made. Such myths rely upon polarized images of opposed states: one “for” freedom (and by extension, fully possessive of it) and one “against” it (and entirely without it). More than just fleeting matter for gossip among New York “literati,” the history of the *Onegin* affair shows how American intellectual discourse and debate narrowed in the years of the Cold War and how culture became the product (both imported and exported) and province of specialized, elite authority. Where the myth sustains the unstated equivalence of cultural authority and political power, this history of patronage and propaganda provides cause to and means with which to reconsider, challenge, and perhaps overturn it.

Notes

1. Mitgang notes that “Faulkner himself walked out on the program in less than six months, perhaps enlightened by letters such as Wilson’s” (181).
2. The match is ably documented by David Edmonds and John Eidinow. Note that, according to their hyperbolic subtitle, it was “the Soviets” who lost the match, not simply an individual player.
3. In a letter of 14 February 1966, Wilson writes of how he and Nabokov “are now fighting on two fronts: *Encounter* and the *New York Review of Books*. It is like that story of Gogol’s about the quarrel between Ivan Ivanovich and Ivan Nikiforovich” (Castronovo and Groth 305). The comparison suggests that, in Wilson’s view, he and Nabokov are, like both Ivans in the story, equally ridiculous in their overheated row over trifles. This essay’s subtitle is drawn from Gogol’s story.
4. Though it is primarily the American literary and political context that is considered in this essay, it should be carefully noted that Russian debates about translation have a fuller and more complex history of politicization (for a very good overview of this subject, see Maurice Friedberg’s *Literary Translation in Russia: A Cultural History*). Given the way that translation in the Soviet Union “became a refuge for major authors in disfavor” (Friedberg 17) while the status of the literary translator in America has conspicuously declined in the second half of the twentieth century (to the point that the 2005 blockbuster novel *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* was published as though it had never been translated, with no translator named on either the cover or the title page of the North American edition), a comparative study of social attitudes towards translators and translations in Russia and the United States would surely be illuminating.

5. Like many literary prizes, the Bollingen was awarded the year following the nominal year of the prize; Pound won for his *Pisan Cantos* (1948). The prize's jury was composed of Fellows of the Library of Congress. For a discerning account of the subsequent controversy, see Rasula 98-122.

6. Elman ought not to be confused with Richard Ellmann, the biographer of Joyce and Wilde.

7. Exactly how much influence the Reece Committee and Wormser's report had on the Bollingen publishing agenda may be impossible to calculate, but it is surely not coincidental that Wormser himself plays a significant role in the publication of *Onegin*: according to William McGuire's *Bollingen: An Adventure in Collecting the Past*, Wormser served as legal adviser to the publisher on concerns about the possibilities of libel action on Nabokov's vitriolic condemnations of other translators (264). This fact succinctly demonstrates that Bollingen did not see *Onegin* as an apolitical text or a work of entirely disinterested scholarship.

8. Examples of American authors published in the Soviet Union in this period include John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, and William Saroyan.

9. For example, in his distressingly breezy study of the political exigencies of Communist jokes, Ben Lewis recounts a similar Russian *anekdot* (a tricky term that may mean "story" or "joke") about a proposed monument to Lenin, which ultimately results in a statue of "Stalin, seated and reading one of Lenin's books" (113). As Lewis observes, "no one knew which came first, Stalin's cruel jokes, or the jokes about cruel Stalin" (54).

10. Although Wilson concludes his review by praising the tasteful binding of the *Onegin* volumes, calling them "among the most attractive books that have recently been brought out in this country," he objects to both Nabokov's "oppressive compulsion to prove himself by piling things up" in his "overdone" commentary and his translation's outright rejection of "idiomatic and recognizable English" ("The Strange Case"). I do wonder whether Wilson would have the same enthusiasm for the production of the pair of Princeton-Bollingen volumes now available, where the second volume bulges out at over a thousand pages.

11. For Wilson on the MLA, see "The Fruits of the MLA."

12. It is not incidental that Nabokov's arrogant manner and occasional sneer are trademark parts of his charm. The adjective "Nabokovian" denotes, among other things, an extravagance of style underwritten by a towering sense of authority

which will brook no reproach. For the members of the Congress for Cultural Freedoms and like-minded planners, Nabokov's separation of art and politics must have seemed exactly what the doctor ordered. In the decade prior to the *Onegin* quarrel, Nabokov had a similarly acrimonious dispute about Russian translation with the linguist Roman Jakobson, with comparable political dimensions (examined in Baer 171-86). That much more private affair can be read as a prelude to the Nabokov-Wilson dispute in the American theater.

13. Wilson cannily reminds Nabokov of the "governess" exception in his review of *Onegin*: "There is a tradition—I have not been able to trace it to its origin—that Pushkin, in the early Twenties, began to read Byron with the young Raevskys, who had an English governess. Mr. Nabokov scoffs at this, but it seems extremely plausible."

14. Wilson's governess theory (see note 13 above) has few supporters these days, but neither does Nabokov's portrait of the artist as a "poor linguist," with little to no English. For instance, David M. Bethea recounts that "Pushkin came to Byron and Shakespeare primarily through the French, and this, for a creative personality as linguistically sensitive as his, was immensely problematic" (75), but "by approximately 1928 [when he was twenty-nine years old] . . . Pushkin's English was sufficient to read both Byron and Shakespeare in the original" (78).

15. To a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request into the activities of the Bollingen Foundation circa 1955-1975 came the reply: "the CIA can neither confirm nor deny the existence or nonexistence of records." This response characterizes said existent or nonexistent records as "properly classified" under regulations that specifically "protect from disclosure intelligence sources . . . [and] personnel employed by the Agency."

16. *Encounter*'s literary forays were entirely consistent with this mythology before Nabokov joined the ranks. For example, Mark Alexander bemoaned the dismal "New Directions in Soviet Literature?" as early as 1954.

17. Wilson himself had previously published in *Encounter*, though it would be fatuous to suggest that merely the publication of an author in its pages points to him or her as ideologically sympathetic to the (covert) editorial mandate; rather, it is by studying *patterns* of publication in *Encounter* that tenable assessments of its direction and effects may be made. Studying not who but what is published and when, especially in view of what is *not* published (Nabokov's "Reply" but not, say, criticism of American nuclear arms proliferation), provides the best understanding of such publications.

18. On 8 November 1965, Nabokov sent the article to Barbara Epstein at the *New York Review of Books*, noting that it would “also appear in a British periodical” (*Selected Letters* 381). In a telegram of the following February, irritated at not having received word of when it would be published, Nabokov withdrew the article from the *NYRB*, a decision which, judging from subsequent correspondence with Epstein, seems to have signaled a decisive break with the publication. When Wilson wrote a letter of response to Nabokov at *Encounter*—to which Nabokov was invited but declined to answer—it was not printed.

19. This is the only mention of Vietnam in Boyd’s biography.

20. This is not to say that as a writer, Nabokov has no conception of his reader (his perennial book dedications to his wife succinctly make this point), but simply that this is the sort of personal subject area from which he is frequently warning critics (and especially psychoanalytic ones) to stay away.

21. Compare Charles Johnston’s translation, published the decade after Nabokov’s (*Eugene Onegin*, New York: Penguin, 1977), simply as an alternative version:

Happy a hundredfold, whoever
can lean on faith, who can dismiss
cold reason, sleep in sensual welter
like a drunk traveller in a shelter,
or, sweeter, like a butterfly
in flowers of spring it’s drinking dry:
but piteous he, the all-foreseeing,
the sober head, detesting each
human reaction, every speech
in the expression of its being,
whose heart experience has cooled
and saved from being charmed or fooled! (131)

Setting aside the primary difference, the rhyming that Nabokov decries, and even such finer details as Johnston’s restoring to the butterfly the active role among the flowers that Nabokov removes, we can see that one need not necessarily read Pushkin’s lines as being explicitly about translation as such. Ironically, Pushkin’s text concerns the transcendence of translation, an especially intense kind of Keatsian negative capability, while its translations necessitate the use of “cold intellect” (or “cold reason”), Nabokov’s rather colder than most.

22. Nabokov’s translation practice is not always consistent with his hard-nosed theory. His insufficiently known *Alice in Wonderland* (New York: Dover, 1976),

for instance, approximates Carrollian puns and has no notes, and the poem which contributes the second of this essay's epigraphs, "one of Pushkin's least successful poems," has its octosyllabic arrangement more or less preserved "and even a few docile rhymes here and there" (Nabokov, trans., *Eugene Onegin*, 2.12). Moreover, Nabokov "consistently violated the literal approach" to translation he preached in both Russian and English translations of poetry, including poems by "Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tyutchev that appeared under the title *Three Russian Poets* [1944]" (Baer 179).

23. Staged performances of readings from the Nabokov-Wilson letters, known as *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya* (adapted by Terry Quinn) began in 1999, at the centenary of Nabokov's birth.

Works Cited

- Alexander, Mark. "New Directions in Soviet Literature?" *Encounter* 2.6 (1954): 37-42. Print.
- Amis, Martin. *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million*. Toronto: Knopf, 2002. Print.
- Baer, Brian James. "Translation Theory and Cold War Politics: Roman Jakobson and Vladimir Nabokov in 1950s America." *Contexts, Subtexts and Pretexts: Literary Translation in Eastern Europe and Russia*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2011. 171-86. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator." Trans. Harry Zohn. *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*. Ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997. 253-63. Print.
- Bethea, David M. "Pushkin: From Byron to Shakespeare." *The Routledge Companion to Russian Literature*. Ed. Neil Cornwell. London: Routledge, 2001. 74-88. Print.
- Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991. Print.
- Castronovo, David, and Janet Groth, eds. *Edmund Wilson, the Man in Letters*. Athens: Ohio UP, 2001. Print.
- Dabney, Lewis M. *Edmund Wilson: A Life in Literature*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005. Print.
- Dobrenko, Evgeny. "Pushkin in Soviet and post-Soviet Culture." *The Cambridge Companion to Pushkin*. Ed. Andrew Kahn. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. 202-20. Print.

- Edmonds, David, and John Eidinow, *Bobby Fischer Goes to War: The True Story of How the Soviets Lost the Most Extraordinary Chess Match of All Time*. London: Faber and Faber, 2004. Print.
- Fiedler, Leslie A. "The 'Good American.'" *Encounter* 2.3 (1954): 51-53. Print.
- . "A Postscript to the Rosenberg Case." *Encounter* 1.1 (1953): 12-21. Print.
- Friedberg, Maurice. *Literary Translation in Russia: A Cultural History*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1997. Print.
- Gerschenkron, Alexander. "A Manufactured Monument?" *Modern Philology* 63.4 (1966): 336-47. Print.
- Kermode, Frank. "Edmund Wilson's Achievement." *Encounter* 26.5 (1966): 61-70. Print.
- . *Not Entitled*. London: HarperCollins, 1996. Print.
- Lewis, Ben. *Hammer and Tickle: A Cultural History of Communism*. New York: Pegasus Books, 2009. Print.
- McGuire, William. *Bollingen: An Adventure in Collecting the Past*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982. Print.
- Meyers, Jeffrey. *Edmund Wilson: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995. Print.
- Mitgang, Herbert. *Dangerous Dossiers: Exposing the Secret War Against America's Greatest Authors*. New York: Donald I. Fine, 1988. Print.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lectures on Russian Literature*. Ed. Fredson Bowers. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981. Print.
- . *Lolita*. New York: Vintage, 1989. Print.
- . "Nabokov's Reply." *Encounter* 26.2 (1966): 80-89. Print.
- . "Problems of Translation: 'Onegin' in English." *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. Lawrence Venuti. London: Routledge, 2000. 71-83. Print.
- . *Selected Letters 1940-1977*. Ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989. Print.
- . "The Servile Path." *On Translation*. Ed. Reuben A. Brower. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1959. 97-110. Print.
- . *Strong Opinions*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973. Print.
- Nabokov, Vladimir, trans. *Eugene Onegin*. By Aleksandr Pushkin. Rev. ed. 2 vols. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975. Print.
- Patmore, Derek. Letter to the Editor. *Encounter* 2.5 (1954): 69. Print.
- Rasula, Jed. *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940-1990*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996. Print.
- Saunders, Frances Stonor. *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*. London: Granta Books, 1999. Print.
- Venuti, Lawrence. *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*. London: Routledge, 1998. Print.

- Wilson, Edmund. "The Fruits of the MLA." *The Devils and Canon Barham: Ten Essays on Poets, Novelists and Monsters*. New York: Farrar, 1973. 154-202. Print.
- . Letter to the Editor. *Encounter* 26.4 (1966): 92. Print.
- . "The Strange Case of Pushkin and Nabokov." *The New York Review of Books* 15 July 1965. Web. 24 February 2014
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1965/jul/15/the-strange-case-of-pushkin-and-nabokov>
- . *Upstate: Records and Recollections of Northern New York*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971. Print.
- Wormser, René A. *Foundations: Their Power and Influence*. New York: Devin-Adair, 1958. Print.