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Vortrag

The Very Heart and Soul of Russian Literature: Alexander Pushkin’s Novel-in-Verse Eugen Onegin

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Anmeldung erforderlich per eMail an cosy@cs.univie.ac.at

Abstract
Virtually universally, the Russians consider Alexander Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin to be the highest peak in the vast mountain chain of their noble literature, and yet weirdly enough, outside of Russia almost no one knows this great work, let alone loves it. To be sure, vast numbers of people are familiar with the opera bearing the same name, but the truth is that Tchaikovsky’s opera and Pushkin’s novel have little in common other than the story line, which is only a small part of the effervescent creation that sprang from Pushkin’s pen in the latter half of the 1820’s.

My purpose in this talk is to expose non-Russians to the astonishing beauty of this work of Russian literature through a tiny sampler that will include small bits of the original, but that mainly will feature high-quality translations into English, German, and French. I will take just a handful of my very favorite stanzas (the work consists of roughly 400 fourteen-line “Onegin stanzas”, all sharing the same structure) and will do my best to show how intoxicating they are — thanks to their precise meter, their elegant rhymes, their profound lyricism, their pungent humor, and their intangible, magical musicality.

All the translators who will be showcased have done something that Russians consider to be self-evidently impossible: transplanting their most beloved work of art from its native linguistic soil into an alien soil, while preserving both content and form. Clearly, this is a very hard set of hoops to jump through simultaneously, but is making such a leap really impossible? Obviously, I don’t think so.

To carry out such a delicate artistic transformation requires not only a highly poetic soul, but also a truly devoted and patient one — and luckily, in each culture, such souls exist. What is sad, however, is that the products of these ardent souls’ blood, sweat, and tears have met with such little recognition that Eugene Onegin, novel-in-verse, is still virtually unknown outside its native soil. One day, maybe this will change. One can always hope!
Bio
Douglas Hofstadter (New York, 1945; B.S., mathematics, Stanford, 1965; Ph.D., physics, University of Oregon, 1975) is College of Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor of Cognitive Science and Comparative Literature, Indiana University, Bloomington. He discovered the first fractal in physics (“Hofstadter’s butterfly”); in number theory, he invented meta-Fibonacci sequences. His research involves computer models of analogy-making in microworlds (Fluid Concepts and Creative Analogies), viewing analogy as cognition’s core (Surfaces and Essences). Aside from penning the column “Metamagical Themas” for Scientific American (1981–83), he has explored “I” and consciousness in Godel, Escher, Bach (Pulitzer Prize, 1980), The Mind’s I, and I Am a Strange Loop, has done literary translation (e.g., Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin), written on translation (Le Ton beau de Marot and Translator, Trader), and had expositions of his script-influenced line drawings, including ambigrams. He calls himself “pilingual”, his strongest foreign languages being French and Italian.