Chapter Six

MISANTHROPOLOGY IN VERSE: AN ONEGIN OF OUR TIMES

By Alicia Chudo

I

As Walter brooded “weak and weary”
On Poe and onomatopoeia
He wished he could return to Theory,
Forget trochaic diarrhea,
Abandon texts you force to fit,
Leave literature for “comp lit.”
In one short term he’d have his wish
And read no Fielding, only Fish,
No poems, just *texts* and *parataxis*.
Desire takes the place of joy,
Thematization of Tolstoy,
As theory transmutes work to *praxis*.
So long as schism yields to schism
He’ll never read without an *-ism*.

II

So thought a would-be critical theorist
Who found poetic fire chilling,
An anti-bourgeois pro-careerist,
Our heir to Richards, Brooks, and Trilling.
Admirers of Pushkin and *Onegin*
(Whose devotees now go a-beggin’),
My hero, with no more ado,
I proudly introduce to you:
Young Walter Samuel Alladish
Attended Duke and Santa Cruz
Where you, dear reader, loved t’amuse
Yourselves with theories dark and faddish
Until you found the one to suit
All texts you’d care to hermeneut.

III

His mother's antics always bored him.
 A Bolshie heir to factories,
 She financed marches and ignored him.
 (His dad still wore phylacteries.
 He muttered, shrugged, and shook his head
 And gave his boychik up for dead,
 Especially when "in the know"
 The youth embraced the PLO,
 Confiding that there was no way
 A comp lit major could demur
 From opposition *de rigueur*,
 Since *victim studies* now held sway.
 He mentioned Heraclitus' river.
 With eyes rolled up, his dad sat *shiva*.)

IV

The young Alladish loved to play;
 He aped his teachers and forgot
 That he was he and they were they
 And whether role was self or not.
 His shrinks detected abnormality
 And called the deviance *performativity*,
 Which leads at last to *mimicry*.
 (His dad just called it cynicism.
 But no one listened to the father
 Who thought in terms of "right" and "wrong"
 And not in terms from Freud or Jung.)
 Alladish never thought to bother
 If absent selfhood is pathology
 Or present self, ontotheology.

V

His dissertation now completed,
 Alladish as assistant prof
 Old class notes every day repeated
 Until his students had enough.

He played each theorist's perfect clone,
 And answered the department phone:
 "W. S. Alladish is the name,
 Comp Lit and Theory is the game."
 What power wished was his desire.
 Avoiding junior prof neurotics,
 He shared the chairman's semiotics
 (He knew who was the Signifier)
 And fenced (not first) with those she fenced with.
 (The first, he knew, would be dispensed with.)

VI

With time he was the perfect miser;
 No pedagogy ever bound him.
 He served as undergrad advisor
 Though students never yet have found him.
 Except for two: the first knew beer,
 The second had the chairman's ear.
 What more was needed? Friends assured
 He won the Pedagogue Award.
 His junior colleagues all averred
 The students loved him just as they did;
 Which means, in private, they all hated
 The man they praised but jointly feared.
 They stressed the splendid role he'd played.
 (That's how a reputation's made.)

VII

His graduate students he'd advise
 They never had to read a "classic"
 And certainly not read it twice
 Unless you held beliefs Jurassic
 That "authors wisdom should impart"
 And "texts are integral as art."
 Such views he deemed, above all, sorry.
 One makes one's meanings *a priori*.
 "To guarantee interpretation
 You have to know the text is empty,

Means what you please, said Humpty Dumpty.
 No difference with evaluation.
 We make each painting in the gallery.
 And that is how we earn our salary.”¹

VIII

“All English profs who love to read,
 Historians who value facts,
 You’re relics we’ve long ceased to need,
 That ‘same old cast of cataracts.’
 For facts, agreed both Marx and Kant
 Are made to order as you want.
 The only thing that makes them ‘true’
 Depends on what you need to do.
 All other theories are erroneous,
 All science equally as specious
 As atomism in Lucretius
 Or Platonism in Petronius.”
 He never fails to earn a kudo
 By calling one more science pseudo.

IX

He taught TV, games, comics, porno
 While always *privileging* the new.
 Improving Habermas, Adorno,
 He synthesized them with Bourdieu.
 The canon was his constant enemy;
 It serves the interests of *hegemony*.
 So-called aesthetic valuation
 Preserves the forms of *domination*.
 A course in classics always fails
 In gender, class, and social history.
 We must demystify the mystery
 Of Dead White European Males
 And show it’s either us or them.

¹ Written in Durham.

(You'll never learn that from a DWEM.)

X

By "us" he meant the combination
Of sufferers and academics.
His ever-growing reputation
Was based on deftly turned polemics:
Some die from bourgeois exploitation,
We teach with but three months vacation.
Some starve, and some have wounds that fester;
We teach two courses per semester!
We have to publish, others wonder
What happenstance will feed them next.
To help, we deconstruct the text
And tear its signifier asunder.
To battle the reactionary
We show all signs are arbitrary.

XI

He hated every "pious message"
And so his students called him "Pilate."
"You needn't read; for any passage
Just choose your theory and apply it.
You have to write on *Adam Bede*?
One random page is all you need.
Good theories come with guarantees,
So work on any text you please."
Thus Walter sought an invitation
To talk at a prestigious meeting;
Without a thought he might be cheating,
Prepared to give an explanation
Of Pushkin's curious allure,
All phrased in terms of *écriture*.

XII

Onegin's a novel told in verse,
And poetry he found a bore.

All narratives he hated worse;
 This poem he managed to ignore.
 The new advanced lit education
 Let Walter pass examination
 In *areas* the student chooses
 And other forward-looking ruses.
 And now he had to give a lecture
 About a work he didn't know;
 But Walter had his *method*, so
 He wrote on Pushkin's *empty texture*.
 His theme and theory worked in tandem,
 And Walter picked a page at random.

XIII

Here's Walter at his writing table.
 With implements he dully fingers,
 He reads as long as he is able.
 He picks his text and briefly lingers
 Ten minutes on the chosen lines
 And then their meaning undermines.
 And here, alas, an explanation:
 Not knowing Russian, he resorted
 For evidence to be aborted
 To Nesposobny's verse translation—
 Enough to make another falter,
 It didn't matter squat to Walter.

[Fragment from *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*]

XIV

"My uncle, principled old ass,
 Fell ill so well it was no joke,
 Compelled respect with great finesse
 (A case that others well might note)
 And could have wished for nothing more.
 But what a God-forsaken bore
 To serve a sick man night and day

And not to stir a step away;
 What lethal hypocritical cunning
 To entertain one half alive
 Adjust his pillow, heave a sigh,
 And sadly for his pills go running.
 And mutter through a practiced moan,
 ‘When *will* the devil claim his own?’”

XV

So thought our hero in his chaise
 While speeding past the posting stations,
 By Zeus’s will and Russia’s laws
 The heir to all his dear relations.
 Friends of Lyudmila and Ruslan!
 Who want to know this novel’s plan:
In medias res, without ado,
 My hero I present to you.
 Eugene Onegin, long my friend
 Was born upon the Neva’s banks
 Where maybe you, like all us cranks,
 Were born, now shine, will meet your end.
 There I, too, used to have a spree,
 But now the north is bad for me.²

XVI

An honest servant of the state,
 His father earned less than he’d spend.
 Gave countless balls, filled each guest’s plate,
 And then went bankrupt in the end.
 Eugene was rescued by kind Fate:
 On him *Madame* at first would wait.
Monsieur replaced her one fine year.
 “The boy’s precocious, but a dear.”
 A wretched Frog, *Monsieur l’Abbé*,
 In order not to vex the lad

2

Written in Bessarabia.

Would never teach him good from bad,
Instructed in a jesting way,
Ignored his "pranks," or maybe talk
Of taking kiddie for a walk.

XVII

And when he reached the stormy years,
"That time of hope and sweetest doubt,
Of youthful dreams and pleasant tears,"
Monsieur l'Abbé he had kicked out.
I give you reader, young Eugene
Who captivates the social scene.
A London *dandy* came to view
And made his Petersburg *debut*.
His French was flawless, all allowed,
He knew when, how, and what to say,
His speech a dance, his dance display,
He moved with ease, with grace he bowed,
And what else is there? It was clear
He was a charming cavalier.

XVIII

Some time or other, some old way,
We all have learned some proper lies,
So we can voice the right cliché
To get someone to think us wise.
Onegin, though, had still more learning,
So judges stern and men discerning
Pronounced him, with a sigh, a pedant.
They claimed he even had the talent
To speak with charm, with polish state
The latest in imported truths.
Important topics in the news
He passed in silence, or would wait
Till ladies yawned, and then he chose
A pointed epigram to close.

XIX

Among us Latin's now *passé*:
 But then Onegin knew enough
 To charm ennui or spleen away
 By citing some wise epigraph.
 He'd prove that Juvenal lashed folly;
 When writing notes, he'd close them *vale*.
 At feast, he'd say "Trimalchio dines";
 From Virgil he could botch two lines.
 And though he had no inclination
 To sift through chronologic dust
 He could an anecdote adjust
 To fit the present situation.
 Some pithy tale he could recite
 To grace whatever might seem trite.

[end of Alladish's reading]

XX

"Ennui, hypocrisy, and spleen
 Reflect the Signified's senescence;
 This carnival (he cites Bakhtin)
 Recalls the hero's fear of *presence*.
 All value is eliminated,
 The poem's de-axiologated.
 Its autotelic hygienics
 Bequeaths *Onegin* to 'Eugenics.'"
 Alladish took most joy in dooming
 All human interest in the text.
 Of course, you guess what he did next:
 The work, he proved, is *self-consuming*.
 It has no meaning through and through.
 (For him, at least, it's largely true.)

XXI

With gender theory's rage exceeding
 He blamed Descartes for anorexia

And dreamed up a new way of reading,
 Which he called *carnival dyslexia*.
 This theory made his reputation.
 It authorized new obfuscation,
 The old ones now a known arrangement.
 Alladish found the new *bestrangement*.
 Interpreting began anew.
 The terms he coined were all displayed
 In hermeneutic games now played
 So critics had enough to do.
 To undermine the *status quo*
 They copied Walter's *style nouveau*.

XXII

"Dyslexic textualities
 Command inversion of the signs.
 Disrupting staid realities
 The critic *dislocates* the lines.
 He moves an ending to the center
 And so allows new sense to enter.
 Replace or change a primal word
 Whose opposite can be inferred.
 So meaning might be sublimated,
 Use criticism's archest cunning
 (When all else fails, resort to punning).
 Relations must be *dis-related*.
 Erase or cover all the traces
 Of stable texts and social places."

XXIII

With Walter's powerful connections
 Dyslexic readings won the day.
 Success in turn ensured election
 As president of MLA.
 No Ayatollah could be wiser
 Rewarding every sympathizer.
 Alladish complimented most
 Those adding *post-* to last year's *post-*.

With all his rapid revolutions
And with the certainty of rhyme
He won awards from Guggenheim.
New panels passed his resolutions.
He soon became the new *Times* sage
With columns on the op-ed page.

XXIV

But my muse, with her wizened ears
And long passé humanity
The sounds of older ages hears
Until I doubt my sanity.
In all new academic roles
I see the shadows of dead souls,
In MLA's new Ayatollah
The figure of Savonarola.
I call the shade of Lev Tolstoy
To banish this new catechism
By writing *What Is Criticism?*
And scatter theorists who annoy
This humble bard, Alicia Chudo
(Of course, the name's, like theory, pseudo).

Alicia Chudo teaches Russian and Comparative Literature at Midwestern University. Her first book, *Sadistic Victims: Self-Abasement in the Novel and Self-Righteousness in Criticism*, won the Jonathan Swift prize from the American League of Misanthropes. Her notorious study *And Quiet Flows the Vodka: or When Pushkin Comes to Shove: The Curmudgeon's Guide to Russian Literature and Culture* (Northwestern University Press, 2000) earned the contempt of Russians and Russianists the world over. Her most recent article is "Susan Sontag as Metaphor."