The Hierarchy of Narratees in Evgenii Onegin*

Works of literature are always directed towards an audience, yet paradoxically—to quote the title of Walter Ong's recent essay—"the writer's audience is always a fiction." Just as we distinguish between the author of a literary work and the image the author creates of himself within a work, so must we distinguish between the real individual who reads a work and the fictitious person we become in the process of reading it. For, as Walker Gibson points out, "every time we open the pages of another piece of writing, we are embarked on a new adventure in which we become a new person—a person as controlled and definable and as remote from the chaotic self of daily life as the lover in a sonnet. Subject to the degree of our literary sensibility, we are recreated by the language. We assume, for the sake of the experience, that set of attitudes and qualities which the language asks us to assume, and if we cannot assume them, we throw the book away." A text then places certain demands on us; it "imposes" a role on us. Successful reading depends upon our assuming that role, on our taking on the character of what I should like to call the "implied reader" created by the author. This paper is addressed to the question of how we as readers role play, or, more exactly, how a text guides and manipulates us so that we become the "implied reader." The case in point is Alexander Pushkin's narrative poem Evgenii Onegin.

As Gerald Prince points out in his study of the narratee, the "reader" (chitatel') is explicitly mentioned in Evgenii Onegin, and the references are both frequent and direct. The narrator turns to the reader at the beginning of the work (I, 2—Onegin, dobryi moi priatel', Rodilsia na bregakh Nevy, Gde mozhets byt' rodlis' vy, Ili blistali, moi chitatel') and bids him farewell at the conclusion (VIII, 49). At first glance it would seem that we are asked to become this "reader." Certainly in the sentimental fiction of Pushkin's predecessor Nikolai Karamzin the "reader" so addressed within the text coincides with the "implied reader." But is this true of Pushkin's work as well? In order to answer this question let us examine

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at a session of the AAASS meeting in 1975. The author wishes to thank Professor Robert Belknap, who chaired that session, for first drawing her attention to the problem of the "reader" in fiction.
5. In Karamzin's stories the "reader," like the narrator, is cast in the role of a "sensitive soul" ("Natalia, Boiarskaia Doch'"), one who "knows his own heart" ("Bednaia Liza").
the text of Evgenii Onegin, and let us begin with the final and most famous address to the reader, stanza VIII, 49:6

Ostensibly, this is a friendly farewell. The narrator—and here I would like to suggest that in Evgenii Onegin the narrator is synonymous with the “implied author”—appears deferential and anxious to part with the reader on good terms. But then one might ask why does he address the reader here as ty? Why does he not use the more formal and also more respectful vy? This is particularly puzzling in light of the fact that on every other occasion the reader is addressed as vy (for example, in stanza I, 2). Something else is puzzling here as well. The narrator says with great deference that he hopes the reader is pleased with the work, that it in some “small way” meets his expectations. But then in the catalog that follows these expectations are in effect reduced to absurdity, as the text shifts abruptly and without warning from ostrye slova to grammaticheskie oshibki, from mechy to zhurnal'nye sshibki. Both this reduction—a device used twice within a span of twelve lines—and the forced familiarity the narrator assumes, insisting all the while that the reader and he part as friends (significantly, priiatel’ is used here rather than the more intimate form drug which we would expect), indicate the ironic nature of this stanza. As implied reader we are required to reject the literal meaning and to “reconstruct” that meaning. The “between-the-lines dialogue” which emerges between implied author and implied reader might be paraphrased as follows: “You and I know this reader is no friend of mine nor of my work. We recognize that he is a pompous ass and a literary philistine. Imagine, approaching my work looking for

8. Prince does not take this irony into consideration. Is he then successful in assuming the role of implied reader?
9. The metaphor is Booth’s. See Rhetoric of Irony, p. 33.
10. Gibson, loc. cit., p. 266.