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Kant and Romantic Self-Fashioning in "Evgenii Onegin"

Scholarship on Russian Romanticism tends to neglect the western philosophical context of the movement. Although German Romanticism is more researched for its explicit philosophical content and relation to German idealism, this paper emphasizes the influence of Kantian epistemology on Pushkin's "Evgenii Onegin." Challenging the common claim that Romantics asserted a unified subjective experience in contrast to Kant's subdivisions of consciousness, this paper argues instead that, similarly to Byron in "Don Juan," Pushkin aestheticizes subjective identity in his novel in verse – a project made possible by Kant's critiques and divisions of reason.

Pushkin's project is revealed through the self-conscious reflection on romanticism developed in the text. Examining the character of Lensky, whom the narrator calls "[a]n admirer of Kant", I assert that Lensky's brand of romanticism typifies a simplistic interpretation of the philosopher. His romantic poetry does not distinguish between his "self" and its lyrical expression, evoking a reading of Kant as the savior of western metaphysics. The narrator's romanticism, on the other hand, represents a more perspicacious incorporation of Kantian epistemology within Romanticism. Pushkin's narrator exemplifies an ironic mode of lyricism and social existence that can only be developed in a post-Kantian world of the critiqued consciousness. The fundamental turning point in western philosophy – when subjectivity became objectively divided - reverberates in romanticism and helps to explain identity as an aesthetic object in "Evgenii Onegin."

The shift from Lensky's early romanticism to the narrator's ironic romanticism, represented on the narrative and metapoetic levels in the text, is not only Pushkin's argument for a more sophisticated and cosmopolitan literary culture in Russia. It also represents a shift from a conception of consciousness as an integral whole to a divided and objectified composite. However, instead of representing a crisis, this Kantian turn is positively represented by the narrator's creative self-fashioning in the text.