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INTRODUCTORY AND BIOGRAPHICAL

A study in English of Pushkin's works is a more dubious undertaking than one on most other great foreign authors. As a name he lacks definition. He is present to most English-speaking readers neither as a personality in his own right nor as the creator of scenes and figures which have passed into the common culture: not even as the poet of a few memorable and translatable quotations. His place among the very greatest poets has never been taken for granted outside Russia. Significantly it is only in Germany, where the golden age of poetry had preceded Russia's by a generation or so, and where the aged Goethe was completing *Faust* only five years before Pushkin's death, that the whole of his work has been translated and widely read. Not because he in any way resembled German writers, about whom he knew little and cared less, but because Russia and Germany had in common their late entrance on the European literary scene.

'*Il est plat, votre poète*', exclaimed Flaubert to Turgenev in genuine perplexity, and indeed the chief difficulty in the way of our understanding is that Pushkin's words come before us on two levels, disconcertingly obvious and familiar in the medium of translation: inexplicably different, exciting, and unique, when we have learnt some of his own language. The foreign critic cannot ignore this gap, and must work from both sides as he attempts to bridge it. As the would-be critic of ancient literatures today must defer to the vast corpus of classical scholarship while contriving at the same time to remain independent, so the critic of Pushkin must make what virtue he can from his position outside the linguistic and textual tradition of professional Pushkin scholarship, since he is in no case to compete with it.

He can only be grateful for the results of its labours, the painstaking detail of commentaries and the precise establishment of texts. The bulk and scope of Pushkin studies befits the author whom Russians will always put in a class by himself. For the great novels which to the world at large are the real Russian contribution to

world literature, and one unequalled elsewhere, are for Pushkin's countrymen a secondary development of his primary genius. Without Pushkin, they say, no Turgenev, no Dostoevsky or Tolstoy; and the European reader can only test the truth of the assumption by as close a study as he can manage of Pushkin's work. Even so, he cannot apprehend the relation as a Russian does, who absorbs Pushkin in adolescence before reading the novelists, and for whom even today his rhyming verse remains the most authoritative and the most natural expression of the language in art,[1] but he will certainly never again see in Tolstoy and Dostoevsky self-contained and self-created provinces of the imagination. He will instead, it may be, find them to be wide seas in which the element of salt has been crystallised and tasted in concentration by reading Pushkin.

Edmund Wilson has made the point, and found an analogy in French literature:

> Reading Pushkin for the first time, for a foreigner who has already read later Russian writers, is like coming for the first time to Voltaire after an acquaintance with later French literature: he feels that he is tasting the pure essence of something which he has found before only in combination with other elements. It is a spirit whose presence he has felt and with whom he is in a sense already familiar, but whom he now first confronts in person.[2]

To a lesser extent the spirit of Dante in Italian, and of Goethe in German literature, is equally strong; while Shakespeare's prose, as well as his poetry, is in the marrow of English style. But Pushkin's relation to his country's literature remains unique, which is why the Russians claim so much for him. Too much, it is sometimes said. Does his reputation depend simply on his place in the Russian consciousness? Blok spoke of its gloomy roll-call of despots and executioners, and of the one bright name on the other side – Pushkin. His name frees his fellow-countrymen from the weight of their history, even from the burden of themselves – Pushkin is as 'unrussian' in obvious senses as Dickens is 'unenglish' – and for them this freedom constitutes a unique enchantment. But does it for us? No foreigner is in danger of supposing that because Shake-

[1] In his essay on *Anna Karenina* in 1887 Matthew Arnold observed that 'the crown of literature is poetry' and that the Russians had not yet produced a great poet.

[2] E. Wilson, 'In Honor of Pushkin', an essay from *The Triple Thinkers*. The best short introduction to Pushkin in English.

speare is so important in English literature, or Goethe in German, these countries set for that reason an excessive valuation on them. They have their place in world literature because of what they are, not because of a special relation with their cultures.

And yet any criterion of universality is ambiguous. Byron had, and has, an international reputation denied to Wordsworth, but most English readers would maintain that Wordsworth was the greater poet, and they would be right. No judgement can be founded on the significance of a wide appeal to a writer's entire age, and the accessibility of his personality and appeal through the medium of translations. Nor can we necessarily judge greatness by the way it may perfect and use up a form, although no masterpiece in the same genre is possible after the *Divine Comedy*, *Faust*, *King Lear* or the tragedies of Racine; and Tolstoy and Dostoevsky may have created the great novels not only of Russia but of all time, even though the novel is by its nature far less exclusive and national a form than the tragedy or the long *poema*.

We can oppose to the concept of the masterpiece, in a finalising and self-defining form, that of the work which initiates or prolongs a whole tradition. Following Edmund Wilson, we might take Voltaire as the writer most representative of the unity of French culture, though he neither created it nor inhibited later writers from achieving the fullest individual expression within it. In such a culture, as T. S. Eliot put it, 'the existing order is complete before the new work arrives' and continues after it because any novelty modifies the whole existing order. 'The past is modified by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.' In such a culture it is hard to find out who began what and when, and it may be irrelevant or misleading to inquire. Was the direction of French literature determined by Malherbe and Montaigne? Did Chaucer or Surrey lay down the course of English poetry? These are fundamentally unreal questions, though it may be proper to pose them in surveys of literature and even to suggest answers. But a culture of long standing (and Eliot has French culture most obviously in mind) is indeed a seamless garment, because 'the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way that the past's awareness of itself cannot show'.[1] In France literature as an institution has always been greater than any individual who represents it (it is hard to imagine a French author who would consider it irrelevant to his achievement if he became, or did not become, an academi-

[1] From T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Collected Essays*.

cian) and this is indeed the touchstone of metropolitan culture which Matthew Arnold so highly valued.

An isolated culture, or a recently arrived one, is apt to be represented, if not dominated, by a single figure. Goethe and Cervantes represent to outsiders, and with justification, the spirits of their national literatures. Pushkin's contemporary Mickiewicz gave the Poles their national poem and became the focus of their cultural identity – a god-like figure to his fellow-countrymen. Pushkin is not like this. He is in the peculiar position of being regarded as the founding father, while his own *œuvre* resembles that of a genius born into a high culture and taking his place in it, not embodying it. He seems both the original Russian writer and the representative of Eliot's concept of a cultural tradition. For his genius enabled him to marry Russia and the Russian language to the whole tradition of European and classical culture. And in this he sets a precedent: no great Russian writer who follows him is definitively national.

In a letter to his friend the writer Bestuzhev, written in June 1825, Pushkin discusses the question of who comes first in the development of a new literary culture, the mediocrity or the genius. In an article in *The Polar Star* in the same year, 'A glance at Russian literature in 1824 and the beginning of 1825', Bestuzhev had maintained that genius is the first to arrive. Pushkin disputes this, pointing out that with the exception of Ovid and Lucretius the great Latin poets – Virgil and Horace – 'went along the well-marked road of imitation'. 'In Italy Dante and Petrarch preceded Tasso and Ariosto, and the latter came before Alfieri and Foscolo. With the English, Milton and Shakespeare wrote before Addison and Pope, after whom came Southey, Walter Scott, Moore and Byron. It is hard to draw any conclusion or rule from this. Your words apply fully to French literature alone.' Of the Germans, he says only that theirs is the one culture in which 'criticism preceded literature', and he deplores the lack of good criticism in Russia. The comment on German culture is shrewd, but the oddity of some of his examples shows how superficial was Pushkin's knowledge of foreign literatures at this time – the only one he knew at all well was the French. The interest of the argument is the light it throws on the Russian writers' consciousness of their culture at this period, and on Pushkin's own probable sense of himself as the inheritor of an already established national literary tradition.

Had Pushkin's genius been other than it was, Russian literature might have become what it most certainly is not – provincial.

A giant on the threshold could have dwarfed the dimensions of the new temple of literature. Pushkin was not a giant but a Proteus – the term was applied to him in his own lifetime – and he modelled for his successors a wide range of literary forms. A great part of his achievement can now be seen to point towards the nineteenth-century Russian novel, but that novel itself – as Tolstoy pointed out[1] – cannot be defined in terms of its European counterpart. In Tolstoy's words: 'its whole aspect can be expressed only by itself' and this it owes to Pushkin's liberating as well as Europeanising genius. It is as if Shakespeare had shown his successors how a new kind of drama might be written, and had left them to exploit a genre on which he had set an unmistakable but not a personal imprint. Shakespeare, like Pushkin, was Protean; and his genius was as generous and as unportentous; he too was a fertilising influence in his own lifetime and in the years just after his death. When Coleridge, in the *Biographia Literaria*, called him 'a very Proteus of the fire and flood', he contrasts this kind of greatness with that of Milton, which drew all nature egocentrically into its own compass. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's genius proved in the long run as conclusive as Milton's, in that the forms it created could have no direct literary issue.

Pushkin is unique among great writers, and particularly writers of his own age, in his attitude to literary forms. All his works are an examination – often amounting to an inspired parody – of one or another of them; and it is this more than anything else which makes a complete aesthetic comprehension of his work so difficult in translation. (It is also, as we shall see, the starting-point of Russian formalist criticism, with its thesis that 'the perception of its form reveals the content of the work'.) Moreover he wrote in many forms – the narrative poem combining romance with history, the history play and novel, the folk tale in verse – forms which we do not associate, in the nineteenth century, with any very great kinds of literary achievement. The dramatic sketch, which he picked up from the now-forgotten English poet Bryan Proctor, who wrote under the name of Barry Cornwall, is, in almost every example outside Pushkin's work, downright feeble. There is something bewildering to the foreigner about a poet who makes alleged

[1] In an article that appeared in *Russian Archive* after the publication of the first part of *War and Peace*. Tolstoy wrote that 'the history of Russian literature since the time of Pushkin' had seen no prose work of the highest class that would qualify as a novel in the sense in which the term was understood in the west.

masterpieces out of these kinds of composition; and indeed it is not unironic that, in following the most commonplace forms of European romanticism, Pushkin (and sometimes his older friend and fellow-poet Zhukovsky as well) produced versions that are superior to their originals in the west. But it is the forms themselves that never really became self-justifying in nineteenth-century literature as the novel was to do. Though many were written, the novel in verse never achieved real status in the west – Pushkin's is the only masterpiece in the genre – and *Evgeny Onegin* is further compromised in western eyes by the impression that it is in some sense a variant of Byron's *Don Juan*, though a closer parallel would be one of Jane Austen's masterpieces, or even Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*: the fact that two such different authors can be cited in comparison is in itself bewildering to the reader outside.

Neither of Pushkin's greatest achievements in narrative poetry, *Evgeny Onegin* and *The Bronze Horseman*, appear to carry the weight of 'things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme'; their pretensions are far from being self-proclaimed, and both seem at the same time finished and unfinished. They have a formal perfection and inevitability combined with a being provisional and open-ended, a paradox of Pushkin's art that has a parallel in the structure of the greatest Russian novels. Although one of his last poems paraphrases the Horatian ode *Exegi monumentum*, and claims, with a kind of proud equanimity, that his monument has raised its unhumble head higher than the Tsar Alexander's column, he remains no more imprisoned than Horace does in a monumental *Weltliteratur* of his own making. Horace has inspired poets of every age and culture, and continues to exist in their work as much as in his own. Tyutchev said that Pushkin was Russia's *pervaya lyubov* (first love), as if a great country and a great language had been waiting, like the sleeping princess, to feel this emotion. No previous Russian writer, not even Krylov the fabulist, had affected his fellow-countrymen in the same way, though many had been more decisive innovators and pioneers than Pushkin. Derzhavin, who as an old man heard Pushkin reading his poetry at his school in Tsarskoe Selo, had himself composed an *Exegi monumentum* on the Horatian pattern. We must postpone a detailed examination of the two poems till a later chapter, but it is worth noticing that both poets repeat in their separate ways Horace's claim to remembrance in the town of his birth as the first to set the modes of Lesbian song to the Latin language.

It is obviously exasperating for a foreign reader to be told that though Pushkin is the most eclectic of poets, little of his quality can appear in translation, and it produces a natural scepticism. But the reader without any Latin cannot really do more than take on trust the quality of Horace, and must look for his monument in later European poetry, in Shakespeare and Ronsard, Ben Jonson, Campion or Dryden. It is in any case arguable that the language barrier has become less important, not through the spread of education, but because the Hegelian and Goethean idea of world literature has become accepted as a standard by readers and writers alike, the novel being the form that both embodies the attitude and lends itself to the process. Moreover as languages develop they lose their power of primary meaning and become more instrumental and also more personal, less opaque and more transparent, a medium to feel and to see by (even if the object of view is only the author) rather than the materials of linguistic art. In *What is Literature?* Sartre distinguished prose, which brings us inside language, from poetry, which leaves us outside it. And what is written 'inside' a foreign language can be without too much difficulty transposed and apprehended on the 'inside' of our own.

The apotheosis of Shakespeare's plays in the nineteenth century took place not so much because of any increased understanding and appreciation of their dramatic poetry but because of the immense scope they afforded, as *Weltliteratur*, for universal recognition and identification. The reader of 'world literature' is scarcely concerned with the words on the page. Most of us take the greatness of the ancient classics for granted by reading into them meanings based on a translation; as they recede from the patterns of our own thought and speech and language we bridge the gap, justifiably, by taking less account of the actual words in them and more of what meanings they can continue to have for us. Recreating, as he did, a new poetic language, and creating a new world of poetry, Pushkin may none the less seem at first, to the foreigner, closer to such classics than he is to modern literature.

I

The bafflement which assails an experienced reader confronted with a translation of what he is assured is one of Pushkin's masterpieces, and hence one of the great poems of the world, is in reality a very pure sensation. He is confronted by commonplace words which he

can make nothing of. He cannot read virtues into them, as long conditioning has accustomed him to do with the classics, and he cannot find a personality in them of obvious originality and power, as he does in translations of great novels. In such novels the style is the man, and although some of him is lost in translation – as we lose the repetitive, preoccupied, probing sentence-structure of Tolstoy, and the sly malign play of humour in Dostoevsky – enough remains for us to meet and appraise the author man to man. By contrast, Pushkin seems both flat and anonymous.

It is this bafflement which Flaubert expressed when Turgenev attempted to show him how great Pushkin was by translating some passages. The flatness is an aspect of words that imply nothing, have no power or resonance, and a merely mechanical correspondence with the words of the original. Any attempt to make the paraphrase more lively in its own right, as in most verse translations of *Evgeny Onegin*, merely muddies the waters. But Horace too can sound flat:

> usque ego postera
> crescam laude recens, dum Capitolium
> scandet cum tacita virgine pontifex.
>
> I shall live on to reap
> Fresh praise in ages new, while silent maid
> And solemn priest shall climb the Capitol.[1]

In *Exegi monumentum*, the ode paraphrased by both Derzhavin and Pushkin, the language is truly monumental,[2] and its impression like a carved proclamation which in the word *tacita* can almost be touched. The words convey the whole weight of time through an image and appearance of space. But in an English equivalent the idea is no more than nobly picturesque.

Pushkin's powers of concentration can be as great as Horace's and of a very similar kind. No more than Horace does Pushkin keep himself out of his work with any air of deliberation, but his presence is as subordinate to his art as that of Horace to the *leges*. Consequently his style is never the man in the romantic and nineteenth-century sense, and we never identify with him. It is this which

[1] H. Macnaghten's translation.

[2] 'Impossible, en effet, de trouver une expression plus monumentale pour cette religion, monumentale entre toutes, du peuple maître du monde.' Zielinski, *Horace et la société romaine du temps d'Auguste*. (Horace's boast has turned out to be an enormous understatement, as Professor Fraenkel remarks, and yet the word *tacita* perhaps suggests to the modern ear a rite continuing eternally in the imagination. 'And, little town, thy streets for evermore / Will silent be...')

distinguishes his poetry from that of almost all other poets of his time. In *Tithonus* and *Ulysses* Tennyson sets out to achieve impersonality through a mythological convention, and his language seeks very consciously to impress with the powerful decorum of the classics. But lines like 'And see the great Achilles, whom we knew', or 'And after many a summer dies the swan', imply very little by suggesting too much. Because it is supplied from the hidden world of the poet's personality, their appearance of summation gives an effect which is the very opposite of the graven finality in Horace's lines, or in Pushkin's paraphrase of them.

Although the language of Pushkin's finest poetry does not remind us of other poets, the foreign reader assumes he belongs to the same world as that of André Chénier, Scott, Byron and De Musset, and finds nothing in a translation to disprove his assumption. The subject and treatment of *The Captive of the Caucasus* and *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai*, and also that of *The Gipsies* and *Evgeny Onegin*, seem in translation to be characteristic of their period; a rendering of the best-known lyrics sounds reminiscent of Byron and Heine, while many of the slighter ones remind us of Moore, Southey or Hood. On the surface Pushkin can be seen to have a variety of styles, suited to the kind of poem he is writing. *The Little House in Kolomna*, for instance, is so close to Byron's *Beppo* manner that the englishing of it should present few difficulties to an enterprising translator, but it is perhaps for this reason that so few have been made. The translator naturally wishes to try his skill on what is least accessible, and these are not the sparkling stylistic *tours de force* but the lyrics and shorter poems. The difficulty of rendering even *Evgeny Onegin* is not absolute – as is the case with such short and apparently simple poems as *Arion*, *Anchar*, and *I loved you* – but more obviously technical. The meagre rhyme resources of English are impossibly overstrained, and soon lapse into grotesque, and our syntax cannot begin to stand the pace which Pushkin sets by exploiting every advantage that can be won from Russian inflection, absence of particles, and flexibility of word order.

When we read in their own language the work of other Russian poets – Pushkin's predecessors Derzhavin and Krylov, his elder contemporary Zhukovsky, Yazykov and Baratynsky, even Lermontov or Tyutchev – we can distinguish between familiar differences and feel on familiar ground, and this is still more true of those nearer to us in time, the poets of Russia's *fin de siècle* 'Silver

Age', and the poets of today. We recognise their tone by its immediate resemblance to some analogue in our experience of European poetry: it is like reading known poetry in a new tongue, and it seems as if this new poetry could be variously interchangeable with its counterparts in Europe, in the same way that the poems of Byron, Schiller, or Lamartine have their Russian counterparts in Pushkin's period. The 'suggestibility' of Tennyson's lines, previously quoted, would not disappear in translation but would find everywhere some corresponding contemporary echo. The opening lines of the Prologue to *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, on the other hand, bring us a sensation for which there is no analogue. The international movements which had brought national literatures closer together, and which suggested to Goethe the growing importance of *Weltliteratur*, lose their relevance when we are confronted with the seeming isolation of Pushkin's poetic self.

Though our first acquaintance with Pushkin's poetry is a revelation, while that of his contemporaries is more like a recognition of kinds of poetry we have already experienced in another language, he can at times sound like any other poet of his period because he uses its conventionally poetic styles and tones. But after his most youthful period he can be seen to use them: they do not use him. The poetry of Zhukovsky, for example, seems of its time because its author was not able to make it anything else: Pushkin's, because he has chosen – for one reason or another – to make it sound that way.

We shall return again and again to this unique combination in his greatest poetry of a complete identity with words and style and at the same moment an equally complete detachment from them. It can seem simple and inevitable, the words 'frappent moins d'abord pour frapper plus en suite', as Montesquieu said of Raphael. But Pushkin also has Shakespeare's or Chaucer's joy in language as spontaneous artifice, and this pleasure in manipulating styles and diction has no parallel in any European poetry of his time – nineteenth-century poets may change styles or mix a variety of them, yet the process lacks the immediacy and assurance of language used by genius at its most malleable and least misgiving point of development. Parny, Chénier, and Byron are all imitated by Pushkin, but the language of all three seems limited and circumscribed beside his own.

The diction of Pushkin's poetry is a complex and specialised field of study, but even the foreign amateur can get the feel of the