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ANDREW KAHN

Introduction

Alexander Pushkin changed the course of Russian literature. Ceaselessly experimental, he is the author of the greatest body of lyric poetry in the language; a remarkable novelist in verse, and a pioneer of Russian prose fiction; an innovator in psychological and historical drama; and an amateur historian of serious purpose. Pushkin's protean talent was legendary in his own lifetime. Both contemporary and later readers invoke the names of Shakespeare and Mozart to convey the impact of his artistic genius and the seeming effortlessness of his creative imagination. Russian writers of every generation, from Fedor Dostoevsky to Vladimir Nabokov and Joseph Brodsky, turn back to Pushkin, making him an interlocutor and acknowledging his presence as a continuous creative force. At the same time, he remains for Russians the indispensable writer, a genuinely popular classic, a cultural icon, a biographical obsession.

Underlying the protean diversity are unifying patterns of thought and theme. The interconnections between different types in Pushkin's creation bear witness to his impulse to refract historical, philosophical, psychological and autobiographical interests through multiple literary forms. This multiplicity of literary expression captures the essential mobility of Pushkin's thinking which preferred play and openness to definitive answers, and irony and ambiguity to didacticism, in the certain knowledge that these were the hallmarks of a free mind and in their own right anti-authoritarian. His preoccupations with numerous questions – the nature of the creative imagination, the meanings of love and the nature of betrayal, the connectedness of Russian and European cultures, the course of history in Russia and across Europe in the post-Napoleonic period – elicited masterpieces that often tend to incompleteness rather than dogmatic certainty, and to an openness of form that is radical from a writer also famed for the classical polish of his style.

Pushkin's sense of personal identity and his creative preoccupations grew out of a profound interest in the history of his nation. This is another unifying

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pattern across his diverse activities, reflected in the frequency with which historical topics and personal concerns are linked in his writings and in the chapters in this volume. His own coming of age occurred at a transitional moment in Russia's history that compelled him to wonder and write about the direction of the present in terms of the past. Russia's transformation during the epoch from Peter the Great to the end of Catherine the Great's reign in 1796 formed the backdrop for much of Pushkin's thinking about personal, historical and literary issues (discussed here in Chapters 1, 6, 7, 8 and 9). Bearing this in mind, it is helpful to understand certain aspects of Pushkin's life and artistic themes in the context of Russia's historical transformation during the eighteenth century.

The modern Russian state is often seen to originate in the reign of Peter I (1682–1725). The consequences of his reforms were still being felt in Pushkin's lifetime. When Peter the Great, as he was known, came to the throne in 1689, the social hierarchy and political structure of the medieval state were still largely intact. At the apex of the realm was the autocratic tsar; although he ruled unchecked by a constitution or parliamentary institutions, he ignored at his peril the advice of his aristocratic boyars, whose influence fluctuated from reign to reign. Their status, derived from their ancient lineage and military function, was defined by a complex precedence system known as *mestnichestvo* and was reflected in etiquette at the court of the tsar. As a way of guaranteeing conscription to the army and securing agricultural labour, the state had gradually imposed serfdom on the peasantry between the late-fifteenth century and 1649. In Peter's time, almost half the population of Russia was in bondage to a private lord; this remained the case in Pushkin's lifetime.

By the end of the seventeenth century, there was a growing sense that these structures were too primitive to meet the state's changing needs but it took the vision and energy of a determined moderniser like Peter the Great to achieve the necessary transformation. In order to establish Russia as a European power and to increase his country's status as a trading nation, Peter needed to defeat Sweden, Russia's strongest rival in the north. Such international ambition lay beyond the capabilities of the old Russia, requiring Peter to reform his army, create a navy and overhaul the major institutions of state. The tsar's governmental reforms were supplemented in 1722 by the institution of a Table of Ranks – an obligatory ladder for advancement in state service and an entry point into the nobility. Set against the old system of privileges that accrued to boyars by favour of the tsar and *mestnichestvo*, the new system encouraged the growth of a meritocratic elite to serve the renovated state. Ranked on three parallel tables – for civil, military and court personnel – entrants to the new system, whether of noble origin or drawn

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from the merchant class or free peasantry, were meant to ascend the ladder by dint of ability, knowledge and accomplishment.

Birth and marriage continued to confer privilege and status but by rewarding the service of commoners with noble rank, the Table fostered the view that nobility was a matter of performance and not simply pedigree. All those who reached the eighth of the fourteen ranks on the Table were granted hereditary nobility: the entitlement conferred status rather than land or wealth, but the effect was to dilute the perceived prestige of the ancient nobility and rapidly expand the gentry. Apart from a few aristocratic families that consolidated their wealth over the course of the next hundred years, the winners were largely 'new men', often regarded as social upstarts by more established nobles. Between Peter I's reforms and the mid-nineteenth century, the nobility increased rapidly in size (while remaining little more than 1 per cent of the overall population). Most of this metropolitan service gentry had few serf-holdings compared to the new magnates created in the reign of Catherine the Great (1762–96). Catherine's husband, Peter III, was assassinated as a consequence of the *coup* that brought her to the throne, but not before he had released the nobility from compulsory state service, encouraging them to continue to serve voluntarily on their provincial estates. By confirming and codifying noble privileges in her Charter to the Nobility (1785), Catherine maintained the tsars' traditional policy of granting nobles virtually unlimited social and economic control over their serfs in return for unquestioning political loyalty to the monarch. Any hopes of power-sharing entertained by the writers and intellectuals of her time were no more than fantasies.

Although the reality was that many ancient families were tenacious in their survival, it is no wonder that Pushkin, who admired Peter the Great, felt embittered about the declining status of the nobleman. Like other scions of ancient families, Pushkin was born into a family whose estates had been mortgaged or sold off and whose pedigree offered prestige without great preferment. Pushkin did not hanker for the days of the boyars, although he took pride in the Pushkin family pedigree. Despite ambivalence about Peter's documented inhumanity, Pushkin's respect for this ruler was constant and enhanced by the story of his great-grandfather Gannibal's rise under the tsar. His attitude towards Catherine the Great, however, was more personalised and complex, tinged with an animosity and blame for the way she had undermined the nobility, which, in Pushkin's view, deserved the sort of parliamentary influence it had gained in England.

Peter the Great also initiated a cultural revolution, discarding the old social conventions of the Muscovite state in favour of westernised manners and mores. He decreed against the wearing of beards and the old-fashioned

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caftan: his 'new Russians' were to dress in European costume and be clean-shaven. The push toward Westernisation led him to create a new capital, St Petersburg, founded in 1703 (an achievement that Pushkin described in *The Bronze Horseman*, his greatest narrative poem). Unlike ancient Moscow, famed for its gleaming cupolas, crooked streets and wooden houses, St Petersburg was designed to reflect the rational design of the new modern Russia. Its streets were laid out on a geometrical pattern, its buildings were topped with spires, feats of scientific engineering, and Colleges (precursors to the ministries created at the beginning of the nineteenth century) were housed in purpose-built Baroque accommodation. While Russia continued, under Peter's successors, to draw on a wide variety of European cultural influences, France became the main model for educated society, particularly in the reign of Catherine the Great. Though many provincial nobles remained illiterate, and were mocked as backward relics of a bygone world, French was the preferred language of the educated gentry, who aped French manners, dress and customs. Despite the satirists who lampooned their European ways, the cultivated Russian elite, like Pushkin's parents, took pride in their urbanity, polish and status.

By the time of Pushkin's youth, the accession of Alexander I (1801) had raised broader expectations of serf emancipation and constitutional reform. Doubts about the inhumane treatment meted out to their serfs were already troubling the more enlightened Russian nobles in the 1780s. The failure of the Decembrist Rebellion of 1825 (discussed in Chapter 7) reinforced Nicholas I's authoritarian streak. Demanding allegiance to the conservative values of 'Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality', the new tsar outlawed dissent and inhibited open political debate. Pushkin's class was left marginalised without political influence, obliged to serve in the bureaucracy or consigned to slow decay in the countryside or Romantic escape in the Caucasus. Aristocratic disillusionment with Nicholas I's regime was largely captured by the next generation of writers, who came of age in the 1850s, but Pushkin's hero Evgenii Onegin was seen by that time as the prototypical 'superfluous man' doomed to boredom and inertia. Among the aristocrats of Pushkin's milieu, much pent-up energy was channelled into gambling to relieve boredom and the sense of stasis. A personal sense of honour became all the more important as an expression of self-worth in a society where thinking men and women were hardly free to act or take charge of their destiny. In this connection, the art of duelling, still alive in France, too, continued to be a means of settling scores. Pushkin's keen sense of honour, born both of his own accomplishments and of his self-identity as a nobleman, repeatedly involved him in duels. All of these historical issues, from state institutions like the Table of Ranks to the concept of individual status and

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honour, inform Pushkin's writings in ways that the individual chapters of this *Companion* elucidate.

It is also the case that Pushkin's creative life reached maturity at a time in the 1820s when Russia's literary culture, confined in the last third of the eighteenth century to a small urban elite, was slowly being transformed by growth in readership and commercial opportunities. Galvanised by the examples of Walter Scott and Byron – and aware that his own politically subversive persona attracted readers – Pushkin aspired to a similar level of popularity that would secure the status of the writer and also raise the taste of his readership. The success of the narrative poem *Ruslan and Liudmila* (1820), which appeared and sold out just as Pushkin departed to Southern exile, fuelled his ambition of establishing the professional status of the writer in a literary marketplace just as had occurred in Britain and in France. But the opportunities available to Pushkin as a writer, critic, and publisher were on a much smaller scale. While the first two cantos of Byron's *Childe Harold* were reprinted eight times in the six years following their original publication in 1812, and sold more than 20,000 copies, the print runs of chapters of *Evgenii Onegin* were relatively modest at a little more than 1,000 copies and never sold out. By the end of the 1820s, the growth of a readership in Russia made literary life almost viable commercially: publishers were paying authors several multiples of the sums offered to the previous generation. All the same, this was less than Pushkin needed and a fraction of the money that English and French writers normally – and some Russian writers exceptionally – earned (see Chapter 10). A wealthy magnate of the period might enjoy a quit-rent of 50,000 roubles from his landholdings, while Pushkin's salary as a courtier was closer to 5,000 roubles. The increasing popularity of low-quality fiction had made it difficult for poetry and high-quality fiction to compete. In 1831, when he published the *Tales of Belkin*, Pushkin hoped to sell 2,000 copies and walk away with a profit of 10,000 roubles after costs. In the event, only 1,200 copies were printed and he netted less than half his projected profit. By the end of his life, Pushkin's own works and his journal, *The Contemporary*, barely covered the cost of their publication. Awareness of the connection between economic pressures and creative choices informs our understanding of Pushkin at every level, whether he is projecting an image of genius in his poetry (Chapter 2) or managing a literary network in the ephemeral banter of correspondence (Chapter 9).

He was regarded as a classic by the time of his death, which occasioned widespread popular mourning. But his work was no longer fashionable and many of his greatest poems remained unpublished in his lifetime and proper editions did not appear till much later in the nineteenth century. The phenomenon of Pushkin appreciation only began to gain momentum from the

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1870s: arguably, he became a truly popular writer only in the Soviet period. At the same time, although other Romantics like Byron or Hugo did battle with public opinion and censorship, Pushkin's career was also uniquely Russian in forcing him to negotiate with an autocratic government that saw a threat in the liberty of expression and artistic autonomy that Pushkin regarded as a right. His entire creative life amounts to an assertion of artistic freedom against the insuperable meddling and harassment of the government.

Readers have always been able to savour the beauty of Pushkin's language, famed for a surface clarity suffused with connotation and implication. But readers in the twenty-first century, approaching Pushkin for the first time, can now better see his creation, and his unique status in Russian culture, as historical phenomena in their own right. Over the past twenty years, major developments have occurred in the way Pushkin is understood. The chapters in this volume are shaped by the conclusions of specialist studies, and convey this contextualised portrait of the writer. We now read him with a greater awareness of his connection to the institutions of literature and the influence of market forces on literary production; with a fuller knowledge of his links to important trends in European Romanticism and aesthetics; and through the lens of modern critical theory, now including reader-response and Bakhtin as well as, from an earlier era, the influential Russian Formalists. This *Companion* affords an opportunity to consolidate and revise views of Pushkin's creative achievement in a post-Perestroika world where scholars from Russia and the West are newly collaborating in modernising their understanding of Pushkin's life and work. In areas such as politics and historiography, for example, where scholarship was contaminated by the Marxist ideology of the Soviet State, the present volume reconsiders Pushkin's connection to revolutionary groups of the 1820s, and his belief in the governing potential of his class of nobles.

The authors recognise that this book will most often be turned to by students of Pushkin and Russian literature, and the chapters in this volume reflect the great range of Pushkin's achievement as a writer and as a man of letters. But they are also aware of his impact in other media popular both in Russia and the West, whether in the drama of *Mozart and Salieri* or the operas of Tchaikovsky (Chapter 11); and of the perhaps unique experience of the Pushkin phenomenon as a case study in cultural politics (Chapters 12, 13 and 14). From the origins of the Soviet Union to its fall, there has scarcely been a moment when the spotlight has been off Pushkin as the symbolic centre of official ideology and unofficial dissent. Yet different visions of Pushkin, as much as an Iron Curtain, divided the literary cultures of the Russian diaspora and of the Soviet Union. Exploring the official and unofficial

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mechanisms behind Pushkin's role in the formation of twentieth-century Russian culture is an area that has been highly productive and one where even more exciting work is promised. In providing a detailed account of Pushkin's crucial role in the formation of Soviet and post-Soviet national identity and, in the case of émigré culture, alternative identity, the essays in the second section bear witness to a historical moment that is still being played out in Russia's perception of itself. The open-endedness of his legacy as a dynamic principle in a literature and culture seems particularly Pushkinian.

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TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

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1

DAVID BETHEA AND SERGEI DAVYDOV

Pushkin's life

Alexander Pushkin, like his near-contemporary Lord Byron, took great pride in his aristocratic ancestry. He was born into the family of Sergei L'vovich Pushkin and Nadezhda Osipovna Pushkina née Gannibal, whose ancestors on both sides included prominent figures in Russian history. Through his father, Pushkin belonged to an ancient line of nobility dating back to the twelfth century (not the thirteenth as Pushkin thought); their names are cited twenty-one times in Nikolai Karamzin's monumental *History of the Russian State* (1818), the authoritative historical work on Russia in Pushkin's lifetime. The Pushkin clan stayed close to power up to the end of the sixteenth century, falling from grace under the Romanovs, whose dynasty dates from the early seventeenth century. Several ancestors were conspirators and mutineers and suffered in particular under Peter the Great. By 1799, the year of the poet's birth, the Pushkin family had lost all their influence and most of their fortune, and, as he grew older, Pushkin came to identify with their lot: 'They were persecuted. And I am persecuted' (*PSS*, vol. xi, p. 388).

On the maternal side, Pushkin's great-grandfather, Abram (originally Ibrahim) Petrovich Gannibal was born in Africa in 1696; he may have been the son of an Abyssinian prince, as Pushkin believed. He was sent as a slave to the court of Peter the Great, where he became the tsar's informal secretary and constant attendant. Eventually he attained the status of hereditary nobleman and was awarded several estates for his loyal service.[1] While Gannibal achieved distinction as a military engineer, a notorious jealous streak marred his private life. This amazing figure with ties to Russia's greatest tsar and with a story of meteoric rise from slavery captured Pushkin's imagination and played a role in his self-projection (see Chapter 6). Pushkin was proud of his ancestors, accepting their heroic deeds and nobility along with the 'taint' of their passions and their penchant for self-destruction. Throughout his life he was sensitive about what he saw as his 'Negro ugliness' while fearing that his inherited temperament could – and given his poetic fatalism probably would – cast its shadow over his own life.

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Childhood: 1799–1811

Alexander Pushkin was born on 26 May 1799 in Moscow. His parents endeavoured to maintain aristocratic appearances and constantly lived beyond their means. The podgy and clumsy Sasha (his affectionate Russian nickname) was their least favourite child; and while he felt this keenly he found refuge and warmth with his grandmother Maria Alekseevna and with his nanny Arina Rodionovna. From these two women the children learned Russian, as Pushkin recalls in the poem 'Sleep/Dream' ('Son', 1816), where 'granny' and 'nanny' merge into one appealing image. The children spent summers at their grandmother's estate in Zakharovo, near Moscow, where old-fashioned Russian life ruled. Pushkin addressed a number of moving poems to his nanny,[2] and as the ultimate token of his affection, he 'lent' her to his favourite heroine Tatiana in *Evgenii Onegin*.

Lycée: 1811–1817

The Lycée was an exclusive boarding school, directly attached to the Catherine Palace in Tsarskoe Selo, the royal summer residence. The emperor himself inaugurated it with pomp on 19 October 1811 in the presence of the court, the faculty and the first class of thirty students. It was the most progressive educational institution of its day in Russia.

Pushkin – nicknamed 'the Frenchman' for his brilliant command of French language and literature – was only a mediocre student. But he read avidly and began writing love elegies and verse epistles to friends. In the poem 'The Little Town' ('Gorodok', 1814) the teenage poet lists his favourite authors: classical and neoclassical writers like Homer, Virgil, Horace, Tasso, Molière, Racine, Voltaire, J.-B. Rousseau, Évariste de Parny, and Russian writers famed from the eighteenth century like the poet Gavrila Derzhavin, the playwright Denis Fonvizin, the historian and man of letters Karamzin, the poet Ivan Dmitriev and the fable-writer Ivan Krylov. To Voltaire and Parny he pays particular tribute. Pushkin started writing verse from an early age and published his first poem 'To a Poet-Friend' ('K drugu stikhotvortsu') in 1814. A more important debut was his public reading of 'Recollections in Tsarskoe Selo' ('Vospominaniia v Tsarskom Sele') during the qualifying examination at the end of the junior course on 8 January 1815. The greatest Russian poet of the eighteenth century, Derzhavin, was the guest of honour. He fell asleep during the examination, and only when Pushkin began reciting his poem – a gentle parody of Derzhavin's style – did the great man wake up: 'Here is the one who will take Derzhavin's place', he is alleged to have said.[3]

Pushkin's reputation grew by word of mouth, and he was encouraged by poets and men of letters close to the Karamzin circle, such as the poet

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