

# Collecting Pushkin

## November 2008



Alexander Pushkin, by Orest Kiprensky,  
1827

Harold Bloom once wrote that “strangeness” is one mark of the greatness which confers canonical status on a literary work.<sup>1</sup> He was referring to the uniqueness of the work itself – its style, beauty and embedded thought. But one might extend the concept to the author – his mind and conversation, appearance and behavior, and how he was regarded by his contemporaries. “Strange” is, in fact, a rather tame adjective to apply to the giant of Russian literature, Alexander Pushkin – perhaps the greatest poet to write in any European language since Shakespeare.

Pushkin was a 19th-century literary rock star. Or, to juggle musical metaphors, he was Mozart as portrayed in Peter Shaffer’s *Amadeus* – only with greater idiosyncrasies. It was unimaginable that a just deity would embody such an enormous – indeed revolutionary – literary talent in this unprepossessing character: a short man, about 5’5”, curly-haired, the descendant of an African slave, often carelessly dressed, irreverent in a land dominated by the Orthodox Church, and disrespectful of authority in a country ruled at

the microcosmic level by the Tsar and his officials (including his censors). Pushkin was indiscreet, lecherous, and obscene in his conversation and his poems. He hustled women constantly – married as well as unmarried – and patronized whorehouses. He had a child by a serf on his father's estate. He gambled – mostly at cards – and lost heavily, which left him constantly in debt. He quarreled, which regularly led to duels. He was killed at the age of 37 in a duel. Yet in less than two decades he reshaped Russian into a new literary language and became the great model – the poet all his successors read and internalized – for the next two centuries. His poems are still quoted at length by Russian school children and cab drivers. He also wrote graceful prose. One of his biographers says that “the great Russian 19th-century novel could hardly have existed without his tales in prose.”<sup>2</sup>

One immediately confronts the problem identified in two earlier pieces appearing in the *Caxtonian* (on collecting the Russian poets Mandelstam (11/06) and Akhmatova (4/07)). Histories and biographies can be translated from one language to another without much damage. Novels and short stories suffer somewhat more, but the English reader may get most of *War and Peace* or *Crime and Punishment* from a good translation. Poetry is untranslatable – except in the sense that one may render the words of one language into their rough equivalents in another. The reader may still get the drift of what is happening or being described. But the music is gone. Or at least the original music is gone. Perhaps a new composer and new music ...

This is why English and American readers cannot appreciate directly the form and liveliness, the bubbling wit and polish, of Pushkin's poems – which may explain why we do not often bother to read the inevitably unsatisfying translations.

I am in pretty much the same boat as most other non-Russians. I had a smattering of Russian in college, and started to study it again when I was 59. With a dictionary and plenty of time, I can now “read” Pushkin. Yet I'm sure much of the “music” that lives in the penumbras of words and the intonation of spoken Russian is lost on me. But perhaps one need not be an expert in the Russian language to be interested in the intersections of the poet's life and the appearance of the works that made him famous, in Russia if not the rest of the world. This essay is mostly for book collectors. It is not an attempt at literary criticism.

Alexander Pushkin was born May 26, 1799 (according to the Julian calendar), in Moscow.<sup>3</sup> His mother, Nadezhda (the equivalent of “Hope” in Russian), was the granddaughter of Abram Petrovich Gannibal, an African who had been purchased as a boy in Constantinople in 1704 by the Russian ambassador as a gift for Peter the Great. Abram’s origins may have been in Abyssinia or possibly the present state of Cameroon.

The Tsar ordered that the child be baptized and gave him his own name as a patronymic – “Petrovich,” signifying “son of Peter.” Abram was educated in France where he studied military science. At some point, he took the name “Gannibal” – or Hannibal – signifying both his African roots and military aspirations. (Russians do not have an equivalent to our letter “h.”) He returned to Russia, served in the army, became a major-general, oversaw the building of the Ladoga canal (built with slave or “serf” labor), and was granted large landholdings in the province of Pskov – including Mikhailovskoe, where his great-grandson would later spend much time. He married the daughter of a Swedish officer in the Russian army. Their son Osip was Pushkin’s maternal grandfather.

The Pushkins were an old but undistinguished part of the Russian aristocracy. Both Alexander’s grandfather and father had served in the military. His father, Sergei, was “short and stout, with a nose like a parrot’s beak,” and was said to combine weakness with irritability. During the Napoleonic invasion, he was faulted for incompetence and disobedience of instructions, and was later sacked.<sup>4</sup> Pushkin never got along with him. His mother, Nadezhda Gannibal, was the stronger parent – attractive, good-humored, strong-willed, never satisfied, constantly moving the family from one lodging to another. The family ultimately included eight children, of whom Alexander was the oldest boy. They lived in perhaps ten different cramped homes in Moscow before Alexander reached the age of 12.

As in most Russian aristocratic families, the language spoken in the Pushkin household was French. Alexander learned his Russian from his maternal grandmother. The family managed to hire a series of foreign tutors, who taught the children French but apparently not much else. Alexander later wrote, “My first tutor turned out to be a drunkard; the second, not a stupid man and not without information, had such mad habits that once he almost murdered me because I spilled ink on his waistcoat; a third living with us for a whole year became insane.”<sup>5</sup>

Pushkin's birthplace in  
Moscow



Alexander's father Sergei had a good library and read French poetry to the children; and Sergei's brother Vasily (Alexander's uncle) was an established poet and a frequent guest. Evidently, the literary gene came to Pushkin from his father's side.

The boy Alexander loved to read and rummage through his father's library. By the time he was ten, he had read Racine, Moliere, and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in French translation. Voltaire became a later favorite. He was also allowed to explore his father's collection of French pornography. In bed at night, he made up poems in French, and he later improvised comedies in French.<sup>6</sup> The early French poems, according to one biographer, were "marked by an amazing precocity."<sup>7</sup> His grandmother told her friends: "I've no idea what will become of [Alexander]: he's a clever boy and loves books, but he's a bad student and rarely prepares his lessons properly."<sup>8</sup>

In early 1811, when Alexander was not yet 12, the family decided to enroll him in a boarding school in St. Petersburg. Initially, the parents inclined toward a Jesuit school; but they learned that a new Imperial Lycee was to be opened in the fall of 1811 at Tsarskoe Selo – the Tsar's Village – a few miles south of Petersburg, in a wing of one of Catherine's great palaces. The Tsar's intention was to educate young members of aristocratic families to prepare them for the civil service. The program would be free (which no doubt helped his parents decide) and would last six years. Students would be required to remain at school throughout the entire period – even during the one-month summer vacation in July.

Pushkin narrowly passed the entrance exam. The headmaster privately noted at the time that he was, "Empty-headed and thoughtless. Excellent at French and drawing, lazy and backward at arithmetic."<sup>9</sup> Several students in that first class at the Lycee would become Alexander's closest friends; and a

few played their own parts in the unfolding story of 19th-century Russian literature. His closest friends were Ivan Pushchin (note the different spelling and pronunciation than Pushkin), Baron Anton Delvig, and Wilhelm Küchelbecker. The youngsters were measured for their school uniforms and assigned their own small individual rooms on the third floor. Pushkin's room (number 14) may still be seen by visitors to Catherine's palace.

Pushkin's teachers and his school friends became, in effect, his family. He saw little of his parents, who during his first two years of schooling continued to live in far-away Moscow. His mother visited him in January 1812 but did not see him again until April 1814 – after the family had moved to St. Petersburg.

Though the Lycee may have served as a kind of home for Pushkin, it did not stimulate him to study. In November 1812 after one year, a supervisor wrote of him at the age of 13:

His talents are more brilliant than fundamental, his mind more ardent and subtle than deep. His application to study is moderate, as diligence has not yet become a virtue with him. Having read a great number of French books, often inappropriate to his age, he has filled his memory with many successful passages of famous authors; he is also reasonably well-read in Russian literature, and knows many fables and light verses. His knowledge is generally superficial .... At the same time his good-nature is evident; ... In his character generally there is neither constancy nor firmness.<sup>10</sup>

Another teacher less generously described him as, “very lazy, inattentive and badly-behaved in the class,” and “empty-headed, frivolous, and inclined to temper.” At the end of his first year, he was graded “poor” in German, logic, ethics and math, and only “good” in Russian and French literature. But he could improvise poems at an instant, and his classmates remembered “that everything he read he remembered.”<sup>11</sup> The end of Pushkin's first year at the Lycee coincided with Napoleon's invasion of Russia.

Pushkin's love was clearly poetry. His first known Lycee poem was composed in the summer of 1813 when he was 14. Once he started, he apparently wrote all the time – casual pieces, notes to his friends – often using conversational, humorous, even scatological language. Other verses were more conventional. His first published piece appeared anonymously in the

*Herald of Europe* in July 1814. About 20 others appeared in various other literary journals during his time at the Lycee.

In late 1814, at the suggestion of one of his teachers, Pushkin wrote a poem – “Recollections in Tsarskoe Selo” – on the theme of the glories of the age of Catherine the Great with bits added on the victory of the Russians over Napoleon. The poem was submitted as part of an examination in January 1815. The exam took place before an audience of high state officials and relatives, and was distinguished by the presence of the 71-year old Derzhavin, generally acknowledged to be the greatest Russian poet of the age. He paid little attention to the other pupils but was “suddenly galvanized into attention” when Pushkin began to recite.<sup>12</sup> Pushkin, who was 15 at the time, later remembered reading out his “Recollections” standing only two paces from Derzhavin. Afterwards Alexander fled. But “Derzhavin was delighted; he called for me, wanted to embrace me... There was a search for me, but I could not be found.” Soon after, Derzhavin told a friend: “[A] second Derzhavin will appear in the world; he is Pushkin, who in the Lycee has already outshone all writers.”<sup>13</sup> The great Russian painter Ilya Repin later immortalized the scene in a famous painting.



Ilya Repin's famous painting of Pushkin reciting before Derzhavin

Soon Pushkin's fame began to spread beyond the Lycee. Next to Derzhavin the greatest Russian poet of that time was Zhukovsky, who met Pushkin at Tsarskoe Selo a few months after Derzhavin and wrote of the visit: “With our young miracle-worker Pushkin. I called on him for a minute in Tsarskoe Selo. A pleasant, lively creature!... He is the hope of our literature.... We must unite to assist this future giant, who will outgrow us all, to grow up...”<sup>14</sup>

Not bad for a young man who was about the same age as a sophomore in an American high school.

Zhukovsky, who wrote about the need to help Pushkin “grow up,” had perhaps heard something of his reputation as a clown and skirt-chaser. Not all his poems were paens to the greatness of Russia’s past or its present generation of writers. One written in 1814 (about the same time as his “Recollections”) was composed on the occasion of a visit to the Lycee by the lovely sister of one of his fellow students:

*“To a Beauty Who Uses Snuff”*

...

*But you, charming one... if snuff pleased you  
O the flame of my imagination –  
Ah, if I could be turned into powder,  
And imprisoned in the snuff box,  
I might fall into your tender fingers,  
Then might I in sweet delight,  
Be scattered on your breast, under the silk handkerchief,  
And even ... mozhet byt' [maybe] ... But no!  
An empty dream.  
That cannot be.  
Envious fate, wicked!  
Ah, why am I not snuff!...*

The current Russian text in the fourth-to-last line uses the words “mozhet byt’” – or “maybe.” But Russian editors tend to be puritanical, and there is reason to think Pushkin’s original words were probably “mezhdū nog” – or “between her legs.”<sup>15</sup>

Many of his poems from the Lycee years were written to other sisters or relatives of classmates, or to the maid of one of the ladies of the Tsar’s court. In 1816 Pushkin spotted the maid in one of the palace corridors and rushed after her. When he caught up to her, he bothered her with “rash words” and even “indiscreet caresses” – before he realized it was not the maid but rather the court lady herself, who reported Pushkin to Emperor Alexander. The Tsar came the next day to the Lycee and spoke to the headmaster: “Your pupils not only climb over the fence to steal my ripe apples ... but now will not let my wife’s ladies-in-waiting pass in the corridor.” The master explained that it was a terrible mistake, and that Pushkin was in despair. Well, Alexander reportedly said, “tell him it is for the last time.” Then he added, “Between us, the old woman is probably enchanted at the young man’s mistake.”<sup>16</sup>

Pushkin, under imperial duress, wrote a letter of apology to the wounded lady-in-waiting. But he circulated a private epigram that negated the apology:<sup>17</sup>

*One could easily,  
Mistake you for a brothel madam,  
Or for an old hag;  
But for a trollop, – oh, my God, no.*

Here we have the once-and-forever Pushkin – the rhymer, the cutting wit – libido-driven, and totally lacking in judgment.

Yet some adults regarded him as much more than a clown. While still in school, Pushkin was admitted to the Arzamas society – a group of successful writers promoting a new Russian literature. Sometime during his last year at the Lycee, while he was 17 years old, Pushkin began to write his first long poem, *Ruslan and Lyudmila*. It took him several years to complete.

The final exams for Pushkin's class took place in May 1817. The school director's judgment on him was negative:

*The highest and final purpose of Pushkin was to shine, and in poetry alone, having neither penetration nor depth and an entirely superficial and French mind ... His heart is cold and empty; there is neither love nor religion in him; perhaps no young heart was ever quite so empty as his.*<sup>18</sup>

Tsar Alexander personally presented the graduation certificates. Pushkin was asked to write a poem for the event but neglected to do so. He then received his civil service appointment – to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a collegial secretary, at the salary of 700 rubles per year.<sup>19</sup>

**I**n June 1817, when Pushkin graduated from the Lycee and relocated a few miles north to Petersburg, he was barely 18 years old – the age many American youths head off to college. He moved into the family apartment on the Fontanka canal. According to one of his classmates, the Pushkin apartment “was always topsy-turvy; valuable antique furniture in one room, in another nothing but empty walls or a rush-bottomed chair; numerous, but ragged and drunken servants, fabulously unclean; decrepit coaches with emaciated nags, and a continual shortage of everything, from money to glasses.”<sup>20</sup>



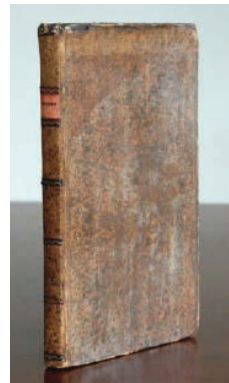
Pushkin promptly reported to the Foreign Minister and assumed his duties in the civil service. Apparently, he did no work and therefore had ample time to attend literary salons, as well as drink, go to parties and balls, gamble, get into fights and duels, and pursue attractive women. An unadmiring neighbor described him this way:

Beginning while still at the Lycee, he later, in society, abandoned himself to every kind of debauchery and spent days and nights in an uninterrupted succession of bacchanals and orgies, with the most noted and inveterate rakes of the time. It is astonishing how his health and his very talent could withstand such a way of life, with which were naturally associated frequent venereal diseases, bringing him at times to the brink of the grave .... Eternally without a kopeck, externally in debt, sometimes even without a decent frock-coat, with endless scandals, frequent duels, closely acquainted with every tavern-keeper, whore and trollop, Pushkin represented a type of the filthiest depravity.<sup>21</sup>

Somehow, these dissipations did not get in the way of writing. Pushkin continued to work on the mock-epic in verse which he had begun at the Lycee – *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, the story of the Prince of Kiev, and his daughter Lyudmila, the bride of Ruslan. In the story, immediately after the marriage ceremony Lyudmila is kidnapped by a dwarf-magician, Chernomor. Ruslan pursues the evil dwarf, eventually kills him and recovers his bride – conquering an army of pesky Pechenegs along the way. When the accomplished poet Batyushkov saw an early draft, he wrote to a friend: “What a marvelous, rare talent! Taste, wit, invention and gaiety.”<sup>22</sup>

Between parties, card games, and duels, work on *Ruslan* continued through 1818-1819 and into early 1820. In March of that year, Pushkin pronounced it completed. Portions appeared in journals, and the entire work appeared in book form in July 1820 – his first published book. The entire print run was purchased by a single Petersburg book dealer, who resold it to the public – 10 rubles for the regular edition, 15 for the vellum version.

Critics attacked the work for its “coarseness” and for the use of peasant rhymes and low language. But Zhukovsky loved it and sent Pushkin his portrait with a generous inscription.<sup>23</sup> Professor Irwin



*Ruslan and Lyudmila*,  
Petersburg 1820  
– first edition of  
Pushkin's first book

Weil of Northwestern (in an email to the author) points to “the incredible music and rhythm of the lines, at a level never heard before in the Russian language.” Most important, the public loved it – soon buying out the book dealer’s entire stock.

While attending parties and finishing *Ruslan*, Pushkin refined his aptitude for wandering into dangerous political territory. By the end of that first year of independence, he had written “Liberty, an Ode,” (*Volnost*), which his biographer calls his “first great mature poem”<sup>24</sup> – liberal in tone though far from revolutionary in substance. “Rulers! Your crown and throne, are given by Law – not Nature; You may stand higher than the people; But the eternal Law stands higher than you.” The poem could not be published, but was widely circulated in manuscript. Some copies were confiscated and the work was branded “disloyal.”

Tsar Alexander heard about Pushkin’s work and asked to see it. He was given a copy of the less flammable “The Country,” which he liked. He would have been less enthusiastic about another of Pushkin’s short poems, which circulated privately. Entitled “You and I,” in this verse Pushkin draws comparisons between himself and the Tsar, taking the occasion also to jab at the poet Khvostov – a frequent target of Pushkin’s wit:

*Your [referring to the Tsar] plump posterior you  
Cleanse with calico;  
I do not pamper  
My sinful hole in this childish manner,  
But with one of Khvostov’s harsh odes,  
Wipe it though I wince.*

Pushkin wrote this stuff at a dangerous time. Russian soldiers had recently returned from France – victorious but full of Western liberal ideals of freedom of speech and press, and even – smother the thought – constitutional democracy. A secret political society had been formed in early 1816, which would later grow into the Decembrist revolt of 1825. Tsarist spies kept the regime reasonably well informed of these developments, which colored their attitude toward any liberal-sounding odes to liberty or freedom. In 1818 the Tsar and his ruthless minister, Arakcheyev, created a committee to remove from circulation any writings “which contradict Christianity.”<sup>25</sup> Proposed publications had to be cleared by the official censor, and forbidden volumes were burned.

Pushkin was lucky. For one thing, he quickly earned a reputation for empty-headedness and lack of seriousness, which made the genuine revolutionaries reluctant to take him into their confidence. Also, Tsar Alexander had greater tolerance for juvenile indiscretion than other monarchs. In early 1820 a report was sent to the Minister of the Interior on the troubled state of Russia, including the fact that students and recent graduates of the Lycee were writing scandalous things about the royal family. One of Pushkin's witty but indecent epigrams made the list. Alexander ordered an investigation, and the Governor-General of Petersburg was directed to seize Pushkin's writings. Pushkin heard about it and burned his manuscripts before they could be confiscated. He was then called in and questioned. He quickly admitted that he had burned his poems, but also did what no well-coached witness would have done: he volunteered that he could remember them all. So he sat down and wrote out an entire notebook. The verses were then taken to Tsar Alexander, who considered exiling him to Siberia, but – after extracting a promise from Pushkin to write nothing against the government for two years – relented and decided on internal exile in southern Russia. Pushkin promptly departed for the south, on May 9, 1820 – not yet 21 years old. He would not return to Petersburg society for over six years.

One might ask: was this good or bad luck? If Pushkin had not been exiled from the capital, he would have been in Petersburg during the period of conspiracy and the uprising of the Decembrists in 1825. He later admitted that, but for his exile, he would have been with them – which would have meant either death or long-term exile in Siberia.

An additional dimension to his luck was that during this period of internal exile, Pushkin had time to write – to think, draft, edit and polish – and to mature into the great craftsman predicted by so many of his contemporaries.

Technically still assigned to the Foreign Ministry, Pushkin was first sent to Ekaterinoslav, a small town just north of the Black Sea. He managed to hook up with a General named Raevsky and to obtain permission to accompany him and his family to the Caucasus, farther east and south – between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. It did not take Pushkin long to become infatuated with Raevsky's eldest daughter, about whom he wrote a fine lyric. He also commenced work on a long narrative poem – *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* – which he completed the next year and which became his second published book. When it appeared in August 1822, it consisted of 53 pages of verse and was priced at five rubles. The editors added a

portrait of the author depicting him at age 15 in a Byronesque pose.<sup>26</sup> The edition of 1200 or so copies sold out quickly, earning Pushkin 500 rubles for his trouble.



*Prisoner of the Caucasus*, Petersburg, 1822, with picture of young Pushkin,

Reassigned to a military base at Kishinev, the capital of Bessarabia, Pushkin travelled westward through the Crimea, past a place called Bakhchisarai, the “Golden Pavilion” of the Crimean khans. He later used it as the setting for another narrative poem – “The Fountain of Bakhchisarai.” Pushkin arrived in Kishinev in September 1820 and rented two rooms from General Inzov, his military supervisor. It must not have taken him long to meet most of the Russians in the town. A couple of months later, he managed to obtain an invitation to a family estate, which turned out to be a center of the southern Decembrist movement. While there, he somehow contrived to have an affair with the wife of one of his hosts.<sup>27</sup> When she broke it off, Pushkin ungraciously composed several spiteful epigrams, one of which commented on her promiscuity.

Returning to Kishinev, Pushkin found himself caught up in enthusiasm for the Greek struggle for liberation from Turkey. His enthusiasm for a Greek refugee named Calypso Polichroni was even greater – perhaps because as a teenager she was supposed “to have first known passion in the arms of Lord Byron, who was then traveling in Greece.”<sup>28</sup>

General Inzov, Pushkin’s supervisor, assigned him to translate Moldavian law into Russian, which required Pushkin to learn some Moldavian. He learned enough to teach the General’s parrot to swear in Moldavian. The parrot chose one Easter Sunday, when the Archbishop of Kishinev was lunching with the General, to practice its new vocabulary. Inzov demonstrated his tolerance by forgiving the prank.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps it was that same Easter Sunday when Pushkin wrote a poem addressed to the pretty daughter of a Kishinev innkeeper. “Today he would exchange kisses with her in the Christian manner, but tomorrow, for another kiss, would be willing to adhere to ‘the faith of Moses,’ and even put into her hand “That by which one can distinguish/A genuine Jew from the Orthodox.”<sup>30</sup>

Far worse was his blasphemous parody of the miracle of Jesus’ birth, entitled *The Gavrieliad*. Written in elegantly-rhymed iambic pentameter, it circulated for decades in manuscript and was not printed until 1907 – and even then, with omissions. The poem is named after the Angel Gabriel. A young Jewish girl Mary lives with her “lazy husband,” the carpenter Joseph. God sees her and, falling in love with her, sends Gabriel as his messenger. But Satan arrives first and seduces Mary. Then Gabriel arrives, drives off the Devil and takes his turn. Finally, God appears in the form of a white dove.

*Tired Mary Thought:  
‘What goings-on!  
One, two, three! – how can they keep it up!  
I must say, it’s been a busy time:  
I’ve been had in one and the same day  
By Satan, an Archangel and by God.’<sup>31</sup>*

This scandalous piece would later get him into big trouble.

Idle hands ...! Pushkin also managed to get into quarrels, sometimes related to his chasing after the wives of his acquaintances, and even into duels. One fight got him sentenced to house arrest for three weeks. He also spent much of his time reading English poetry and novels, which he began to admire more than the French.

In late May 1823, a few days before his 24th birthday, Pushkin in Kishinev began writing *Eugene Onegin*, which would become his greatest masterpiece. It appeared a chapter at a time, and took him years to complete. Initially, he believed the censor would never clear it for publication so, as he told one friend, “I am writing it the way I feel like writing.”<sup>32</sup>

A few months later, in July 1823, Pushkin was reassigned to the command of General Vorontsov in Odessa, on the shores of the Black Sea. Soon he was writing passionate poems to a local banker’s daughter, as well as working on *Onegin*, drafting a long poem based on his visits with a community

of Gypsies, and completing the composition of *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai*. *The Fountain* tells in verse the simple story of a Crimean khan who falls in love with a Polish captive. When the Polish girl dies, the Kahn builds a marble fountain in her memory. The book was printed in Moscow and appeared in March 1824. Pushkin sold the 1,200 copies to two booksellers – one in Petersburg and the other in Moscow – for which he netted about 2,500 rubles. He calculated that this sum worked out to more per line than any previous Russian verse.<sup>33</sup>



*Bakhchisarai Fountain*, 1824

Perhaps success clouded his ability to sense danger, which approached in two forms. First, Pushkin became infatuated with the wife of his supervising General Vorontsov. This led to an affair, about which the General soon learned. Second, Pushkin became friends with Vorontsov's physician, an English atheist. Pushkin then wrote a letter to his old lyceum friend Küchelbecker about "taking lessons in pure atheism," and the Englishman's proof "that no intelligent being, Creator and governor can exist...."<sup>34</sup> The letter soon circulated in manuscript, and a copy fell into the hands of the Moscow police.

The angered General Vorontsov complained to the Petersburg authorities, asking that Pushkin be reassigned. In the meantime, he gave Pushkin the task in May 1824 of investigating an enormous infestation of locusts that were plaguing a neighboring district. Pushkin objected, claiming (falsely) that he suffered from an aneurysm in his leg. When Vorontsov overruled his objection, Pushkin – who evidently did not fully comprehend that he was where he was at the Tsar's will – decided to "resign."<sup>35</sup>

Meanwhile, Tsar Alexander had reviewed both Pushkin's atheistic letter to Küchelbecker and Vorontsov's complaint. The Tsar granted Vorontsov's

request – noting Pushkin’s “bad conduct” and reassigning him to confinement on his parents’ country estate at Mikhailovskoe near Pskov, subject to the vigilance of the local authorities. The Tsar also had Pushkin’s name stricken from the list of civil servants in the Foreign Ministry – thus eliminating his small stipend.<sup>36</sup> After briefly considering possible escape from Russia by sea, Pushkin signed a pledge promising future good behavior and departed for the family estate on August 1, 1824. He was 25.

Arriving at Mikhailovskoe with the first two chapters of *Onegin*, Pushkin was placed under the charge of his father, Sergei – who was as unhappy about the assignment as his son. Within a few months, there were bitter arguments – Pushkin swearing never again to speak to his father, and Sergei claiming to the rest of the family that his son had attacked him.<sup>37</sup>

With little to do on the estate, Pushkin spent his days walking, swimming, practicing with pistols, and writing. He let his fingernails grow so long that he used them to peel the rinds from oranges. He also finished the last of his “southern” poems – *The Gypsies* (in Russian “Tsygani”). Set in a Gypsy camp, it tells the story of a tribal girl who brings a boy, Aleko, into the camp where the two live together for a time. The girl then exercises her freedom and chooses another. The boy kills her lover and then the girl herself. Instead of executing the murderer, the tribe banishes him: “The freedom that you have known, You want it for yourself alone.” *The Gypsies* was not published until 1827.

Pushkin also found time to impregnate a 19-year old serf girl – Olga, the daughter of the estate’s bailiff. The child lived only a few months.<sup>38</sup> The practice of land-owning aristocrats taking sexual advantage of serfs appears to have been fairly common in 19th century Russia. The great Tolstoy later indulged himself in this way. So did Turgenev.

From a literary standpoint, the most important consequence of Pushkin’s enforced stay at Mikhailovskoe was his continuing progress with *Eugene Onegin*. Also, he had better luck with the censor than he had earlier thought possible. The first “canto” – published as a separate 80-page booklet – was cleared by the



The first canto of *Onegin*.

editor and appeared in February 1825. It gave a glittering picture in verse of social life in Petersburg. The reviews were enthusiastically favorable – referring to “the charm of joyful, witty and noble satire ... combined with authentic and sharp descriptions of society life,” and the “spontaneity, gaiety, feeling and picturesque verse.”<sup>39</sup> However, sales were initially disappointing. The usual print run had been doubled – to 2,400 copies – but only about 1,100 copies were sold during the first six months, at 5 rubles per copy.

The second canto was published in October 1826, and the remaining chapters appeared in October 1827 (Ch. 3), February 1828 (Chs. 4 and 5, published together) and March 1828 (Ch. 6).<sup>40</sup> Some sections had appeared earlier in literary journal. For example, Tatanya’s famous letter to Onegin and her conversation with her Nanny first appeared in Baron Delvig’s journal in 1827 (which Pushkin helped edit). Publication of the fourth chapter was delayed when Pushkin lost the manuscript in a game of cards and had to buy it back before the chapter could be turned over to the printer.<sup>41</sup> All the cantos sold well and received positive reviews, though there were some dissenters.

These separate publications of the chapters of *Onegin* are the black tulips of Russian book collecting. Because of their fragile paper wrappers, and the fact that they were printed in two different cities over a period of more than three years, not to mention the later destructions of revolution and war, complete sets of these chapters in collectible condition are great rarities. Moreover, *Onegin* is generally regarded as Pushkin’s masterpiece, which contributes to its high value. The first full book publication of *Onegin* did not appear until March 1833.<sup>42</sup>

During his enforced stay at Mikhailovskoe, Pushkin – no doubt under the influence of Shakespeare – also worked on an historical play in blank verse. Pushkin greatly admired Shakespeare, and wanted “to bring the vitality of Shakespearean drama into the largely Racine-dominated Russia theater.”<sup>43</sup> The play is set at the end of the 16th century, following the death of Ivan the Terrible. After the death of Ivan’s son, the husband of Ivan’s daughter – Boris Godunov – was elected Tsar. He reigned for seven years during a “Time of Troubles” – a period in which historians see both the germs of centralization of the Tsarist government and possible seeds of democracy.

Pushkin also continued while at Mikhailovskoe to write shorter lyrical poems. He conceived the idea of publishing a volume of his collected poems – many of which had earlier appeared in literary journals. One of my



favorites – the “Song of Oleg” – had appeared in Baron Delvig’s literary journal, *Northern Flowers*, at the end of 1825. However, publication of the full collection was delayed when Pushkin – again – lost the manuscript in a card game. Fortunately, he was able to use his profits from the first chapter of *Onegin* to buy back the manuscript – for 500 rubles, the amount of his gambling debt. By this time, he had written two additional poems, which were included, and the whole was sent off to his brother Lev in Petersburg to see it through the censor and the printer. The new volume, *Poems of Alexander Pushkin* – a book of 204 pages,



*Poetry*, 1826

with a few more than 100 poems – appeared at the end of December 1825 (but bore the year “1826” on the title page). Pushkin drafted a comic (or humble) preface referring to his poems as “rubbish” and “unworthy,” but his printer had the good sense to substitute a short note in place of Pushkin’s more self-critical version.<sup>44</sup> Because of the experience of slow sales with the first chapter of *Onegin*, only 1,200 copies were printed.

Despite the small first edition and the relatively high price of 10 rubles, *Poems* was a smashing success. Within two months, all the copies were sold.<sup>45</sup> Pushkin’s profit came to about 7,000 rubles.

In December 1825, while Pushkin’s volume of *Poems* was in the hands of the printer, the rumbling discontents with the Tsarist regime came to a boil. Tsar Alexander had died in November. His brother Duke Constantine was next in line of succession; but he had married a Polish countess – a Catholic – and had formally renounced his claim to the throne. The younger brother, Duke Nicholas, waited to see what Constantine would do. After an awkward interregnum of several weeks, Nicholas finally had himself proclaimed Tsar on December 14. The conspirators – later to be known as the Dekabristi (“Decembrists”) – seized the opportunity to push for a constitutional monarchy. They managed to engineer an uncoordinated uprising of a few thousand troops on Senate Square in Petersburg, adjacent to the Neva River, on the morning of December 14. However, the authorities mustered troops and cleared the square with canister shot. The leaders of the uprising lost their ardor, and the rebellion quickly collapsed. Two of Pushkin’s school chums – Pushchin and Küchelbecker – were among those arrested. A special Tsarist commission interviewed hundreds of witnesses, many of whom testified as to the influence of Pushkin’s “liberal” verses. Ultimately,

five of the leaders were hanged, and dozens more were exiled for long terms – most to Siberia.

In the following crackdown, all members of the aristocracy were ordered to take a loyalty oath. Pushkin gladly took it. He also wrote a personal letter to the new Tsar Nicholas, asking that he be permitted to travel to Petersburg and Moscow, “or to foreign lands.”<sup>46</sup> One of the Tsar’s agents was ordered to look into Pushkin’s conduct and report back. Based on the letter and report, Nicholas decided to call Pushkin in for a personal interview.

Pushkin’s interview with Tsar Nicholas – a famous event in Russian literary history – took place on September 8, 1826. No one else was present during the interview. Nicholas later related that Pushkin appeared “ill and covered with sores (from a *notorious disease*).” He asked Pushkin what he would have done if he had been in Petersburg on the day of the uprising in December 1825. Pushkin said, “I would have been in the ranks of the rebels.” Nicholas apparently gave him points for candor. He also extracted a pledge to improve his behavior:

When I then asked him whether his way of thought had changed and would he give me his word to think and act in a different fashion, if I were to release him, he hesitated for a very long time and only after a lengthy silence stretched out his hand to me with the promise – to become different.<sup>47</sup>

Nicholas may have thought that having a chastened and grateful Pushkin on his side was better than sending the famous writer back into exile. In any event, he agreed to allow Pushkin to end his enforced absence from Petersburg. Nicholas also announced that in the future, when Pushkin wanted to publish a poem or article, the Tsar himself would be Pushkin’s personal censor. This meant (though Pushkin did not initially understand it) that any works had to be cleared before being either read to audiences or published.<sup>48</sup> Having the Tsar as his personal censor would turn out to be a mixed blessing.

Pushkin was now back in social circulation. He went to parties and enjoyed the new Tsar’s coronation celebrations. He gave poetry readings



Pushkin’s drawing, in his manuscripts, of the hanged Decembrist leaders. His nearby note reads “And like [a clown], I might have...”<sup>84</sup>

– including portions of his draft historical verse drama, “Boris Godunov.” A fan who attended one of these readings wrote: “Instead of the high-flown language of the gods, we heard simple, clear, ordinary, but at the same time – poetic and captivating speech! ... [T]he further it advanced, the stronger our emotions grew.... The reading finished. For a long time we looked at one another, and then rushed toward Pushkin. Embraces began, noise arose, laughter resounded, tears and congratulations flowed.” So, evidently, did the champagne.<sup>49</sup> The problem was that Pushkin had failed to clear his manuscript with his personal censor – the Tsar – for which he got his wrists slapped.<sup>50</sup>

He continued to gamble – both with amateur friends and professional gamblers. (It was about this time he lost the fourth chapter of *Onegin* in a card game.) He also continued his serial skirt-chasing and even began to think about the possibility of marriage.

The reader may recall that a few years earlier Pushkin had written the blasphemous poem about the Virgin Mary – *The Gavrieliad* – which had continued to circulate in manuscript. In the spring of 1828, a copy of this poem came into the hands of the Metropolitan of St. Petersburg, who in turn passed it upstairs to Tsar Nicholas, who directed that it be investigated. Pushkin was summoned and asked by the police if he was the author. He said he was not. The Tsar then directed that Pushkin be summoned and asked in the Tsar’s name for his help in identifying the culprit. Pushkin was summoned – and promptly caved. He wrote to Nicholas: “[N]ow, when questioned directly by the person of my Sovereign, I declare that *The Gavrieliad* was composed by me in 1817. Throwing myself on the mercy and magnanimity of the Tsar, I am Your Imperial Majesty’s loyal subject, Alexander Pushkin.”<sup>51</sup> Instead of sending him to Siberia, Nicholas let him off the hook again and considered the case closed. But Pushkin must have realized he had pushed his luck to the limit.

Perhaps because of financial pressures, Pushkin made time for serious literary work. In October 1828 he completed a long narrative poem, ultimately titled *Poltava*, which tells the story of the Ukrainian insurgent Mazepa, and blends it with the story of Peter the Great’s victory over the Swedes in the battle of Poltava. Probably he hoped that



*Poltava*, Petersburg,  
1829

the glorification of Peter would confirm to Nicholas his own gratitude and loyalty to Peter's descendants. The book appeared in 1829, and although Pushkin's friends were complimentary, it was not as successful with the public as his earlier works.<sup>52</sup> Feinstein says it was the first poem he published "which did not receive immediate acclaim."<sup>53</sup>

In the spring of 1829, Pushkin headed south to join the Russian army in the war with Turkey. His idea was to gain the kinds of experience that he could transform into verse. Alexander made it as far as the Turkish city of Erzerum, south of the eastern end of the Black Sea, and was present during one military skirmish. He then turned back north, drinking and gambling. Tsar Nicholas read in one of the newspapers about Pushkin's presence in the Caucasus and was outraged that he had left the capital without imperial permission. Pushkin responded with what his biographer calls an "obsequious apology."<sup>54</sup> The result of this sole brief episode of military experience was never transformed into verse but became the subject of his prose "Journey to Erzerum," which appeared years later, in a literary journal in 1836.<sup>55</sup>

In early 1830, Pushkin and a group of his literary friends – including Baron Delvig – began publishing a new *Literary Journal* in Petersburg. Each issue had to be cleared by the censor, which caused great irritation and led to squabbling with another leading journal.

In December 1828 at a ball in Moscow, Pushkin had first spotted 16-year old Natalya Goncharova, a beautiful but apparently light-headed young woman. He later wrote, "When I saw her for the first time, her beauty was just being noticed in society. I loved her; my head was quite turned."<sup>56</sup> Pushkin had always been attracted to women more for their beauty than their brains, and his bride-to-be was no exception. She was described by one of Pushkin's biographers as "a provincial simpleton, with little knowledge of literature and less of the world. Nor was she distinguished by her intellect."<sup>57</sup>

It took over two years to work out a marriage agreement. The Goncharov family was on shaky financial footings, as was the Pushkin family. But a bigger concern on the part of the bride's family was that Pushkin was reported to be on bad paper with the Tsar. Natalya's mother, whom Binyon calls "stupid, insensitive and tactless" as well as "meddlesome" and "dictatorial,"<sup>58</sup> insisted that Pushkin get a character reference from the Tsar. Pushkin applied through the head of State Security, and received a reply stating that the Tsar had heard about the proposed marriage with "benevolent satisfac-

tion,” and that there was no “shadow” over his reputation with the Tsar.<sup>59</sup> This was enough for the troublesome mother-in-law, though the wedding was delayed for several months, until February 1831.

In the meantime, Pushkin sought to enhance his finances through his writing. He worked during the latter half of 1830 to arrange for the publication of his play, *Boris Godunov*, which finally appeared in December. He dedicated the work to the memory of Karamzin, the great Russian historian. Anxious for cash to pay his debts, he sold the entire first edition – some 2,400 copies – to the St. Petersburg book dealer Smirdin, for 10,000 rubles. The book was an instant success – 400 copies selling in St. Petersburg on the first morning. Just as important (if not more), the Tsar liked it. The head of State Security wrote to Pushkin to report: “His Majesty the Sovereign Emperor has deigned to instruct me to inform you that he deigned to read with especial pleasure your work: Boris Gudonov.”<sup>60</sup> To raise more money, Pushkin sold the bookseller Smirdin all remaining unsold copies of his past works for 28,800 rubles.

It sounds like a lot of money. But to put this success in perspective, about this same time Pushkin lost 24,800 rubles to a professional gambler in Moscow, as well as other smaller amounts to other less skilled opponents.<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps it was the prospect of marriage and the expenses of a household that unleashed the flood of creative juices. During the fall of 1830, Pushkin settled at Boldino, a small Pushkin family estate. There he completed the final chapter of his masterpiece *Eugene Onegin* as well as some thirty short poems, including some of his best lyrics. He also composed the five short stories that would later comprise *The Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin*, which appeared in book form in October 1831 – identified not as a work written by Pushkin but as stories “edited by A.P.” It was his first prose work to be published. Pushkin’s biographer describes the tales as “a work of extreme artistic sophistication ... distinguished by an extraordinary literariness.” Perhaps for that reason, they were not well received, or as his biographer says, “their subtlety was completely unappreciated.”<sup>62</sup> During that same fall, Pushkin also wrote four short dramatic pieces in blank verse, including the semi-autobiographical “The Stone Guest,” a variant on the Don Juan theme. We think of Pushkin as a poet because of his transcendent genius; but one should not forget his short stories and dramas, which alone would have made him a leading figure in Russian literary history.

Alexander Pushkin (31) and Natalya (18) were married February 18, 1831, in Moscow and promptly moved into a rented two-story brick house in the Arbat area. Marriage agreed with him. Within a few months, he wrote a poem which circulated in manuscript, but which could not be published. Here is Binyon's translation:<sup>63</sup>

*No, I don't enjoy the violent pleasure,  
Wild delights and maddened frenzy,  
When the young bacchante, screaming,  
Writhes in my snakelike embrace,  
With ardent caresses and biting kisses  
Hastens the moment of the last shudder!  
How much sweeter are you, my meek one!  
How painfully happy I am with you,  
When, yielding to my long pleading,  
You, tenderly, give yourself to me without ecstasy,  
Shyly cold, not responding to my rapture,  
You scarcely respond, heeding nothing,  
And then are roused, little by little –  
And finally involuntarily share my passion.*

This cannot be a biography or even a fair summary of one; so generalization must substitute for detail. Pushkin's marriage was a success that led to failure. The success – perhaps surprisingly, in light of Pushkin's libidinous impulses – lay in the fact that he loved his young, non-intellectual wife and was as loyal to her as possible, given his nature and the culture in which they lived. Their marriage produced four children – two boys, two girls. His letters to Natalya are tender and understanding. He regularly addressed her affectionately as his “darling” – his “wifekin.” And, apart from flirtatious lapses of judgment, she was loyal to him.



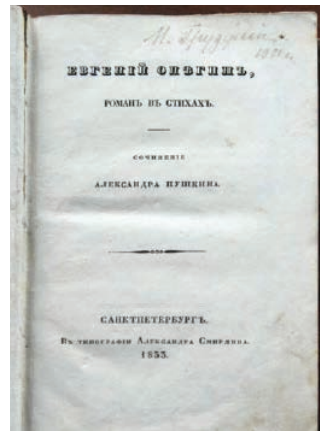
Pushkin's wife Natalya

But the expenses of marriage and social life coupled with the continued deterioration of the finances of both families ultimately put such a strain on Pushkin's life that it snuffed out most of the freedom he needed to think and write. He spent much of his energy seeking unsuccessfully to put his family's estate operations in order. He sought to cut down the amount of skimming by the serfs and farm managers; and he struggled to find ways to

mortgage the family land and serfs – basically, to up-front the speculative future profits of the farms. But mostly he recycled his debts – borrowing from one set of friends or money lenders to pay off those who were hounding him to repay earlier loans. As the recycling progressed, the amount of the debt ballooned – both because of interest and the additional expenses of living in Petersburg, where his social position, such as it was, led him to live in a style he could not afford.

The only thing he knew how to do to raise money was to write. Tsar Nicholas readily gave him permission to use the state archives to prepare a history of Peter the Great – which he started but never completed. Another possibility was to publish a newspaper or journal. However, Pushkin was a writer – not an editor or a businessman.

In March 1833 the first complete book edition of *Eugene Onegin* appeared. It had taken over seven years from the time he started work on it until its publication in complete form. Because all the chapters had earlier appeared separately, the book edition made little impact on either his readers or his pocketbook. The bookseller Smirdin doubled as publisher and took responsibility for selling the 2,400 copies, for which Pushkin received 12,000 rubles.



*Eugene Onegin*, Petersburg, 1833, first edition of the complete work

On one level, *Onegin* is the story of a young aristocrat who meets a poet, Lensky. They meet two sisters – the older of whom, Tatjana, falls in love with Onegin, and the younger of whom, Olga, loves Lensky. Onegin makes a pass at Olga. Lensky challenges Onegin to a duel and is killed. Onegin leaves the country and years later returns to St. Petersburg, where he meets Tatjana again, who has married in the meantime. This time Onegin falls in love with Tatjana – but is rejected.

On another level, the book is a complex literary conversation between Pushkin and other great European and Russian authors. As Binyon summarizes, “it can almost be read as literary history, an account of the evolution of literary taste in Russia over the preceding few decades, presented synchronically, with each of the three main characters personifying a stage in this evolution.”<sup>64</sup>

To one who can only touch the surface of the rhythms and intonations of the Russian language, *Onegin* is a subtle mix of simplicity, elegance and beauty that confounds description. Elaine Feinstein, one of Pushkin's biographers, may have come close when she described the work as "a fizzing brilliance of seemingly effortless improvisation contained in eight chapters of intricately rhymed fourteen-line stanzas which flow as freely and openly as colloquial prose."<sup>65</sup> The work is written about a time long ago, a place far away, and a society and culture strikingly different from our own; and yet it comes alive in a way that no English or American writing of that period does – at least for this reader. We recognize ourselves in it – the pleasures and sadness which we share with his characters – the aspects of life which transcend place and time.

Pushkin's historical researches never culminated in a history of Peter the Great. But they did lead Pushkin to undertake a book about the peasant revolt of 1773-74, which took place in southeast Russia. The leader of the revolt was a Cossack named Pugachev, who sought to rally support by claiming to be Peter III – husband of Catherine II – who had actually been assassinated in 1762. During early 1833, Pushkin worked his way through thousands of pages in the government's archives. He spent much of the fall in and around Kazan, visiting the places where Pugachev had raised his forces. He interviewed people who had met Pugachev and witnessed the fighting. One was an 83-year old lady who told about Pugachev's capture of a particular fort:

[The fort's commander] resisted desperately. At last the rebels broke into the smoking ruins. The commanders were seized. Bilov was beheaded. Elagin, a stout man, was skinned; the villains extracted his fat, and smeared their wounds with it. His wife was hacked to pieces.... Major Velovsky's widow... was strangled. All the officers were hanged.

Pushkin worked her story into his narrative.<sup>66</sup>

After this trip, Pushkin retired again to Boldino, where he finished his draft of *Pugachev* as well as a separate work – *The Captain's Daughter* – a novel set in the time of Pugachev. He also wrote "The Bronze Horseman" – a long poem of imaginative power suggested by the monumental Falconet statue of Peter the Great (completed in 1782) which stands opposite the old Senate building, next to the Neva River. "The Bronze Horseman" is based loosely on a flood which had occurred in St. Petersburg in November 1824.



Pushkin submitted the poem to his personal censor, Tsar Nicholas, who read it – striking out several lines and questioning others. Because Pushkin did not want to tinker with this magnificent work, it did not appear in print during his lifetime. Its first book appearance was at the end of his first collected writings, compiled by his friends a few years after his death.

During this period, Pushkin also wrote his short story, “The Queen of Spades” – today known to Western audiences via Tchaikovsky’s opera. It appeared in a periodical in March 1834.

On his way back to St. Petersburg, Alexander spent a few days in Moscow. Caxtonians will be pleased to know that Pushkin loved fine books. During his stopover, he visited a great book collector, a man named Norov, who had a fine library. Norov was selling off some of his rarest items; and Pushkin managed to buy from him, for 200 rubles, a copy of Radishchev’s *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow* (1790) – an attack on the evils of serfdom and corruption – and one of the rarest and most important books in Russian literature. For writing it, Radishchev had been tried and condemned to death; his sentence was then commuted, and he was exiled to Siberia. Pushkin’s fine copy, bound in red morocco, was the one that had been used to indict Radishchev, and contained notes in pencil made by the Empress, Catherine II.

Despite his literary productivity, Pushkin’s finances grew steadily worse. The Tsar advanced 20,000 rubles to help pay for the printing of the *History of the Pugachev Rebellion*, which appeared in November 1834, at 20 rubles a copy. It is one of the handsomest of his books. Tsar Nicholas was given a special presentation copy. But the public reception was tepid and the book sold badly, leaving Pushkin with 1,775 copies of the 3,000 printed sheets unsold. In the end, he received perhaps 16,000 rubles – less than the debt he owed to the Tsar for the advance.<sup>67</sup>

Another idea was to edit and publish a literary periodical – stories, poems, articles. The first number of *Contemporary* appeared in April 1836, and three other numbers followed that year. The December 1836 issue contained Pushkin’s novel of the Pugachev rebellion – “The Captain’s Daughter.” But there were less than 800 subscribers, and the enterprise served only to drive Pushkin deeper into debt. A further imperial loan delayed but did not avert the impending crisis.<sup>68</sup>



A collection of Pushkin's books in first editions.

In early 1837, hoping to generate money, Pushkin agreed to the issuance of a two-volume edition of his prose. The first volume would consist of the first book appearance of “The Captain’s Daughter,” and the latter would include his earlier writings. The collection was to come out in May 1837, but by that time Pushkin was dead. His trustees, contemplating issuance of a fuller “collected works,” bought up and destroyed all copies of that first volume. Or rather, all but one: a single copy is known to have survived.<sup>69</sup>

The minister to Russia from the Netherlands was a strange character named Baron Louis van Heeckeren, who belonged to one of Holland’s old aristocratic families. He had a young friend named Baron Georges D’Anthes, who had come to Russia from France and joined the Chevalier Guards, which served as bodyguards for the imperial family. D’Anthes had a complicated relationship to Heeckeren. The younger man was sometimes described as a protégé. Some believed both to be homosexuals. If so, the fact did not prevent D’Anthes from pursuing the ladies. At some point Heeckeren adopted D’Anthes and attempted to change his name to “Heeckeren” under Dutch law.

By the fall of 1835, D’Anthes had met and become enamored of Pushkin’s wife, Natalya. He pursued her and flirted with her at parties. She flirted

back, but there is no evidence that she allowed his advances to be successful. D'Anthes told his friends he loved her, and that she had become an "obsession." During at least some of this period of harassment on the part of D'Anthes, Natalya was in the last stages of pregnancy.<sup>70</sup>

D'Anthes was playing with fire. In early 1836 Pushkin had "issued two challenges to duels and came close to a third."<sup>71</sup> Whatever the reason, D'Anthes stayed away from Natalya for several months in 1836. But by the fall he was back at it – approaching her at parties, dancing with her, sending her presents and notes. Binyon calls it a "classic case of the 'stalker' syndrome." D'Anthes even attempted to provide cover for his approaches by letting it be known that he was courting Natalya's unmarried sister, Ekaterina. At one point, D'Anthes sent a letter to Natalya pleading with her to leave Pushkin. "She rejected the proposal" and made it clear that "he would no longer be a welcome visitor...."<sup>72</sup>

On November 4, 1836, an anonymous letter was delivered to several of Pushkin's friends nominating Pushkin "coadjutor to the Grand Master of the Order of Cuckolds..." Pushkin assumed that D'Anthes – or possibly Heeckeren – was responsible, and challenged D'Anthes to a duel. It is now believed that the authors of the letter were probably unrelated pranksters. After complicated negotiations, D'Anthes sought to avoid the challenge by proposing to Natalya's sister, Ekaterina. Why this ploy should have been thought by anyone an adequate response is not clear. D'Anthes may have coupled the proposal with a rumor that he had impregnated Ekaterina and wished to marry her to protect her "virtue."<sup>73</sup> There is some reason to believe it was not just a rumor.<sup>74</sup> Pushkin would surely not wish to stand in the way of such a noble objective.

Here is an abbreviated account of what followed: Heeckeren announced the engagement of his "son" D'Anthes to Ekaterina. Pushkin then withdrew the challenge. Stiff notes were exchanged. The engagement was announced. Tsar Nicholas heard about the trouble, summoned Pushkin, and extracted a promise that he would not engage "again" in a duel. The marriage between D'Anthes and Pushkin's sister-in-law took place January 10, 1837. Pushkin did not attend.

Following the marriage, D'Anthes and his new bride sought to call on the Pushkins but were not received. This did not prevent D'Anthes from approaching – "stalking" – Natalya at social events. He succeeded in dancing and flirting with her. She disclosed all this to Pushkin, and they were recon-

ciled. But Pushkin's animosity toward D'Anthes was not diminished. On January 25, 1837, ignoring his promise to the Tsar, Pushkin sent an abusive letter to the senior Heeckeren, accusing the "son" of "cowardice and servility" and the "father" of playing the "pimp for your son."<sup>75</sup>

Negotiations followed. Pushkin and D'Anthes agreed on a time and a concealed place north of Petersburg. They met at 5 o'clock in the afternoon on January 27th. Pushkin rushed forward, almost certainly intending to kill D'Anthes. D'Anthes fired first, his shot striking Pushkin in the abdomen. (One Pushkin biographer, Feinstein, thinks D'Anthes intended to hit Pushkin in the leg rather than kill him, but he was startled by Pushkin's rush forward.<sup>76</sup>) Raising himself, Pushkin fired – hitting D'Anthes in the arm. Pushkin's wound was fatal. He was rushed in great pain to his apartment. Seeing him wounded Natalya collapsed. Doctors were called but could do little but reduce the pain with opium. Tsar Nicholas, upon being told, wrote Pushkin a handwritten note which does not survive. Those who saw it recalled something like this: "If God ordains that we are not to meet again in this world, then accept my forgiveness and my advice to die in a Christian manner and take communion, and do not worry about your wife and children. They will be my children and I will take them in my care."<sup>77</sup>



Pushkin's death in a duel, 1837, killed by D'Anthes.

On Thursday, January 29, after great suffering, Pushkin died. The news instantly passed through St. Petersburg. On the Tsar's orders, his study was sealed. From Saturday morning to Sunday evening, perhaps ten thousand visitors streamed through the apartment to pay respects. During the days immediately following his death, some 40,000 rubles' worth of his books were sold in Petersburg.<sup>78</sup> The breadth and depth of public reaction to Pushkin's death frightened the authorities, who decided to hold his funeral

service in a small church. Despite the presence of gendarmes, the square opposite the church was crowded with people. One spectator wrote, “the veneration for the memory of the poet in the immense crowds of people present at his funeral service... was so great, that the front of his frock-coat was reduced to ribbons, and he lay there almost in his jacket alone; his side-whiskers and hair were carefully trimmed by his female admirers.”<sup>79</sup> Afterward, his body was taken to the family estate at Mikhailovskoe, where he was buried.

D’Anthes was sentenced to hang and then deported. Heeckeren and his “daughter-in-law” Ekaterina were escorted to the frontier and released.

Much of Pushkin’s greatest work did not see the light of day until after his death. “The Stone Guest,” for example – one of the plays he wrote during the Boldino autumn of 1830 – was revised in 1836 but not published until 1839, when it appeared in a collection of works by 100 Russian authors, edited by Alexander Smirdin. It is a 500-line work in four acts. Mirsky, in his magisterial *History of Russian Literature*, described it as one of Pushkin’s greatest works:<sup>80</sup>

[I]t shares with “The Bronze Horseman” the right to be regarded as Pushkin’s masterpiece. ... [I]t even outdoes “The Horseman” in the limitless psychological and poetical suggestiveness of its severely unornamented verse. It is the story of Don Juan’s last love affair – with the widow of the man he had murdered – and of his tragic end. It is Pushkin’s highest achievement on the subject of Nemesis – his greatest subject. For the flexibility of the blank verse..., for the infinitely subtle marriage of colloquial with metrical rhythm, for the boundless pregnancy of the dialogue, for the subtly distilled atmosphere of the south – and of atonement – it has no equal.

Pushkin’s friends arranged for the publication of his *Collected Works*, the first eight volumes of which appeared in 1838. There were 13,000 sets. The regular edition cost 25 rubles; a special edition on vellum cost 40. But the most important part of the collection was the three supplementary volumes – those “containing the unpublished work” – which appeared later, in 1841. Some of the works in these last three volumes had previously appeared in journals; but when I bought the full 11-volume set at an obscure American auction a few years ago, I had no idea that the last three volumes were in fact the first book appearance of some of his greatest writing – including,

for example, “The Bronze Horseman.” As the old Russian proverb goes, it is better to be lucky than smart.

The proceeds from the sale of the *Collected Works* went to benefit Pushkin’s widow and four children. Tsar Nicholas paid off all debts of Pushkin’s estate and appointed Pushkin’s sons as pages in his Court, with an allowance. He also continued to take an interest in Pushkin’s widow, whom he saw privately from time to time (giving rise to unpleasant rumors). He gave her money and may have helped arrange her marriage a few years later to an officer in the guards; and he sent her a valuable diamond necklace as a wedding present.<sup>81</sup>

Gogol, who knew Pushkin, wrote about him:

All that brought joy to my life, all that gave me the greatest pleasure, vanished with him... I did not write a single line without imagining him standing before me. What would he say of it? What would he notice? What would make him laugh?<sup>82</sup>

On June 5, 1880, a statue in Pushkin’s honor was unveiled in Moscow. During a ceremony that lasted three days, Pushkin’s memory was praised by Turgenev and Dostoevsky, whose speech on June 8 caused a sensation. (Dostoevsky published it in his own literary periodical, *Diary of a Writer*, in August 1880.) A *Jubilee Album* of articles and pictures celebrating the Pushkin centennial appeared May 26, 1899.



Pushkin’s library in the Pushkin Museum, Petersburg

Today, the visitor to Petersburg may visit the Pushkin Museum, located in the last Petersburg apartment where he lived – and the place where he died. His study, containing much of his library, remains as he left it. On his writing table is an ivory letter opener given him by his sister and a treasured ink-stand.

Visitors may also visit The Institute of Russian Literature – known as “Pushkin House.” It is a literary museum, created on the 100th anniversary of his birth as a monument to him, and houses the books, manuscripts, furniture and artifacts, pictures, and memorabilia of most of Russia’s great writers. The Institute’s collections survived the Revolution, World War I, and the siege of “Leningrad” during World War II, when the most valuable materials were moved to the interior of the country.

My wife and I were given a special tour of Pushkin House in 2006 and were shown his books and working notebooks. I was permitted to hold the volume of English poetry Pushkin had been handling just before he left for the duel with D’Anthes,<sup>83</sup> as well as pages of his manuscript draft of *Eugene Onegin*, with his scribbled notes and pictures in the margins.

It was like holding stardust.

\* \* \*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Feinstein, 29.

<sup>3</sup> For basic biographical information about Pushkin and his family, I rely on T. J. Binyon, *Pushkin* (London, 2002), and Elaine Feinstein, *Pushkin, A Biography* (Hopewell 1998). The best bibliography available to me is Smirnov-Sokolsky, *Stories of Publications of Pushkin During His Lifetime* (Moscow, 1962). A well-written introduction to Russian literature of the period is Count D.S. Mirsky’s, *A History of Russian Literature from the Earliest Times to the Death of Dostoevsky* (1881). (Vintage ed., 1958.) For the political environment prior to 1825, one may read with pleasure Henri Troyat’s *Alexander of Russia*, (N.Y., 1982). There are many published collections of Pushkin’s poetry. I have used the standard *Collected Works*, in two volumes, published in Moscow in 1978.

<sup>4</sup> Binyon, 9-10.

<sup>5</sup> Feinstein, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Binyon, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Feinstein, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Binyon, 13.

- <sup>9</sup> *Id.*, 19.
- <sup>10</sup> Quoted in Binyon, 24.
- <sup>11</sup> Feinstein, 26.
- <sup>12</sup> *Id.*, 27.
- <sup>13</sup> *Id.*, 34.
- <sup>14</sup> *Id.*, 34.
- <sup>15</sup> *Id.*, 61.
- <sup>16</sup> *Id.*, 38.
- <sup>17</sup> *Id.*
- <sup>18</sup> Quoted in Feinstein, p. 35.
- <sup>19</sup> *Id.*, 41.
- <sup>20</sup> Binyon, 44.
- <sup>21</sup> Quoted in Binyon, 68.
- <sup>22</sup> Binyon, 89.
- <sup>23</sup> *Id.*, 90.
- <sup>24</sup> *Id.*, 52
- <sup>25</sup> Troyat, *Alexander*, 252.
- <sup>26</sup> Binyon, 151.
- <sup>27</sup> *Id.*, 129
- <sup>28</sup> *Id.*, 136.
- <sup>29</sup> *Id.*, 137.
- <sup>30</sup> *Id.*, 138.
- <sup>31</sup> *Collected Works*, Vol. I, 440 et seq.
- <sup>32</sup> Feinstein, 95, 98.
- <sup>33</sup> *Id.*, 170.
- <sup>34</sup> *Id.*, 174.
- <sup>35</sup> *Id.*, 183.
- <sup>36</sup> *Id.*, 101.
- <sup>37</sup> Binyon, 197.
- <sup>38</sup> *Id.*, 207.



- <sup>39</sup> *Id.*, 230.
- <sup>40</sup> *Id.*, 267.
- <sup>41</sup> *Id.*, p. 252.
- <sup>42</sup> Smirnov-Sokolsky, 309.
- <sup>43</sup> Feinstein, 122.
- <sup>44</sup> Binyon, 233.
- <sup>45</sup> *Id.*, 234.
- <sup>46</sup> *Id.*, 225-226.
- <sup>47</sup> *Id.*, 242.
- <sup>48</sup> *Id.*, 253.
- <sup>49</sup> *Id.*, 247.
- <sup>50</sup> *Id.*, 253.
- <sup>51</sup> *Id.*, 281-83; *compare* Feinstein, p. 171.
- <sup>52</sup> *Id.*, 296.
- <sup>53</sup> Feinstein, 172.
- <sup>54</sup> Binyon, 304.
- <sup>55</sup> *Id.*, 305, 484.
- <sup>56</sup> Feinstein, 177.
- <sup>57</sup> Binyon, 323.
- <sup>58</sup> *Id.*, 331
- <sup>59</sup> *Id.*, 330.
- <sup>60</sup> *Id.*, 351.
- <sup>61</sup> *Id.*, 285, 337.
- <sup>62</sup> *Id.*, 384-385.
- <sup>63</sup> *Id.*, 358
- <sup>64</sup> *Id.*, 406.
- <sup>65</sup> Feinstein, 102.
- <sup>66</sup> Binyon, 420.
- <sup>67</sup> *Id.*, 478-79.
- <sup>68</sup> *Id.*, 492, 500, 596.

- <sup>69</sup> *Id.*, 595.
- <sup>70</sup> *Id.*, 522, 524.
- <sup>71</sup> *Id.*, 526.
- <sup>72</sup> *Id.*, 548, 556.
- <sup>73</sup> *Id.* 576.
- <sup>74</sup> Feinstein, 253-55.
- <sup>75</sup> *Id.*, 612.
- <sup>76</sup> *Id.*, 271.
- <sup>77</sup> Binyon, 627.
- <sup>78</sup> *Id.*, 632.
- <sup>79</sup> *Id.*, 634.
- <sup>80</sup> *Id.*, 99
- <sup>81</sup> Binyon, 651.
- <sup>82</sup> Quoted in Feinstein, 276.
- <sup>83</sup> Binyon, 620
- <sup>84</sup> *Id.*, 228