

SERGEI DAVYDOV

Pushkin's Merry Undertaking and "The Coffinmaker"

Tak!—ves' ia ne umru . . .¹
Derzhavin, "Pamiatnik"Ia skoro ves' umru . . .²
Pushkin, "André Chénier"

The autumn of 1830, which Pushkin spent in Boldino, was the most fruitful season in his creative life. After his return to Moscow he reported to Pletnev, "In Boldino I wrote as I have not written for a long time," and presented his friend with a lengthy catalogue of his newest accomplishments. It included the last two chapters of *Evgenii Onegin*, "The Little House in Kolomna," the four "Little Tragedies," and some thirty poems. The list was followed by Pushkin's "secret confession": "That is still not all. . . . I have written five prose tales which are making Baratynskii hee-haw and kick about ("ot kotorykh Baratynskii rzhet i b'etsia")—and which we shall also publish *Anonyme*."³

But when *The Tales of the Late I. P. Belkin* appeared in print, the critics did not laugh. Having missed the novelty and wit of Pushkin's prose, they condemned the *Tales* as simpleminded, devoid of content, and artistically pointless.⁴ Indeed, on the level of plot Pushkin's *Tales* could satisfy perhaps only the esthetic needs of Fonvizin's Mitrofanushka Prostakov who, as the epigraph informs us, "from his childhood on . . . has been fond of stories."⁵ Ironically, by stressing the unpretentious nature of his *Tales*—Pushkin called them "skazki" and "contes à dormir debout"⁶—the author himself perhaps contributed to their low esteem among critics. Only in the twentieth century did Pushkinists begin to uncover layer after layer of wit and intelligence hidden under the surface of Pushkin's *Tales*. By now there is no doubt that these experimental tales are "the first stories of permanent artistic value in the Russian language."⁷

While the four longer *Tales of the Late I. P. Belkin* ("The Shot," "The Blizzard," "The Stationmaster," and "The Lady Peasant") received ample critical

1. "Thus! Not all of me shall die. . . ."

2. "Soon all of me shall die. . . ."

3. A letter to Petr Pletnev, December 9, 1830. English translations are given according to Thomas J. Shaw, tr. and ed., *The Letters of Alexander Pushkin*, 2nd ed. (hereafter *Letters*) (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), p. 446.

4. Bulgarin and Belinskii were two among many who denied the *Tales* artistic value. See Fadei Bulgarin, *Severnaia pchela*, nos. 255, 286, and 288; and Vissarion Belinskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1953–59), 1:139–40.

5. Trans. by T. Keane in *The Captain's Daughter and Other Great Stories* (New York: Random House, 1936), p. 140. All subsequent citations from this tale are to this edition with page numbers given in parentheses.

6. See *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 17 vols. in 21 (Moscow, 1937–59) (hereafter *PSS*), 14:209; *PSS* 15:1.

7. Vladimir Nabokov, trans., *Eugene Onegin* by Aleksandr Pushkin, 4 vols. (Princeton University Press, 1975), 3:180.

attention, "The Coffinmaker" was given comparatively short shrift. This brief tale was often treated as a mere anecdote, providing comic relief half-way through the five *Tales of Belkin*.⁸ In a recent article entitled "Pushkin's Saturnine Cupid: The Poetics of Parody in *The Tales of Belkin*," David Bethea and I attempted to reverse the situation by singling out "The Coffinmaker" and offering this tale as a "master key to various levels of discourse, a key that generates a poetics of parody and a new understanding of the unity of the *Tales*."⁹ In the present study I shall focus exclusively on "The Coffinmaker" in order to elaborate and substantiate further a number of claims made in the above-mentioned article, as well as to provide new evidence in support of the suggested link between the literal and the literary coffinmaker, between Adrian Prokhorov and the author of the *Tales*. This study is also an attempt to explore the multifocal orientation of Pushkin's semantics, the peculiar ability of Pushkin's word to reflect several referents at once, and to refract elements of literary as well as extraliterary *byt*—including the poet's own biography—into his art. By tracing some of Pushkin's thoughts and associations concealed behind the signal-words, names, dates, and emblems in "The Coffinmaker," I hope to add a few new observations about the "polygenetic" origin of this tale and its sepulchral theme as well as to account for some of its "private humor" (the Arzamas connection) which made Pushkin's friends "hee-haw and kick about." I shall also discuss the role played in this cryptic tale by the poet Derzhavin.

"The Coffinmaker" was the first of the five *Tales of the Late I. P. Belkin* written during the Boldino Autumn of 1830. The tale became the centerpiece, symmetrically framed by the other four tales. On the last manuscript page of this sepulchral tale we find a befitting phrase, "A vot to budet, chto i nas ne budet" (And what will be: we won't be), which Pushkin had initially planned to use as the epigraph for the *Tales* of the "late Belkin."¹⁰ This grim dictum was an aphorism of the Sviatogorsk abbot Iona, Pushkin's guardian during the poet's exile to Mikhailovskoe (1824–26), while the Sviatogorsk monastery was the burial site of the Hannibal family (the poet had his mother buried there in 1836 and

8. Nikolai Lerner (1908) calls it *shutka* (a joke) in *Proza Pushkina* (Petrograd, 1923), p. 33, and so does Vasilii Gippius in *Literaturnyi kritik*, 2 (1937): 30; A. S. Iskoz (Dolinin) (1910) calls it a *milaiia shutka* (a good-hearted joke) in S. A. Vengerov, ed., *Pushkin* (St. Petersburg, 1907–11), 4:193; Boris Eikhenbaum calls the tale *malen'kii anekdot* (a little anecdote) in "Boldinskii pobasenki Pushkina," *Zhizn' iskusstva* (1919), nos. 316–17 and 318; Leonid Grossman (1923) calls "The Coffinmaker" a *skazochka* (a little fairy tale) bordering on "anecdote" in "Iskusstvo anekdota u Pushkina," *Pushkin*, vol. 1 (Moscow, 1928), p. 64; and recently Richard Gregg characterized this tale as a "ghoulish little *entr'acte*" in his article "A Scapegoat for All Seasons: The Unity and the Shape of *The Tales of Belkin*," *Slavic Review*, 30, no. 4 (1971): 760. The most extensive treatment of "The Coffinmaker" is S. G. Bocharov's study "O smysle 'Grobovshchika' (K probleme interpretatsii proizvedeniia)," *Kontekst*, 1973: *Literaturno-teoreticheskie issledovaniia* (Moscow, 1974), pp. 196–230. Dmitrii P. Iakubovich (1925) and N. Ia. Berkovskii (1962) suggested several likely subtexts for Pushkin's "Coffinmaker." Iakubovich traces certain aspects of Pushkin's story to Shakespeare and Walter Scott in his article "Reministsentsii iz Val'ter Skotta v 'Povestiakh Belkina,'" *Pushkin i ego sovremenniki*, 37 (1928): 111–18; and Berkovskii has found the prototype of Adrian Prokhorov in the cynical Athenian undertaker mentioned by Montaigne and Rousseau. See his study "O 'Povestiakh Belkina,'" *Stat'i o literature* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1962), pp. 310–11.

9. David Bethea and Sergei Davydov, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 96 (1981): 8–21.

10. PSS 8/2: 625.

at the same time bought a place for himself next to her, where he was buried a year later).

In "The Coffinmaker" Pushkin announced the sepulchral theme in a double key, lofty and low. The elegiac epigraph from Derzhavin's "Vodopad" (The Waterfall), "Ne zrim li kazhdyi den' grobov, / Sedin driakhleishchei vselennoi?"¹¹ opens a magnificent cosmic vision, which is followed by a close view of the real coffins that fill the coffinmaker's kitchen and parlor. The crude "translation" from poetry to prose, reducing Derzhavin's lofty "coffins" to a lowly merchandise, is a grotesque materialization of a metaphor. The deflation of poetic canon was one of the poet's main devices as he was making the transition to prose. The extravagant sign at the entrance of the coffinmaker's shop deflates another highly charged poetic image:

Over the gate was placed a sign representing a plump *Cupid* with an *inverted torch* in his hand and bearing this inscription: "Plain and colored coffins sold and upholstered here; *coffins also let out on hire, and old ones repaired.*"¹²

There is, indeed, something paradoxical about the inscription and the "heraldic" gimmick simulating a realistic item of *byt*. The "plump Cupid" with a torch is suited more for an album of *demoiselles de compagnie* than for the shop of the "sullen" coffinmaker.¹³ The inscription accompanying the Cupid is no less suspicious. Both have elicited many *sics!* from commentators who doubted the propriety of the Cupid above an undertaker's shop or the "hiring and repairing" of old coffins.

In the article "Pushkin's Saturnine Cupid," we explained the paradox as being motivated by the overall poetic design of the *Tales*: the Cupid and coffins, standing for romance and death, were seen as an emblem uniting the remaining tales on the level of plot. In the four longer *Tales of Belkin*, the romance of "true hearts" was threatened by some third agent or force. In all four tales the third force was defeated, while love triumphed. In "The Shot," "The Blizzard," and "The Stationmaster," Pushkin literally united the "true hearts" (the Countess and the Count, Mar'ia and Burmin, Dunia and Minskii) over the grave of the third protagonist, who threatened their romance (Sil'vio, Vladimir, Vyrin). In the last tale, "Lady Peasant," where no corpses appear—for this was the happy ending to the *Tales*—Pushkin did so figuratively: he wedded Vladimir and Liza off-stage over the "grave" of the ancient parental feud. In all the tales—with the exception of "The Coffinmaker"—Pushkin proved himself to be an equally skillful "matchmaker" and "gravedigger." In the asymmetrical tale "The Coffinmaker," where neither romance nor death occur, it is the sign combining the Cupid with coffins that emblematically reflects the thematic unity of the *Tales*.

Without diminishing the validity of our metaphoric, literary reading of the sign, I would like to show that Pushkin's tale is also accurate and consistent on

11. "Are coffins not beheld each day, / the gray hairs of an aging universe?"

12. Keane, *The Captain's Daughter*, p. 178. Emphases are mine throughout.

13. "Tut nepremenno vy naidete / *Dva serdisa, fakel, i tsvetki*; / Tut verno kliatvy vy prochtete / 'V liubvi do grobovoi doski'" (Here you are sure to find / two hearts, a torch, and flowerets; / here you will read no doubt the vows of love / "Unto the tomb slab"), *Evgenii Onegin*, 4:29, trans. by Vladimir Nabokov. My emphasis.

the literal level of the *byt*. As the variants to the tale attest, the coffinmaker's signboard initially depicted a "handsome coffin."¹⁴ Its subsequent replacement by the "plump Cupid" with an "inverted torch" as well as the paradoxical inscription are not only motivated by the poetic design of the *Tales* but also seem to be in perfect agreement with the tradition of sepulchral lore.

Eros/Cupid with a torch in his hand is a classical emblem which could have two meanings, depending on the position of the torch in Cupid's hand. A burning torch held aloft stood for earthly love and was a wedding symbol, whereas the less common extinguished and inverted torch pointed to death and promised life after death. As a complementary pair, both figures are commonly found on Hellenic sarcophagi and were often reproduced by eighteenth-century painters and poets.¹⁵ A number of Cupids with inverted torches can be found, for example, among the engravings which Derzhavin commissioned for the edition of his complete works. These Cupids were meant as vignettes for his numerous sepulchral poems (illustrations 1 and 2).¹⁶ Pushkin himself used this emblem in his invocation of a dead poet: "S potukhshim *fakelom*, s nedvizhnymi *krylami* / K vam Ozerova dukh vzyvaet: drugi! mest'!"¹⁷ Addressing "death," Pushkin's friend Del'vig used the image of two torches in one of his last poems, "Smert', dushi uspokoen'e!": "Dnem li, noch'iu li zaduesh' / Brennyi *plamennik* ty moi / I v obmen ego daruesh' / Mne tvoi *svetoch* nezemnoi?"¹⁸ In nineteenth-century Russia inverted torches were also found on ornate grave stones. The obelisk erected in 1841 over Pushkin's grave in Sviatogorsk monastery, for example, is decorated with two crossed inverted torches (illustration 3).¹⁹ More prosaic torches are of course found in Prokhorov's cupboard, where they share space with "mourning hats and cloaks" and other funeral paraphernalia. Thus the Cupid with the inverted torch has, in the context of Russian funeral *byt*, a legitimate place over the coffinmaker's shop.

In the article "Pushkin's Saturnine Cupid" we argued that the inscription over the coffinmaker's shop about "hiring and repairing of old coffins," although meaningless on a literal level, makes perfect sense on the literary level as a metaphor for Pushkin's notion of parody. By borrowing for his *Tales of the Late Belkin* old literary plots (sentimental, romantic, and moralistic), Pushkin, the literary coffinmaker, actually repaired them in a similar way as the literal coffinmaker allegedly repaired his old coffins. Ironically, Prokhorov's coffins are referred to as "proizvedeniia" (works) in the tale. Elaborating on this metaphorical parallel between the artisan's and artist's *métiers* and their products, we have suggested that *The Tales of the Late Belkin* can be seen as coffins/parodies in which Pushkin buries a fading literary tradition, its authors, and its stock heroes.

14. PSS 8/2: 625.

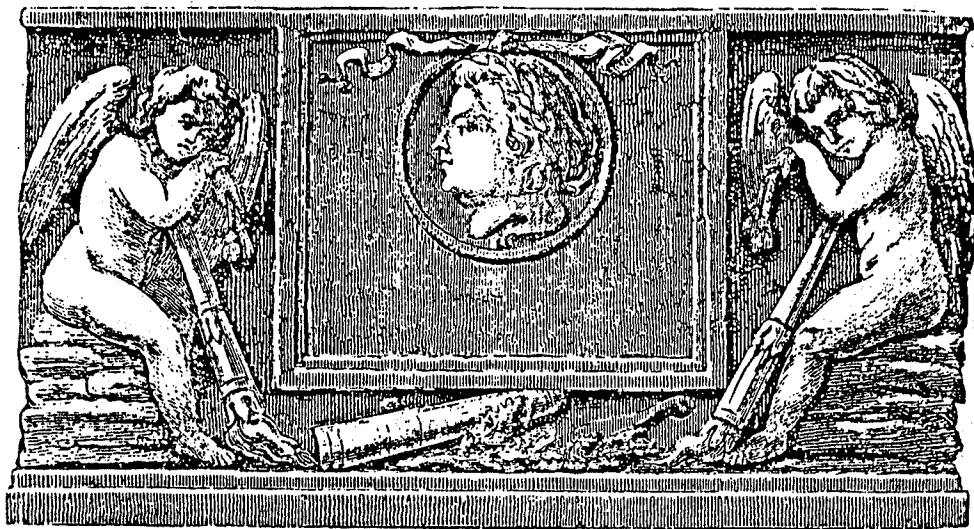
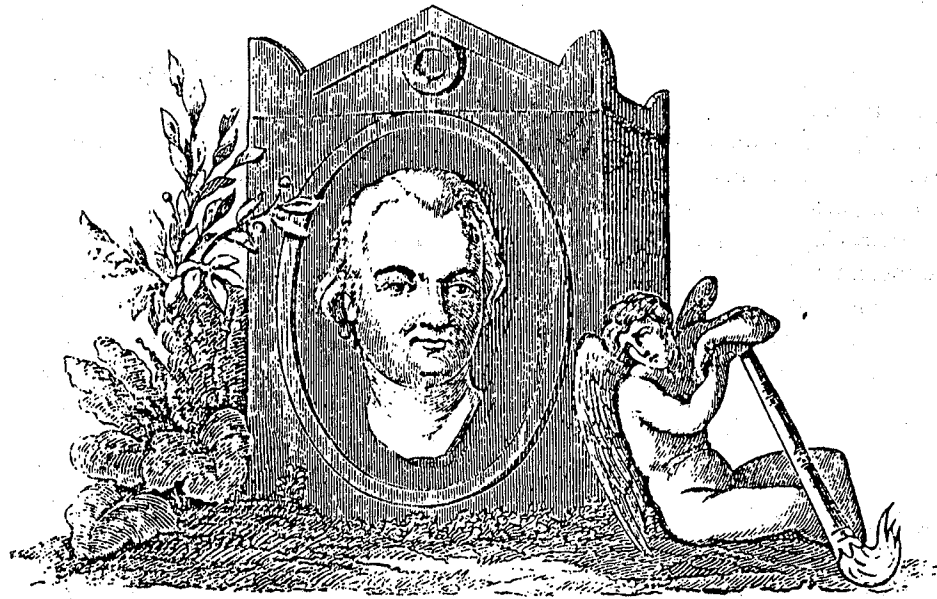
15. Compare A. Pauly and G. Wissowa, *Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, vol. 4, pt. 1 (Stuttgart: Alfred Druckenmüller, 1907), 6/1: 507-509. For illustrations, history and interpretation of this emblem see R. W. Lee, "Van Dyke: Tasso and Antigone," *Studies in Western Art*, 3 (1961), especially pp. 16-18.

16. Some of the vignettes were reproduced in Ia. Grot, ed., *Sochineniia Derzhavina* (9 vols. with illustrations) (St. Petersburg, 1864). See 1:16, 170, 752, 778, and 2:379.

17. "With an extinguished torch, with motionless wings, / Ozerov's spirit summons you: Friends, vengeance! . . ." ("K Zhukovskomu," 1816).

18. "In the daytime or at night will you extinguish / My frail torch / And, in exchange for it, present me / With your unearthly one?"

19. Reproduced from *Muzei-zapovednik A. S. Pushkina* (Moscow, 1982), pp. 198-99.



Illustrations 1 and 2



Illustration 3

Even if taken literally, however, the inscription about "hiring and repairing" of old coffins is not so paradoxical; it can be explained in the more prosaic terms of Russian funeral *byt*. It was a customary practice during the lying in state and the church ceremony to place the coffin with the deceased into an outer, richly decorated coffin. These "outer coffins" could be rented from the church or from the undertaker, and because of the multiple use they had to be repaired. Thus both the Cupid with the inverted torch and the peculiar inscription have a legitimate place over Prokhorov's shop, and the *byt* of Pushkin's story, however amusing, is defensible as being accurate.

V. V. Vinogradov noted that Pushkin's words, while depicting their own literary subject, seem to "squint and wink" in different directions: "Behind word or phrase lurk hidden thoughts, symbolic hints at contemporary life." This "peculiar punning effect" ("svoeobraznaia kalamburnost'") is, according to Vinogradov, the dominant device of Pushkin's poetics.²⁰ A good example of this punning vacillation between literal and literary referents is the coffinmaker's name, Adrian Prokhorov. As Pushkin's letter to Natal'ia Goncharova shows, the name "Adrian" belonged to a real undertaker whose shop was vis-à-vis the Goncharovs on Skariatinskii Lane.²¹ But at the same time the undertaker's name enters into a web of literary relationships with the larger poetic design of the tale. Its role is signaled in the opening paragraph, in which Adrian Prokhorov's name virtually "spills over" the surrounding text and produces an incomplete but tightly knit anagram, linking the coffinmaker's name to his craft:

Последние пожитки гробовщика АДРИАНА ПРОХОРОВА были взвалены на ПОХОРОННЫЕ ДРОГИ, и тощая пара в четвёртый раз потащилась с Басманной на Никитскую, куда гробовщик переселился всем своим домом.²²

An inconspicuous anagram based on a proper name occasionally reveals an intricate semantic and thematic pattern which may develop a secret plot of its own.²³ If we proceed to read the tale with an eye to similar anagrammatic clues, as the opening invites us to do, we may notice, for example, that the coffinmaker Adrian Prokhorov shares his initials with the enigmatic editor of the *Tales*, A. P. This might be dismissed as a pure coincidence were it not for the fact that Pushkin has left additional clues. In the drafts to "The Coffinmaker," Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin endowed Adrian Prokhorov with the "sound" patronymic "Simeonovich," making their initials identical.²⁴ "In a work of art, every name

20. Viktor Vinogradov, "O stile Pushkina," *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, 16-17 (1934): 136.

21. The majority of the topographical references can be found in Nina Volovich, *Pushkinskie mesta Moskvy i Podmoskov'ia* (Moscow, 1979).

22. "The last of the effects of the undertaker, Adrian Prokhorov, were piled upon the hearse, and a couple of sorry-looking jades dragged themselves along for the fourth time from Basmannaia to Nikitskaia, whither the undertaker was removing with all his household" (p. 177).

23. As the drafts to the tale attest, the anagram is clearly intentional; "pokhoronnye drogi" came as a second thought to Pushkin, replacing "drozhki bez resor" (*PSS* 8/2: 625). In the article "The Sound and Theme in the Prose of A. S. Pushkin: A Logo-Semantic Study of Paronomasia," *Slavic and East European Journal*, 27 (1983): 1-18, I have attempted to show that titles and proper names in Pushkin are particularly productive in generating similar logo-semantic images.

24. *PSS* 8/2: 635.

speaks," assures Iurii Tynianov,²⁵ and the coffinmaker's name is certainly no exception.

Nor is it a coincidence that Pushkin had Adrian Prokhorov begin his career as coffinmaker in 1799. On the level of historical *byt*, this was the year when the Emperor Paul I issued the important decree on artisan crafts ("Ustav o tsek-hakh"),²⁶ but it was also the year in which the literary coffinmaker, Pushkin, was born. Each new correspondence of this kind makes it more apparent that a peculiar riddle is at work, the solution to which might explain the nature of the secret bond between the artisan A. P. and the artist A. P., and between their respective *métiers*.²⁷

Pushkin's choice of topography for his tale also seems to refract the "real life" of the artist into the fictional life of the artisan. In the first sentence of the tale we find Adrian Prokhorov moving from Basmannaia to Nikitskaia. Both streets, together with other Moscow localities mentioned in the tale (for instance, Razguliai, Nikitskie Gates, the Church of the Ascension), have close topographical ties to Pushkin's own biography. He was born on Nemetskaia Street (now Baumanskaia), in the immediate vicinity of Adrian Prokhorov's old domicile on Basmannaia (now Ulitsa Karla Marksa). The author of "Opasnyi sosod" ("A Dangerous Neighbor"), Vasilii L'vovich Pushkin, the poet's uncle and the elder of the "Arzamas Society," also lived on Basmannaia, where Pushkin stayed when he was in Moscow.

The coffinmaker's signboard seems to be related in a peculiar way to Pushkin's visit to Moscow in 1830. Depending on the position of the torch in his hand, the Cupid can portend either romance or death. In May 1830 Pushkin arrived in Moscow to arrange his betrothal to Natal'ia Goncharova (May 6) and tried in vain to raise money for Natal'ia's dowry, a condition set by his future mother-in-law. Impecunious and miserable, Pushkin reported to his Arzamasian friend Viazemskii:

Uncle Vasilii L'vovich wept, too, when he learned of my engagement. He is planning to present us some verses on the *wedding*. A few days ago he came within a hair's breadth of *dying* and then within a hair's breadth of coming back to life. God knows what he is living on or for ("Bog znaet chem i zachem on zhivet").²⁸

Ironically, Pushkin's remark did not remain without consequence: on August 20, Vasilii L'vovich died. "Il faut avouer que jamais oncle n'est *mort* plus mal à propos. Voilà mon *mariage* retardé encore de 6 semaines," complained Pushkin, who took upon himself the arrangement and the expenses for his uncle's funeral.²⁹ As a result, Pushkin accumulated new debts, which for the second time postponed his wedding date. In other words, death interfered with romance; the torch aloft in Cupid's hand had been temporarily inverted. Uncertain of the future, Pushkin set off for Boldino where he soon began "The Coffinmaker."

25. Iurii Tynianov, *Arkhaisty i novatory* (Leningrad, 1929), p. 27.

26. Mentioned in A. G. Gukasova, *Boldinskii period v tvorcestve A. S. Pushkina* (Moscow, 1973), p. 176.

27. The identity of the initials and the year 1799 was suggested already in the article by Bethea and Davydov. See n. 7.

28. May 2, 1830, *Letters*, p. 411. My emphasis.

29. Letter to E. M. Khitrovo, August 21, 1830. My emphasis.

Meanwhile, in Moscow, the coffinmaker has moved his shop and his sign from Basmannaia to Nikitskaia Street, at the opposite end of town. Here on Bol'shaia Nikitskaia lived Pushkin's bride Natal'ia. While Pushkin was writing his "Coffinmaker" in Boldino, Moscow and vicinity were afflicted by an epidemic of cholera morbus, a variety of Asiatic cholera. The disease spread fast, and all who could left the city. But Natal'ia and her family stayed on. In a letter from Boldino Pushkin admonishes his bride about staying in Moscow among such unseemly neighbors:

Aren't you ashamed to have remained on the Nikitskaia during the plague? It's all right for your neighbor *Adrian*, who has profitable deals to make. Mais "Natal'ia Ivanovna," mais vous!³⁰

Separated from Natal'ia by fourteen quarantines, not sure whether the wedding would take place at all, Pushkin was awaiting news from Moscow. (Because of the epidemic and necessary detours, Natal'ia's letters arrived late and were postmarked from Arzamas, a provincial town known for its geese and immortalized by the "Arzamas Society.") The drawings on the manuscript of "The Coffinmaker" also attest to the close link between Pushkin's biography and his tale. On the final page (dated September 9), under a picture of a hearse coachman and next to the sentence, "And what will be: we won't be," Pushkin sketched a profile of his fiancée and penned the phrase: "Pis'mo ot Nat'" (a letter from Nat[al'ia]). The same day he wrote to Pletnev:

The cholera morbus is about me. Do you know what kind of a wild beast it is? The first thing you know it will swoop down on Boldino, too, and it will bite us all—the first thing you know I shall set off to Uncle Vasilii's, and then you will be writing my biography.³¹

It seems that in "The Coffinmaker" Pushkin himself undertook the task of writing a part of that biography. The courtship of Natal'ia (torch aloft) and the anxiety over death (torch inverted) give this "fantastic" tale and the extravagant sign their "realistic" underpinning.

During this Boldino autumn, Pushkin found himself actually trapped between two torch-bearing divinities, Cupid and Hymen. An echo of Pushkin's thoughts of matrimony can perhaps be discerned in the episodes connected with weddings. After Adrian's move to Nikitskaia, he is invited by his neighbor Shul'ts to celebrate a silver wedding anniversary. Not far from this spot, across Nikitskie Gates in the Church of the Ascension (both mentioned in the tale), the long-awaited wedding of Pushkin and Natal'ia was to take place (February 18, 1831).³² During the silver wedding celebration, the German artisans propose a toast to

30. November 4, 1830, *Letters*, p. 436. My emphasis. While this real Adrian was making good profits in Moscow during the epidemic, the impecunious Boldino squire was allegedly preaching to his serfs in the church that God had visited the cholera upon them because they had not been paying their quitrent. Reported by P. D. Boborykin in P. E. Shchogolev, *Pushkin i muzhiki* (Moscow, 1928), p. 91.

31. September 9, 1830, *Letters*, p. 429.

32. The biographical clue goes even further: Pushkin not only married in the Church of the Ascension but he also was born on the Ascension day, on May 26, 1799.

their clients, which naturally offends the Russian undertaker. He refuses to raise a toast with the "heathens" (*basurmane*) to the health of his "Orthodox dead" (*pravoslavnye mertvetsy*), and instead invites his clients to a feast at his new place.

The silver wedding is followed by another ceremony—the funeral of Triukhina, whose death the undertaker impatiently awaits and whom he finally, though prematurely, buries that night in his dream. Returning home from the funeral, Adrian notices that someone has entered his gate and wonders: "Ne khodiat li liubovniki k moim duram?"³³ But those whom the coffinmaker mistook for the messengers of the amorous Cupid turn out to be the agents of his sullen counterpart. Summoned by Adrian's invitation, the "Orthodox dead" rise from their graves to celebrate the macabre housewarming in the "yellow house" on Nikitskaia.³⁴

To complete the series of celebrations as well as the charade in which the proper names have played such a decisive part, Pushkin invites his coffinmaker at the end of the tale to yet another feast, the nameday celebration for the district inspector. This off-stage celebration thus elegantly concludes the festive series: silver wedding—funeral—housewarming—nameday.

The artisan and the artist are also connected in a more professional sense. Pushkin, who calls Prokhorov's coffins "proizvedeniia," on occasion referred to his own inspired creation as "merchandise": "Si je n'écris encore que sous l'influence capricieuse de l'inspiration, les vers une fois écrits je ne les regarde plus que comme une marchandise à tant la pièce."³⁵ The rhetorical question, "Mais pourquoi chantais-tu?" the poet answers with truly professional pride: "I have sung as a baker bakes, as a tailor sews . . . as a physician kills—for money, for money, for money. This is what I am like in the nakedness of my cynicism."³⁶ The reduction of Derzhavin's "elegiac coffins" to Prokhorov's lowly merchandise only enhances the paradox between "amateur" and "professional" aspects of creation.³⁷

No matter how episodic these bits of biographical and topographical trivia appear, they are all connected to the themes of romance and death displayed over the undertaker's shop and seem to be part of a larger design in which Prokhorov's life in fiction "squints and winks" in the direction of the real life of Pushkin. It is perhaps only in this peculiar refraction of *Wahrheit* and *Dichtung* that the fantastic Hoffmannesque tale, the extravagant signboard, and the peculiar symbiosis of the artisan and the artist A. P. lend themselves to a partial decoding in terms of Pushkin's own biography and poetics.

It seems, however, that with the nocturnal visit of the "Orthodox dead" ends the *Wahrheit* and begins finally the *Dichtung*:

33. "Have my foolish girls got lovers coming after them?"

34. After his wedding, Pushkin too was to celebrate a housewarming on Arbat No. 53, where he moved with Natal'ia, and thus was once more to become Adrian Prokhorov's immediate neighbor.

35. From a letter to A. I. Kaznacheev (June 1824), *Letters*, p. 158.

36. From a letter to brother Lev (January-February 1824), *Letters*, pp. 149-50.

37. It seems very apropos that Pushkin has chosen as an epigraph for chapter 2 of "The Egyptian Nights," which deal with the "inspired" and "mercenary" aspects of creation. Derzhavin's paradoxical lines: "Ia tsar', ia rab, ia cherv', ia Bog" (I am a tsar, a slave, a worm, a God). For a detailed treatment of the amateur/professional attitudes of Pushkin see Vladislav Khodasevich, "Vdokhnovenie i rukopis'," *O Pushkine* (Berlin, 1937), pp. 142-49.

The room was full of corpses. The moon, shining through the windows, lit up their yellow and blue faces, sunken mouths, dim, half-closed eyes, and protruding noses. Adrian, with horror, recognized in them people that he himself had buried (p. 184).

Even this moonlit scene, however, which belongs entirely to the realm of Gothic lore, is not without a touch of whimsical truth. There was apparently a time when the artist Pushkin used to meddle in the macabre business of the artisan Prokhorov. As is well known, undertaking was the family trade of two famous Pushkins: the "funeral professor and meritorious gravedigger" ("pokhoronnyi professor i zaslužhennyi grobokopatel'") Vasilii L'vovich, who was the elder of the notorious "Arzamas Society," and his nephew, "Sverchok" ("the Cricket"), the poet himself, who became a member of the society in 1817. Though no guild of Russian undertakers lists a firm of that name, the main occupation of this prestigious society (besides eating the Arzamas geese) was the arrangement of funerals and wakes. Like new members in the more respectable "Académie Française," each new member of "Arzamas" had to read an obituary of his deceased predecessor. Unlike the members of the French Academy, however, all Arzamasians were considered immortal; hence the ninth clause of their charter proposed, "for lack of one's own ready corpses, to hire the corpses (*brat' naprokat pokoinikov*) among the charlatans of the 'Academy' and 'Beseda.'"³⁸ The members of these societies, known in history as the "Archaists," were the prime adversaries of "Arzamas." In order to achieve immortality, each Arzamasian had to bury in mock-panegyric the corpse of a writer of his choice, esthetically cleansing himself through this ritual: "May we shed the 'Beseda-filth' as a goose sheds the water! . . . [The goose was an emblem of "Arzamas"] / May we be resurrected. . . ." ³⁹ During these Arzamasian invocations, the "Beseda corpses" rose from their graves, in a manner reminiscent of "The Coffinmaker."

Suddenly subterranean howlings pierce my ears; trembling, I look around. This is the hour of mysterious appearances! Sinister crows and owls, sitting on nearby cypresses, noisily descend toward the gaping graves. Pallid, dejected shadows rise slowly from the graves, nodding their desiccated heads; hand in hand, they come at me. I want to lift my petrified feet and flee, but my path is barred . . . (Dashkov [Chu], p. 94).

Among the favorite figures of speech of the private Arzamasian language we find "Cupid" and "coffins." The literary activity of the "Beseda" members was attributed to their "literary voluptuousness" and "unsuppressible desire to procreate,"⁴⁰ and their offspring naturally were denied immortality. To this purpose the Arzamasians ascribed to the literary works of "Beseda" sepulchral attributes: "Tiazhelye plody polunoshchnykh trudov, / Usopshikh od, poem zabvennye mo-

38. M. S. Borovkova-Maikova, ed., *Arzamas i arzamasskie protokoly* (Leningrad, 1933), p. 84. All subsequent citations are to this edition with page numbers given in parentheses; the emphasis is mine throughout.

39. "Da spadet s nas 'besednaia' pakost', kak s gusia voda! . . . / Da voskresnem . . ." Zhukovskii (Svetlana), 35.

40. "Literaturnoe sladostrastie i nepreoborimaia strast' plodit'sia" (Uvarov [Starushka], pp. 119-20).

gily!" or "No da ne budet voskresen'ia / Usopshei prozy i stikhov."⁴¹ The "Treatise on the Old and the New Style of the Russian Language" by the Admiral Shishkov (known as "Sedoi ded") and his translations from La Harpe were "decomposed" into a "pitiful skeleton of the Treatise . . . and grievous ashes of two articles";⁴² the books of the Count Khvostov (known by his real name) were referred to as coffins:

All bookstores are stocked with assorted coffins of his! Just recently, Arzamasians, I bought one of these coffins for 8 rubles 60 kopecks, and received 40 kopecks change in copper. They incessantly drag him to that graveyard of Beseda corpses, but as soon as they finish mourning him, he rises again, and again chases after death; and look, they drag him again to the grave, again they mourn for him, but these mournings are in vain . . . , 'Kashchei the Immortal' won't be mollified easily (Zhukovskii, p. 107).

Derzhavin, a cofounder and one of the four pillars of "Beseda," died in 1816. The death of the only respectable member of "Beseda" was a crucial event in "Arzamas" history. Derzhavin's funeral was colorfully described by Dashkov. To the accompaniment of Derzhavin's hymns, three chairmen of "Beseda" carried the coffin with the fourth chairman inside to the graveyard. In adumbration of a post-mortem miracle, the unsupported corner levitated:

Suddenly the whole scene became enlivened with a new, radiant light. The leaden coffin opened and, instead of the alleged corpse, an ill-looking apparition rose from it and maliciously guffawed and teased those carrying and surrounding it, sticking out its long tongue at them. Beaming with immortality, the true bard of "Felitsa" was sitting on a cloud. . . . The white Arzamas goose was flying around (p. 201).

With the death of Derzhavin "Beseda" also died, and "Arzamas" was left without adversaries. Anticipating the end of "Arzamas," the "funeral professor and meritorious gravedigger" Vasilii L'vovich Pushkin vows:

What will become of us if Beseda dies? . . . We shall forever mourn for them, we shall be forever entertained by their tragedies, we shall weep and yawn at their comedies, delight in the subtleness of their satires and in the triteness of their madrigals. This is what I wish, and what you, my dearest friends, should incessantly desire for the consolation and honor of Arzamas (p. 13).

By 1830 "Beseda" and Derzhavin were dead, as well as "Arzamas" and its elder, Vasilii L'vovich, who died shortly before Pushkin had begun "The Coffinmaker." The spirit of "Arzamas" persists, however, in Pushkin's letters to his

41. "Heavy fruits of nocturnal labors— / Deceased odes, forgotten graves of epic poems!" or "May there be no resurrection / for their deceased prose and verses" (Pushkin [Sverchok]). "K Zhukovskomu" (To Zhukovskii) (1916) and "Khristos voskres . . ." (Christ has risen) (1816) from Pushkin's letter to his uncle.

42. "Zhalkii skelet Rassuzhdeniia . . . i gorestnyi pepel dvukh statei" (Zhukovskii, p. 104).

Arzamasian friends,⁴³ and it looms large in the pages of "The Coffinmaker." By resurrecting in his tale the Arzamasian art of merry undertaking, the nephew has lived up to his uncle's pledge and at the same time has provided the best proof of the axiom of the Russian Formalists: "When one literary school replaces another, the inheritance passes not from father to son but from uncle to nephew."⁴⁴

If you are no longer among the living, my beloved shade, then give my regards to Derzhavin and embrace Del'vig.

From Pushkin's letter to Pletnev (April 11, 1831)

The Tales of the Late I. P. Belkin were Pushkin's first finished prose work to appear in print, and "The Coffinmaker," written as the first of the five tales, can be seen as Pushkin's official prose debut.⁴⁵ In it the novice prose writer seems to retrace for a moment his very first poetic steps at the Lyceum and in "Arzamas," returning to his first poetic themes, tropes, and genres as well as to his poetic mentors. As Pushkin makes his move from poetry to "stern prose" in "The Coffinmaker," he resurrects and realizes the old metaphor of "death" as a "housewarming" which was established in his earliest poetry.⁴⁶ The invocation of the Orthodox dead and the macabre housewarming at the coffinmaker's "yellow house" echo in many ways the "shades from beyond the grave" which so cheerfully and abundantly inhabited Pushkin's juvenile burlesques, for instance "Gorodok" ("The Little Town") or "Ten' Fonvizina" ("Fonvizin's Shade").⁴⁷ In

43. See, for instance, the letter to Viazemskii of August 1831: "On August 20, the anniversary of the death of Vasilii L'vovich, the local Arzamasians had a funeral banquet in memory of our club elder, of cheesecakes [V. L.'s Arzamasian nickname was "Vortrushka" (Cheesecake)], into each of which was thrust a laurel leaf. Svetlana [Zhukovskii] pronounced the funeral oration, in which with especial feeling she recalled the ceremony of his initiation into the Arzamas." *Letters*, p. 525.

44. Viktor Shklovskii, "Literatura vne siuzheta." *O teorii prozy* (Moscow, 1929), p. 227.

45. *Arap Petra Velikogo*, of which two chapters appeared in print in 1829, remained unfinished.

46. "Kogda zh poidu na novosel'e / (Zasnut' ved' obshchii vsem udel)" (When I will go to the housewarming / [To die is, after all, a common lot]) ("K N. G. Lomonosovu," 1814); "Ne pugai nas, milyi drug, / Groba blizkim novosel'em . . ." (Don't frighten us, dear friend. / With the coffin's nearby housewarming) ("Krivtsovu," 1817). The metaphor survives into the 1830s: "No dolog budet son gostei / Na tesnom, khladnom novosel'e" (But long will be the guests' dream / At the cramped, cool housewarming) ("Borodinskaia godovshchina," 1831).

47. "The Coffinmaker" is not the only work with this "otherworldly" theme. *Kamennyi gost'* (The Stone Guest), the noble cousin of the lowly "Coffinmaker," was written during the same autumn of 1830. In it the dead Commander responds to Don Juan's impious invitation. Trapped in Boldino between Cupid and Hymen, Pushkin bade farewell to his Don Juanian past in several love poems in which the parting with the memories of beloved women is rendered in sepulchral imagery: "Uzh ty dlia svoego poeta / Mogil'nym sumrakom odeta" (To your poet, you are already clad in the dusk of the grave) ("Proshchanie" [Farewell], addressed to Elizaveta Vorontsova). The poem "Dlia beregov otchizny dal'nei" (For the shores of your distant country) addresses a dead woman (Amalia Riznich): "Tvoia krasa, tvoi stradan'ia / Ischezli v urne grobovoi— / A s nimi potselui svidaniia . . . / No zhdu ego; on za toboi . . ." (Your beauty, your sufferings / Have vanished in the sepulchral urn— / And with them the reunion kiss . . . / But I wait for it: you owe it me). The poem "Zaklinanie" (Invocation), a solemn counterpart to "The Coffinmaker," also invokes a dead woman from her grave: "O, esli pravda, chto v nochi, / Kogda pokoiatsia zhivye, / I s neba lunnye luchy / Skol'zhat na kamni grobovye, / O, esli pravda, chto togda / Pusteiat tikhie mogily,— / Ia ten' zovu, ia zhdu Leily: / Ko mne moi drug, siuda, siuda!" (Oh, if it is true that in the night, / When the living rest, / And from the sky lunar rays / Glide over the tombstones, / Oh, if it is true, that then / The silent graves are emptied,— / I call the shade, I wait for Leila: / To me, my friend, come here.

"Gorodok" (1815) the poet, having just moved to a new house, celebrates a housewarming with the ghosts of old writers buried in the "cemetery" of the poet's bookshelf. In "Ten' Fonvizina" (1815) the dead playwright rises from his grave to inspect the sad state of the Russian Parnassus. Accompanied by Hermes, Fonvizin pays a visit to the half-insane Derzhavin, who treats his visitors to a grotesque pastiche from his own "lyrico-epic hymn." After they leave the old bard, Fonvizin exclaims: "What a miraculous phenomenon," whereupon Hermes replies, "But, O why should one live so long!" ("No, akh pochto tak dolgo zhit'?). Derzhavin departed the next year. (Pushkin's words about Vasili L'vovich, "God knows what he is living on or for," and the uncle's subsequent death will repeat this whimsical sequence.)⁴⁸

The death of Derzhavin is similarly linked to the tale in several curious ways. In 1816 Pushkin's friend Del'vig marked this event with the poem "Na smert' Derzhavina" ("To the Death of Derzhavin"). Curiously enough, we find in Del'vig's poem both images which appear on the coffinmaker's sign: "Derzhavin umer! chut' fakel pogasshii dymitsia, o Pushkin! / O Pushkin, net uzh velikogo! Muzy nad prakhom rydaui! / . . . Amura zabyli pechal'nye . . . / Kto zh nyne posmeet vladet' ego gromkoiu liroi? Kto, Pushkin!"⁴⁹ Naturally, Pushkin himself will take over. Del'vig's classical metaphor for the late Derzhavin as the "extinguished torch" (recalling Derzhavin's vignettes) will meet its reflection in the coffinmaker's sign as the "inverted torch" in Cupid's hand, while Derzhavin's "sonorous lyre" will resound from the tale's epigraph: "Are coffins not beheld each day, / the gray hairs of an aging universe?"

It is very fitting that both the epigraph at the opening of "The Coffinmaker" and the signboard above the entrance to the gloomy shop are linked to Derzhavin. *Memento mori* was, after all, Derzhavin's theme par excellence. In his numerous epitaphs, this true master of the sepulchral lore did not leave unattended any death of some renown, not even the one of the "lap dog Milushka who, after receiving the news of the death of Louis XVI, fell from the knees of her mistress and met its death."⁵⁰ The vignettes depicting Cupids with inverted torches were destined for some of these sepulchral poems.

come here!). For a detailed treatment of the "otherworldly" theme in Pushkin see Mikhail Gershenson, "Ten' Pushkina, *Stat'i o Pushkine* (Moscow, 1926), pp. 69-95; and more recently Savelii Senderovich, "On Pushkin's Mythology: The Shade-Myth," *A. Pushkin: Symposium II* (Columbus, Ohio: Slavica, 1980), pp. 103-15. Three years later Pushkin returned to Boldino and to the "otherworldly" theme in *The Queen of Spades*. But in "The Coffinmaker" Pushkin's treatment of the Gothic theme is different; it is more in the vein of his early burlesques, and an Arzamasian smile—not unlike the one that smiled at Adrian from Kurilkin's skull—is visible through the macabre.

48. The "wish of death" is a recurrent theme in the *Tales*. Silvio desires to kill the Count, Vyrin wishes to see Dunia "in her grave" rather than in the arms of the Hussar, Vladimir desires to kill himself, and Adrian impatiently waits for the death of Triukhina. All these are mortal sins for which Pushkin metes out his "poetic justice": Silvio, Vladimir, and Vyrin perish de facto, while Adrian collapses in his dream in Kurilkin's osseous embrace: "come corpo morte cadde" (Dante), *PSS* 8/2: 636.

49. "Derzhavin has died! The extinguished torch is barely smoking, oh, Pushkin! / Oh, Pushkin, the great one is no more! The Muses are weeping over his dust! / . . . The sorrowful Muses have forgotten their Cupid. . . . / Who will dare to take over his sonorous lyre now? Who, Pushkin!" My emphasis.

50. Derzhavin, "Na smert' sobachki Milushki, kotoraiia pri poluchenii izvestia o smerti Liudovika XVI upala s kolen khoziaiki i ubilas' do smerti" (1973).

The image of "Derzhavin" and "death" became a complementary pair in Pushkin's poetry. During the autumn of 1830 Pushkin returned to Derzhavin's grave in the poem "Del'vigu": "Iavilisia my rano oba / . . . Vblizi derzhavinskogo groba, / I shumnyi vstretil nas vostorg."⁵¹ The more famous lines from *Evgenii Onegin*, "Starik Derzhavin nas zametil / I, v grob skhodia, blagoslavit,"⁵² also refer to the same event: during Pushkin's qualifying examination at the lyceum on January 8, 1815, the novice poet read to Derzhavin one of his very first poems, "Vospominaniia v Tsarskom Sele" ("Recollections at Tsarskoe Selo"), which proved to be a brilliant imitation of the old bard's odic splendor. "I am not dead!" exclaimed Derzhavin in a quasi-Arzamasian manner, when the boy finished reading: "He is the one who will replace Derzhavin."⁵³ Thus, on the verge of the grave, Derzhavin served as midwife to Pushkin's poetic career.

Some twenty years later, Pushkin described in detail the historical meeting with Derzhavin, which ended embarrassingly in an unrequited embrace between two generations of Russian poetry. The dying dean of Russian letters is depicted here in true Arzamasian colors: "Derzhavin was very old. . . . His expression was insane, his eyes turbid, his lips hung loosely." Jolted out of his senile somnolence by the sounds of poetry, however, he returned to life and extended his arms to the newborn poet:

Suddenly he revived (*tut on ozhivilsia*), his eyes sparkled; he was completely transfigured. . . . He listened with extraordinary animation (*s zhivost'iu neobyknovennoi*). . . . Standing two steps away from Derzhavin, I recited my "Reminiscences in Tsarskoe Selo." . . . I do not remember how I ended my reading; I do not remember where I fled. Derzhavin was in ecstasy; he asked for me, wished to embrace me (*khotel menia obniat'*). They looked for me but could not find me.⁵⁴

It would be very tempting as well to read the nocturnal housewarming scene in "The Coffinmaker" in the Arzamasian context, and to imagine the chairman of "The Colloquy of Lovers of the Russian Word . . . coming to life" at the sounds of his "Waterfall," rising from his grave at this genuinely Arzamasian invocation, and welcoming with outstretched arms the newborn prose writer. Adrian Prokhorov's "yellow house," having perhaps a parallel in Derzhavin's house on Fontanka, was a perfect stage to replay this old Arzamasian number (*dokhlyi nomer*) in a new key.⁵⁵ Not surprisingly, Derzhavin was escorted by the corpse

51. "To Del'vigu": "We both made our appearance early / . . . Near Derzhavin's grave site, / And we were hailed with clamorous rapture."

52. "The old man Derzhavin noticed us / And, gravebound, gave us his blessings" (VIII, 2).

53. V. P. Gaevskii, *Sovremennik*, 8 (1863): 370, and F. N. Glinka, *Vospominanie o piuteskoi zhizni Pushkina* (Moscow, 1873), p. 13; both quoted by Ernest J. Simmons, *Pushkin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937), p. 56. Compare also V. V. Veresaev (Smidovich), *Pushkin v zhizni*, 1:77, as well as Derzhavin's alleged words to Sergei Aksakov: "Moe vremia proshlo, teper' vashe vremia. . . . Skoro iavitsia svetu vtoroi Derzhavin—eto Pushkin, kotoryi uzhe v litsee pereshchegolial vsekh pisatelei." S. T. Aksakov, *Znakomstvo s Derzhavinyim* (1852), quoted in Oleg N. Mikhailov, *Derzhavin* (Moscow, 1977), p. 290.

54. Pushkin, "Vospominaniia" (1835–36), "Derzhavin."

55. Not only does the expression "yellow house" stand in Russian for "insane asylum," but Derzhavin's house on Fontanka, which served as the meeting place of "Beseda," was adjacent to a madhouse. In Dashkov's (Chu) description of Derzhavin's funeral and the grotesque resurrection, the members of "Beseda," deserting the graveyard in panic, find refuge in the "yellow house" on Fontanka which they mistake for Derzhavin's. See *Arzamas i arzamasskie protokoly*, p. 201. Compare also Viazemskii's (Asmodei) epigram on this occasion: "Kogda besedchikam Derzhavin pred

of a certain "retired brigadier," a likely allusion not only to "Smirenni greshnik, Dmitrii Larin, / Gospodnii rab i brigadir"⁵⁶ but perhaps also to the author of *Brigadir* whose "shade" haunted Derzhavin already in "Fonvizin's Shade" (1815) and who is invoked by the lead epigraph to *The Tales of the Late I. P. Belkin*.

"You see, Prokhorov," said the *brigadier* in the name of all the honorable company, "we have all risen in response to your invitation. Only those have stayed at home who were unable to come, who have crumbled to pieces and have nothing left but fleshless bones. But even of these there was one who hadn't the patience to remain behind—so much did he want to come and see you. . . ." At this moment a little skeleton pushed his way through the crowd and approached Adrian. His skull smiled affably at the undertaker. . . . "Don't you remember the retired sergeant of the Guard, Petr Petrovich *Kurilkin*, the same to whom, in the year 1799, you sold your first coffin, and a pine one at that, instead of oak as agreed?" With these words the corpse *stretched out his bony arms* toward him (*proster emu kostianye ob"iatia*); but Adrian, collecting all his strength, shrieked and *pushed him away*. Petr Petrovich staggered, fell and crumbled to pieces.⁵⁷

After all, it was to Derzhavin that the sixteen-year-old artist/artisan A. P. "sold" his very first poem/coffin, the brilliant imitation of Derzhavin's odic style, one year before the death of the old poet. In benevolent amazement the old bard had reached out in empty space and exclaimed: "I am not dead!" Resurrected fifteen years later as *Kurilkin*, the old client extends his arms and blessing to Prokhorov's new shop and to Pushkin's prose debut; both A. P.s are celebrating some kind of "housewarming" in the "yellow house." The artisan Prokhorov literally pushes away *Kurilkin*; the artist pushes away Derzhavin figuratively, by mocking Derzhavin's "gray hair"—the "cosmic coffins" from the elegiac "Waterfall"—and by placing them in such an unseemly environment as the undertaker's shop.⁵⁸ Pushkin's transition from poetry to prose is accompanied in "The Coffinmaker" by a series of similar grotesque deflations of the poetic canon: the classical poetic image of Cupid is reduced to a prosaic trade sign, the late bard Derzhavin to the skeleton *Kurilkin*, and the inspired artist to a sullen artisan.

The metamorphosis of Derzhavin into *Kurilkin* is particularly intriguing. The classical metaphor of the "extinguished torch," which Del'vig used for the dead poet in "To the Death of Derzhavin," appeared in the coffinmaker's sign-board. In its turn, this "torch" casts a curious light on the skeleton's name, "*Kurilkin*." The name derives from *kurilka*, a word designating a splinter of

kontsom / Zhilishcha svoego ne zaveshchal v nasledstvo, / On znal ikh tverdye prava na zhelyti dom / I prochil im sosedstvo" (When Derzhavin before his death / Did not will his dwelling to the 'Besedians,' / He honored their firm rights for the 'loony bin' / And intended them as neighbors), V. E. Vasil'ev, M. I. Gillel'son, and N. G. Zakharchenko, eds., *Russkaia epigrama vtoroi poloviny XVII-nachala XX v.*, 2d ed. (Leningrad, 1975), p. 271.

56. "The humble sinner Dmitrii Larin, / Slave of our Lord, and Brigadier," *Evgenii Onegin*, 2:36, Nabokov's translation.

57. Pp. 184–85. My emphasis.

58. "In the kitchen and parlor were placed the master's wares—coffins of all colors and of all sizes." Behind the prosy façade of Pushkin's sentence, Derzhavin would most likely recognize another of his famous poetic lines: "Gde stol byl iastv, tam grob stoit" (On the table once laden with victuals now stands a coffin) from "Na smert' kniazia Meshcherskogo" (On the Death of Prince Meshcherskii) (1779). Pushkin used these lines of Derzhavin as an epigraph for chapter 4 of *Dubrovskii*.

wood used to light fires—in other words, a miniature torch. More importantly, the resurrection of Kurilkin calls to mind the Russian saying “Zhiv Kurilka!” (Kurilka is alive!), exclaimed in surprise when something or somebody that is supposed to have vanished long ago is still around. This saying (echoing Derzhavin’s exclamation “I am not dead!” and Pushkin’s “But, O why should one live so long!”) goes back to an old Russian divination song which was known to Pushkin, for he used it in his epigram on Kachenovskii, “Zhiv, zhiv Kurilka!”⁵⁹ Thus the peculiar metamorphosis of the “extinguished torch” (Del’vig’s metaphor for Derzhavin) into “inverted torch” on the coffinmaker’s sign and finally into “Kurilkin” seems to follow the same grotesque curve as the other deflations in the tale.⁶⁰

These punning transformations in “The Coffinmaker,” which surely amused Pushkin’s friends, should not, however, obscure the more serious aspect of the tale. While it is true that Pushkin once suggested that all of Derzhavin’s oeuvre should be burned, except some eight odes,⁶¹ “The Coffinmaker” is more than a prank for the benefit of Pushkin’s friends in which the merry Arzamasian irreverently burns a *kurilka* instead of incense to the old bard. Pushkin’s invocation in *The Tales of Belkin* of the late Derzhavin as well as of other eighteenth-century writers (Fonvizin, Bogdanovich, Dmitriev) also has its redeeming moments because of Pushkin’s own peculiar attachment to the century that gave birth to him.⁶² It was already noted in the nineteenth century that there “is one, little

59. “Kak! zhiv eshche Kurilka zhurnalist? /—Zhivekhonek! vse tak zhe sukh i skuchen. / . . . / —Fu! Nadoel Kurilka zhurnalist! / Kak zagasit’ voniuchuiu luchinku? / Kak umorit’ Kurilku moego?” (What! Kurilka is still alive? / —Very much alive! But just as dry and dreary. / . . . / —Ugh! Enough with Kurilka the journalist! / How to extinguish the smelly ‘taper’? / How to exterminate my Kurilka?) (1825). Pushkin’s epigram goes back to the divination song: “Zhiv, zhiv kurilka, / Zhiv, zhiv, da ne umer. / U nashego kurilki / Nozhki tonen’ki, / Dusha koroten’ka” (Alive, alive is the splinter, / Alive, alive, he did not die. / Our splinter has thin legs, / short soul). The participants sing this song while passing a burning splinter. Those who complete the song before the “kurilka” is extinguished will have their wishes fulfilled. Compare Vladimir Dal’, *Tolkovyi slovar’*, 2nd ed. (1881), 2:222 (“kurit’”); *Slovar’ iazyka Pushkina* (Moscow, 1956), 2:438; and T. G. Tsiavlovakaia’s commentary to this epigram in Dmitrii D. Blagoi et al., eds., Pushkin, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1959), 2:685.

60. In the same “Reminiscences” Pushkin describes another irreverent episode involving Derzhavin which, I believe, captures well the bizarre nature of deflation found in “The Coffinmaker.” Awaiting Derzhavin at the Lyceum, Pushkin’s friend Del’vig decided “to kiss the hand which had written ‘The Waterfall.’” When the bard finally arrived, his first words were: “Gde, bratets, zdes’ nuzhnik?” (Where, buddy, is the latrine?) in consequence of which the little baron lost his desire to kiss the bard’s hand. The grotesque reduction of “The Waterfall” into a “latrine” seems to be similar in nature to Pushkin’s deflation of Derzhavin’s poetic canon in his prose. Thus not only the epigraph to the tale, from “The Waterfall,” but also the very nature of the deflation seems to come courtesy of the old bard Derzhavin whose genius “Ei-bogu, . . . dumal po-tatarski” (By golly, . . . thought in Tatar) (Pushkin’s letter to Del’vig, July 1–8, 1825), and who in his eccentric life and art “lomal kanony, kak ‘varvar’” (was breaking the canons like a barbarian) (Boris Tomashevskii, *Pushkin* [Moscow-Leningrad, 1961], 2:347). Gogol’ too spoke in similar terms about Derzhavin’s poetic boldness. Commenting upon Derzhavin’s lines from “Aristipova bania,” “I smert’, kak gost’iu ozhidaet, / Krutia zadumavshis’ usy” (He awaits death as if it were a lady visitor, / Pensively twisting his moustache), Gogol’ asked: “Who else would dare to combine such business as awaiting death with such trifle as twisting one’s moustache?” (“V chem zhe, nakonets, sushchestvo russkoi poezii i v chem ee osobennost’” in *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1959), 6:165.

61. In the letter to Del’vig, July 1–8, 1825; *Letters*, p. 225.

62. “Derzhavin’s idol, 1/4 gold and 3/4 lead, has not yet been assayed. His ‘Ode to Felitsa’ stands alongside ‘The Noble Lord,’ and the ode ‘God’ alongside the ode ‘On the Death of Mesh-

noticed trait in Pushkin: according to the disposition of his mind, Pushkin orients himself toward the past, not toward the future."⁶³ This notion, which was later repeated by the Formalists—"Pushkin is not the beginning but the end of the long path paved by the Russian poetry of the eighteenth century"⁶⁴—nevertheless deserves a modification that gives Pushkin more credit for the ingenious and innovative transformation of the past tradition into a modern work of art:

Pushkin is the golden section (*zolotoe sechenie*) of Russian literature. Having given that literature a decisive push into the future, he himself was flung back, and fulfills in it rather the role of the eternally blossoming past toward which Russian literature returns in order to rejuvenate itself.⁶⁵

Thus the deeper and more solemn poetic sense of this comic tale and its sign lies in Pushkin's own "sepulchral romance" with his literary ancestors, and it becomes apparent only through the double prism of negation and acceptance of the eighteenth century. By burying and resurrecting Derzhavin in "The Coffinmaker," Pushkin not only lives up to his uncle's Arzamasian pledge ("We will mourn them forever") but also to Shul'ts's puckish dictum: "The dead cannot live without a coffin."

The "shade" of Pushkin's poetic godfather, Derzhavin, was cast over the immortal Boldino Autumn of 1830. It seems very appropriate that the entire season (September 3 to November 28) is framed by a double *memento mori*, both linked to Derzhavin. The first is "The Coffinmaker" itself, written at the beginning of the season, and opening with Derzhavin's lines; the other *memento mori*, concluding the season, is a quatrain which Pushkin inscribed on November 26 in the album of his neighbor D. A. Ostaf'ev, the hero of the campaign of 1812:

Река времен в своем теченьи (sic)
Уносит все дела людей
И топит в пропасти забвенья
Народы, царства и царей...

The river of time in its flow
Carries off all human affairs

cherskii, the 'Ode to Zubov' was discovered not long ago. Kniazhnin is serenely enjoying his fame; Bogdanovich is numbered in the choir of great poets; Dmitriev, too. . . . We do not know just what Krylov is, Krylov who is as much above La Fontaine as Derzhavin is above J. B. Rousseau" (Pushkin's letter to A. A. Bestuzhev, end of May-beginning of June 1925; *Letters*, p. 222). "My dear, have respect for the father Derzhavin!" Pushkin admonishes his friend Viazemskii, who in his anniversary necrology to Ozerov of 1826 returned to Derzhavin's "gray hair" and "grave" with typical Arzamasian irreverence: "How long ago is it that the Russian Muses mourned the death of their favorite Derzhavin whose hair turned gray in his fame? . . . Derzhavin concluded his walk of life and paid his last dues to nature at an age when he suffered the most important of losses—the loss, so to say, of all that was alive in life." (See Pushkin's "Zametki na poliakh stat'i P. A. Viazemskogo 'O zhizni i sochineniiakh V. A. Ozerova'" (1826).

63. Quoted in Viktor Shklovskii, "Literatura vne siuzheta," *O teorii prozy* (Moscow, 1929), p. 242.

64. Boris Eikhenbaum, "Problema poetiki Pushkina" (1921), *O poezii* (Leningrad, 1969), p. 24.

65. Andrei Siniavskii (Abram Terts), *Progulki s Pushkinym* (London, 1975), p. 89.

And drowns in the gulf of oblivion
Nations, kingdoms and kings . . .⁶⁶

These verses do not belong to Pushkin; they are the last lines written by Derzhavin before his death. Years later, in one of *his* last poems, Pushkin was to engrave the immortal lines from Derzhavin's "Pamiatnik"—"Tak!—ves' ia ne umru, no chast' menia bol'shaia, / Ot tlena ubezhav, po smerti stanet zhit'"⁶⁷—on his own "Monument": "Net, ves' ia ne umru—dusha v zavetnoi lire / Moi prakh perezhivet i tlen'ia ubezhit."⁶⁸

On this level of meaning the tale "Grobvshchik," written in Boldino where the poet was surrounded by cholera morbus, troubled by thoughts of the upcoming marriage, and haunted by the ghosts of old poets, can also be seen as a multifaceted prism through which Pushkin's life is refracted into his art, his poetic past into the prose of the present, and the gloomy craft of the artisan A. P. into the "merry undertaking" of the artist A. P. The coffinmaker's punning sign, emblematically uniting the remaining four *Tales of the Late I. P. Belkin*, reflects in turn Pushkin's own "sepulchral romance" with his literary ancestors. On this multifaceted level of meaning, Pushkin's inspired tale is a true literary "feast in time of the plague."

Всё, всё, что гибелью грозит,
Для сердца смертного таит
Неизъяснимы наслажденья,—
Бессмертья, может быть, залог!
(И счастлив тот, кто средь волненья
Их обрести и ведать мог.)

Everything that threatens with doom,
Conceals for the heart of a mortal
Inexplicable delights,—
A pledge of immortality, perhaps!
(And fortunate is he who in the midst of life's vicissitudes
Knew how to discover and taste them.)

66. N. V. Kolosova et al., eds., *Boldinskaiia osen'* (Moscow, 1974), p. 435, and L. A. Chereiskii, *Pushkin i ego okruzhenie* (Leningrad, 1975). The misquotation in the opening line is Pushkin's. The complete text of Derzhavin's last poem contains an acrostic, reading "R-u-i-n-a ch-t-i" (discovered by Morris Halle).

67. "Thus! Not all of me shall die; a great part of me, / Having escaped corruption, shall live after death."

68. "Not all of me shall die; my soul in the sacred lyre / Shall outlive my dust and escape corruption."