

Pushkin's Biography

DAVID M. BETHEA and SERGEI DAVYDOV

Background

Ever since Pushkin's first serious biographers in the mid-nineteenth century, Pavel Annenkov and Petr Bartenev,¹ scholars have crossed swords over what constitutes a "fact" in the poet's biography and what role "interpretation" is to play in arranging these so-called facts into a narrative "life."² Down through the decades the sternly empiricist Bartenev and the chastely interpretive Annenkov have had their acknowledged and unacknowledged adherents. All those interested in Pushkin's biography—Gaevskii, Grot, Gershenzon, Lerner, Khodasevich, Shchegolev, Tomashevskii, Tymanov, B. L. Modzalevskii, Veresaev, N. L. Brodskii, Blagoi, the Tsavlovskis, Tyrkova-Williams, L. Grossman, Akhmatova, Melakh, Eidel'man, Lotman, Maimin, Abramovich, Kuleshov, not to speak of myriad writers in other languages such as Mirsky, Simmons, Troyat, Vickery, and most recently Edmunds, Feinstein, Vitale and Binyon—have felt pulled conceptually toward one or the other pole, that is, toward chronicle [*letopis'*] or toward interpretive narrative (psychologically *exploited* story). On the one hand, Gershenzon and his student Khodasevich are products of the Annenkov school.³ When, for example, Gershenzon tries to show, with his vital grasp of primary sources, how a given creative work emerges out of real-life circumstances—say, how Pushkin's friend Nashchokin served as the source for *Mavra*, the "female cook" eventually caught shaving in *Domik v Kolomne* [Little House in Kolomna]—he is clearly *interpreting*, making elements on unlike planes (life/art) alike.⁴ Posterity has shown that Gershenzon's method of "slow reading" [*medlennoe chtenie*], especially in some of its more "gnostic"

variations, was capable of errors, but they were errors, as Khodasevich was quick to point out, of genius.

On the other hand, Tomashhevskii and Veresaev are inherently "Bartenevian" in their insistence that the "mythopoetic" or "fabulizing" element be placed beyond the boundaries of true scholarship.⁵ Or to use the rigorous Tomashhevskii's own terminology, only the "biographical legend"⁶ that the poet himself consciously adopts to create his image of himself in his art is fair play. Everything else is *ipso facto* "out of bounds." Tending toward Tomashhevskian rigor yet still willing to interpret and thus to psychologize is Shchegolev, one of the great early Soviet-period Pushkinists who loved to point out Gershenzon's errors (although he made a few himself) and who for various reasons managed to capture only the *end* of the poet's life.⁷ And over against Tomashhevskii-Veresaev stand a whole phalanx of capable biographers whose readings, perhaps because of their own cultural assumptions, still fall short of capturing the unique movement of Pushkin's poetic mind: here we would mention the admirable Soviet-period biography done by Byodskii and the even better emigre-period biography done by Tyrkova-Williams.⁸ Both of these works are in their ways heroic, yet the image they create is not necessarily of a living "Pushkin." Why? Because they pay insufficient attention to that rare, delicate osmosis of life and art so typical of the mature poet.

With *Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin. Biografiia pisatelja* [Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin: A Biography of the Writer], In. M. Lotman taught us how to write a life of the poet that was simple, elegant, impeccably informed, and conceptually rigorous. That 1981 volume was, for its time and place, a mighty triumph of the "physicists" over the "lyricists." It was also, despite its modest size and unpretentious style, the most *useful* Pushkin biography since the pioneering work of Annenkov. It was, in a way, the work of a lifetime, on a lifetime, thus its interest, if not obsession, with the centrality of *lichnost'* [personality, personhood]. However, the very beauty of Lotman's view of Pushkin as essential *homo semioticus* seemed to some to conceal an inner contradiction or blind spot (although Lotman himself was most assuredly not blind to it). As his friend Boris Egorov contended in a 1986 letter to him, the code-driven, "constructed"⁹ quality of Lotman's semiotic thinking precluded a priori the possibility of bringing Pushkin alive as a subject. And this despite the maximal attempts on Lotman's part both to present Pushkin's life as an "inner psychological whole" [vnutrennee psikhologicheskoe edinstvo]¹⁰ and to cleanse his language of all scientific or "structuralist" terminology. Recently, and from an entirely different

perspective, Irina Surat has argued that Lotman's biography, while wonderfully rich and perceptive, still lingers on the external cultural, political, and social contexts, and for this reason is not sufficiently "synthesizing" in a way needed after two centuries of Pushkin studies.¹¹ What is called for, argues Surat, is an "interior" biography that takes into account the poet's *psycho-creative journey* from childhood to full maturity. There has to be a way to distill the findings of the great Pushkinists of the past into a story of the poet's creative path not only as meaning-creator, *homo semioticus* but also as life-in-and-through-art-teller, *homo mythopoeticus*. After all, Lotman himself correctly noted that Pushkin was very much like King Midas: "Just as anything the mythological King Midas touched turned to gold, so too did everything Pushkin touch turn to creative work, to art (and this was his tragedy: Midas died from starvation—his food became gold)."¹²

Where to begin such a daunting task of writing an "interior biography" of the poet? How does one undertake to produce an account of Pushkin's life that both reveals the "dramatic embodiment of his inner personality" [dramaticheskoe voploshchenie vnutrennei lichnosti]¹³ and testifies to the "origin of the creative impulse/creativity" [zarozhdenie tvorchestva]¹⁴ in the poet's mind? One place to start is at the intersection of poetry and Pushkin studies: those *scholar-poets*, such as Khodasevich and Akhmatova, who offer a more intimate and intuitive understanding of the act of creation and a more satisfying orientation toward the alchemical relationship wherein life becomes art and art, life. And let us understand this latter statement not simply metaphorically, as a transference of words as words, but in a more embodied and even "metabolic" sense, in the sense that, for Pushkin and his tradition, words are deeds and *consciously* become deeds.¹⁵ At some point in his career, and by now one can say with a fair amount of precision where, Pushkin came to believe that his words, once uttered publicly, had *irreversible* implications, hence the notion of word (art) become deed (life). Poets like Khodasevich and Akhmatova write about Pushkin's creative wellsprings in a manner that subtly negotiates the space between philology and psychology, granting neither the upper hand. Clearly this is a space we, in our own time, need very much. Unfortunately, Khodasevich and Akhmatova were unable for various reasons to complete the creative life of Pushkin on which they made such stunning installments.

Thus what is called for is a coherent narrative that takes into account the principal factual discoveries of the past two centuries and combines them with the most convincing mythopoetic episodes of Pushkin's life. As Khodasevich writes of his methodology,

To a certain extent [the creative process] becomes intelligible to us in those cases when we discover a point, or a series of points, simultaneously positioned on the plane of art and on the plane of life. In other words, when we are able to trace the intersecting lines of these two planes. It is precisely this glimpsing of the original creative process, this observing of how reality becomes art and of how the experience of a man is refracted in the creation of an artist, that the study of an author's biography puts to use.¹⁶

And elsewhere, and somewhat more expansively, he says,

That which Pushkin once lived through himself he often made his characters live through [as well], only in conditions and forms altered by the demands of plot and setting. He liked this link joining life and art and liked to fix it in place for himself in the form of *sly hints* [ukayve nameki] scattered throughout his works. Skillfully concealing all threads leading from invention to biographical truth, he still sometimes displayed their barely noticeable [loose] ends. If one finds such a loose end and tugs on it, the link between invention and reality will reveal a bit of itself.¹⁷

The issue here is not simply to expose the loose thread, which is itself an accomplishment, but—as the poet-Pushkinist shrewdly suggests—to tug on it, show how its disappearance and reappearance in the fabric of a given work contains the very essence of artistic thinking, including those fables of self-presentation that the author has inscribed into his works and masterfully disguised as plots involving others.

Let us now give several examples of what we have in mind. One of the central elements of Pushkin's poetic world and personal myth-making is his muse, that incarnation of female beauty, warmth, and generosity, the very enabler of his poetry. Again, Khodasevich was the first to establish how the image of the poet's old nanny, Arina Rodionovna, metamorphoses into that of a lovely young muse in "Nepersnitsa volshbnoi stariii" [Confidante of Magical Olden Times (1822)] and then how these competing embodiments (maternal-maidenly, folk-educated class) are foregrounded at different points along the poet's creative path, culminating in the interplay between Tatiana and her nurse in *Eygerii Onegin*.¹⁸ When in her last conversation with Onegin Tatiana refers to the country graveyard, "Where now a cross and the shade of branches / [Stand over] my poor nanny,"¹⁹ her creator is also saying good-bye to his own nanny-muse, who had died at the end of 1828, not long before Tatiana's lines were written.²⁰

Another instance involves Nashchokin, who tells the story of Pushkin's affair, replete with an early morning departure that luckily avoids the servants, with the famously discreet Baroness Fiquelmont. This "real life" episode then transmogrifies into the scene of German's escape from the old Countess's boudoir along a secret staircase in "The Queen of Spades" [Plkovaia dama].²¹ And in other cases it is not only that certain situations suggest parallels (for example, the analogy between Pushkin's and Sergei Lvovich's strained relations at the beginning of the poet's exile in Mikhailovskoe and the fatal intergenerational confrontation in *The Covetous Knight* [Skupoi rytsar'] that was noticed long ago) but rather that they share an internal logic, that in a letter addressed to Zhukovskii the angry son reproduces the scandalous family quarrel and the descending register of his father's accusations—"My father, taking advantage of the absence of witnesses, runs out and announces to the entire household that I struck him, intended to strike him, raised my hand as though to strike him, could have struck him"²²—exactly in the same order as they appear in the last scene of the drama, when the baron calumniates his son to the duke: "He . . . he wanted / to kill me . . . I'm not going to begin to prove it, although I know / that he, indeed, thirsts for my death, / though I know that he attempted to / . . . rob [me]!"²³ Likewise, we have Akhmatova's insight that the "godless" libertine Don Guan, who spends a wild evening listening to Laura's songs in *The Stone Guest* [Kamennyi gost'], is more reminiscent of a familiar young St. Petersburg scapegrace who liked to visit the actress Aleksandra Kolesova during his "Green Lamp" [Zelenaiia lampka] period than of any "improviser of love songs" in "laurel and lemon"-scented Madrid.²⁴

The key in each case is to trace the "sly hint" in the process of revealing itself (again, to as it were "tug" on it). In the tale "The Coffinmaker" [Grobovshchik], as we have shown elsewhere, Pushkin returns to his Arzamasian roots (the parodic ritual of "burying of the dead" Shishkovites) and to his own poetic debut in metalinguistic terms.²⁵ Thus the climactic scene of the comically ghoulish visit of the corpses serves a dual purpose: on the one hand, it places the coffinmaker (Adrian Prokhorov=Aleksandr Pushkin), this "crazy" fashioner of houses for the dead, in the bony embrace of his first client Kurilkina (Mr. "Look Who Has Showed Up"); on the other, it allows the author to make one last pass by his poetic roots (his "works," *protivvedeniia*)—first and foremost his declaiming of "Recollections at Tarskoe Selo" before an aging Derzhavin—as he prepares to "descend to prose."²⁶ That Derzhavin himself had tried, but failed, to embrace the schoolboy odist at this same 1815 lyceum examination only adds to the fun.

By the same token, in "The History of the Village Goritukhino" Pushkin has his "man of letters" Belkin telescope step by step his own evolution as an author:

En route to becoming a writer Belkin proceeds hilariously from various poetic to prose fiction genres until he reaches the "ultimate" genre he is now writing—"The History of the Village Goritukhino." This chronological progression from "lofty" to "low," from epic poetry to modest prose, from art as *fantasial* to history as *factual* is one that can be applied not only to Russian literature in general, but to Pushkin's artistic development in particular.²⁷

In short, there are literally scores of similar autobiographical moments, many already brought to light but many as yet undetected, where "sviaz' vrynysla i deistvitel'nosti priokhrvaetsia" (the link between invention and reality reveals a bit of itself).²⁸ They need to be checked for accuracy and context-sensitive plausibility and then they need to be systematized into the ongoing story of the poet's life through art.

Mikhailovskoe

Now, in the second part of our study we would like to turn to a specific subset of examples involving the Mikhailovskoe period (1824–1826) and show how, through a parsing of the details, these life-to-art *likanye namerki* might be responsibly narrativized into a new sort of life of the poet. Mikhailovskoe, as is well known, was a major turning-point in Pushkin's life, one which even at this late date remains to a significant extent shrouded in mystery and speculation. What the few examples of autobiographical mythopoeticization discussed thus far have in common is the appearance of *hiding behind the obvious*, hence the notion that the "hint" [*namerk*] is "sly" [*lukavnyi*]. Our point is that in every instance of Pushkin's reference to himself a subtle truth emerges momentarily from behind a mask of conventional expectations. This truth often involves a shift [*svyaz*], a camouflage, for Pushkin is always careful to cover his autobiographical tracks in his works. There were obviously many things on the poet's mind during the first Mikhailovskoe fall of 1824, among them: whether his reputation had been further tainted by his banishment to the North and what people were saying about him in Moscow and St. Petersburg; the surveillance of him by local secular and church authorities that ended up implicating his

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own father and leading to the scandalous rift with Sergei Lvovich at the end of October; continual financial worries compounded by the pirating of his literary property when the Otdel'ok publishing house began reprinting unauthorized copies of *Kavkazskii plennik* [Prisoner of the Caucasus]; getting to know Praskovia Aleksandrovna Ospova and her children at Trogorskoe; work on the third and fourth chapters of *Evgenii Onegin* in addition to numerous lyrics; the reunion with Arina Rodionovna, his "nanny" and "muse," that inspired an interest in folk songs and tales; requests to brother Lev for primary source information about Sten'ka Razin and Pugachev; renewed study of Karamzin and Shakespeare that highlights the more mature historical consciousness surrounding initial work on *Boris Godunov*; a similar request for a French translation of the Bible to go with the profound self-examination and new attitude toward spiritual matters in "Podrazhanie Koranu" [imitations of the Koran]; a plan hatched with A. N. Vul'f to escape across the Russian border in the guise of Vul'f's servant "Arkhyp Kurochkin" (the name of Pushkin's gardener at Mikhailovskoe—see below); and of course, an urge to keep the channels of communication open through correspondence with Viazemskii (and Viazemskaina), Del'vig, Pushkin, N. N. Raevskii-fils, Iazykov, Zhukovskii, Pletnev, Lev Pushkin, and others. These biographical details, the most accurate compilation of which is still found in M. A. Tsiavlovskii's *Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva Aleksandra Pushkina* [A Chronicle of Aleksandr Pushkin's Life and Work], show vividly how the poet was wrestling that fall with both the angels and demons of his nature, how on the one hand, he had begun to buckle down and to seek refuge and sanity in hard work (*Evgennii Onegin*, *Boris Godunov*, "Imitations of the Koran") and how on the other, he was still capable of losing his head and getting himself into even more trouble (the argument with his father, the subsequent letter—fortunately not delivered—to B. A. Aderskas in which Pushkin asks to be transferred to a fortress, the wild plan to flee abroad incognito).

To reiterate, however, the idea here is not to claim that any and every detail from Pushkin's everyday existence is inevitably aestheticized in his creative work. Rather, it is to show how select moments, moments which were important to the poet because they said something about his inner life and struggles, made their way "slyly" into his art. For example, we have the curious document that came to the attention of Pushkinists in 1933: a "ticket" or "pass" [*Tilet*] dated 29 November 1825, physically describing two Trogorskoe travelers ("Arkhyp Kurochkin" and "Alekssei Khokhlov") and requesting in appropriate bureaucratic language that its holders be granted

safe passage to St. Petersburg to do errands for the "undersigned" Praskov'ia Osipova. What is likely is that in early December 1825 the real Arkhip Kurochkin and someone calling himself "Aleksai Khokhlov" set out for St. Petersburg, but a few versts past the village of Mikhailovskoe a hare crossed their road. Due to this bad omen, the superstitious travelers returned home. Presumably it was under the disguise of "Aleksai Khokhlov" that Pushkin himself (who probably also forged the *bieta*) traveled.²⁹ Were it not for the hare, Pushkin would have arrived at Ryleev's apartment on the very eve of 14 December, a turn of events having the most dire consequences for the already "disgraced" [opa]nyi poet.³⁰ Pushkin's peasant costume and the attempted escape will thereafter find their logical reflection (or "sly" retort) in *Boris Godunov*, in the scene "A Tavern at the Lithuanian Border" [Kormcha na litovskoi granitse].³¹ Here a disguised fugitive (Grigorii) is about to be apprehended by the illiterate authorities. The literate Grigorii reads to his would-be captors the content of the warrant for his arrest and comically distorts the external description of himself in such a way as to implicate another fellow traveler (Vanlam). In both cases there is the theme of flight, a document with a physical description, a suspect who is literate and clever, and last but not least, a kind of "bat-and-switch" device (Vanlam for Grigorii, "Aleksai Khokhlov" for the barin).

In all this discussion of Pushkin's creative life during the Mikhailovskoe period there is one glaring omission to which we now turn. No other figure haunts Pushkin's psyche that first fall and appears more often under different rubrics in Tsiaulovskii's *Chronicle* than Countess Elizaveta Kasaver'evna Vorontsova ("Elise"). Having left Vorontsova behind in Odessa and having been sent to the North for "atheistic" thoughts (when it is impossible to believe the powerful husband did not have more personal reasons for orchestrating this departure), Pushkin could not get her out of his mind and heart. He wrote lyric after lyric addressing their love,³² cherished her letters as major events in his life (they were sealed with the talismanic ring that was the twin of the one gifted to him by her) and sequestered himself in his room whenever one would arrive, drew countless sketches of her over these months, and wondered fitfully how she was occupying herself in his absence. Pushkin needed a muse to write love poetry and Vorontsova was undoubtedly his chief erotic inspiration at the time. She had it all: beauty, breeding, charm, wealth, and influence.

But how to use the obvious fact of Pushkin's all-consuming passion for Vorontsova to better tell the story of his creative life in Mikhailovskoe? That is the task. Because of the delicacy of the matter and the sketchiness

of documented facts surrounding the love affair, some scholars have tended to doubt its existence, while others have preferred to steer clear entirely of Pushkin's erotic life. It is our position, on the other hand, that this pivotal episode in the poet's life is *our business*, especially if the right angle of vision can be calibrated. With this in mind, we would like to cite three methodological caveats of which any writer of Pushkin's intimate biography needs to be aware. First, there is the useful corrective of M. N. Volkonskaia: "as a poet Pushkin considered it his duty to be in love with all the pretty women and young maidens whom he encountered. . . . In essence, [however,] he adored only his muse and poetized everything he saw."³³ Such is the judgment of this clever woman whose name has been put forward as a candidate for Pushkin's "secret love."³⁴ Second, Pushkin took great pleasure in mystifying, in fooling his audience. Thus, he creates the myth of a "secret love" in the Crimean elegies and *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* when in fact such a love may never have existed. What appears to be happening is that Pushkin is consciously fashioning a "second biography" for himself—one which readers then perceive as forming an interstitial context for his works—in *literature*.³⁵ Third, alongside Pushkin's mystification when creating a nonexistent "love," we may also encounter the opposite phenomenon: an attempt to conceal his primary or actual biography. The most obvious instance of this is genuine attachment that has taken place but that should, for reasons of decorum, remain unidentified. Still, even when Pushkin fails to make explicit mention of such personal source material—for example, his romances with the Countess Vorontsova, Karolina Šobańska, or the serf girl Ol'ga Kalashnikova—the echoes of these passions appear in his works, and the scholar-critic needs to be able to guess the essence of such situations intuitively, with the help of the aforementioned "sly hints."

Mystification (pretending to tell the truth, projecting an alternative biography) or diversion (telling the truth, but doing so in a way that disguises the facts) or somehow both? Pushkin's feelings about women in general and, we would argue, Vorontsova in particular are captured powerfully in the opening strophes of the fourth chapter of *Evgenii Onegin*, also penned in autumn 1824,

Then suddenly I would hate her,
and shudder, and weep tears,
with anguish and horror see in her
a creation of malicious and mysterious powers;
her piercing looks,

her smile, voice, conversations—
 everything about her was poisoned,
 suffused with wicked betrayal,
 everything in her thirsted for my tears and moans,
 fed on my blood . . .
 Then suddenly I would see her, before
 Pygmalion's pleading, as [made of] marble,
 still cold and mute,
 but soon to be warm and alive.

III

With the words of the prophetic poet
 I too am allowed to say:

"Temira, Daphne, and Lilieth have

all long since been forgotten by me."

But still there is one in their crowd . . .

For a long time I was captivated by one—

But was I loved [in return], and by whom,

and where, and was it for a long time? . . . Why

should you know that? That's not the point!

What was is passed, is foolishness,

The point is from that time on

my heart has certainly grown cold,

has shut itself off from love,

and everything in it is dark and empty;³⁶

1825

These stanzas (numbers 2 and 3 of the opening four) were not published by the poet in any subsequent complete editions of the novel-in-verse, but they did appear separately as "Zhenshchiny. Oryvok iz *Eygeniia Olegina*" [Women: An Excerpt from *Eygenii Olegin*] in *Moskovskii vestnik* [Moscow Herald] in 1827. In other words, Pushkin felt these verses to be finished enough artistically to see the light of day yet presumably bearing too obvious a personal, autobiographical tone and message to become a permanent part of the larger whole. We can be more precise than this, however. If in the first stanza (not cited here) the speaker describes his youthful idealization of women ("possessing feelings, intelligence / she radiated perfection"),³⁷ and in the fourth stanza (also not cited) that enchantment has been transformed by events into bitter cynicism ("as though one can demand / from butterflies and lilies / both profound feelings and passions"),³⁸ then in the middle two stanzas what we find is a veiled yet

accurate rendering of the emotional trajectory of Pushkin's passionate affair with Vorontsova. In the second stanza (cited above) the perfect "she" of the first stanza metamorphoses into an evil creation ("a creation of malicious and mysterious powers") full of betrayal [zmenia] and somehow, despite the complaisant surface ("her smile, voice, and conversations"), taking pleasure from her lover's pain ("everything in her thirsted for my tears and moans, / fed on my blood . . ."). This sense of betrayal, while presented abstractly and allegorically here, is the key emotional residue Pushkin took from this relationship: betrayal at the hands of his lover (Vorontsova) and betrayal at the hands of his friend (A. N. Raevskii). Be this as it may, the very power of Vorontsova's hold on Pushkin is portrayed vividly in the last four verses of the second stanza, with their Pygmalion myth: now, instead of seeing the cold marble of a statue (the . . . to conjunction suggests this shift in feeling), the sculptor through his entreaties to the goddess of love hopes that the stone will come alive as warm flesh—that he will be granted his wish and the beauty will love him back. This Pygmalion myth will be an essential ingredient in the evolving psycho-erotic plot of *Eygenii Olegin* and will be embedded in such questions as, "Who will be the poet's muse now?" and "What might this new muse look and act like?" In this sense, it (Pygmalion's pleading) is an obvious counterpart (a kind of isomorphic retelling) to the birth of the new muse out of the Arina Rodionovna-Tarjana nexus. Finally, the third stanza, with its mystery lover ("But still there is one in their crowd"), its questions ("But was I loved, and by whom, / and where, and was it for a long time?") that could be hiding information from the reader but just as easily could be admitting defeat, and its sarcastic protesting too much at the outcome ("What was is passed, is foolishness"), shows the killing effects of unrequited eros ("my heart has certainly grown cold . . . and everything in it is dark and empty") and the death, for now, of poetic inspiration from love. What we find in these stanzas is both mystification and diversion simultaneously: the poet is attempting to construct a literary biography for himself as "passion sufferer" for love, yet at the same time he wants to avoid at all costs specific reference to the principals, hence his decision to publish the excerpt separately, outside the web of autobiographical references already associated with *Eygenii Olegin*.

But how to move from the erotic impasse of Pushkin's unhappy affair with Vorontsova to the other concerns of the Mikhailovskoe exile and to the mature artistic works that mark this period as a watershed in Pushkin's creative life? At this point we would like to cite and build on T. G.

Tsaiylovskaiā's long article "Khrani menia, moi talisman" [Preserve Me, My Talisman]. At the center of Tsaiylovskaiā's argument stands the portrait of Countess Leonore D. in the unfinished *Arpa Petra Velikogo* [The Blackamoor of Peter the Great]. Countess D. bears a striking resemblance to Vorontsova. According to such memoirists as F. F. Vigel, Vorontsova was extremely charming and youthfully attractive (though at the time of her acquaintance with the poet in fall 1823 she was already past thirty and no longer "in the first bloom of youth"),³⁹ warm and unaffected in her manners, and above all possessed of the capacity to please—all qualities describing the Countess D. in the novel. Indeed, referred to as "Taf'iana" in the encoded language of the poet and his friend Aleksandr Raevskii, no one among Pushkin's romantic attachments either before or after was apparently more capable of inspiring not only his passion but *his trust* (hence the even greater potential pain of betrayal) than this utterly *comme il faut* society lady: "Her [Countess D.'s] glance conveyed such good nature, her conduct with him was so simple and unaffected, that it was impossible to suspect in her even a shade of coquetry or mockery."⁴⁰ However, the crux of Tsaiylovskaiā's thesis rests on the *transposition of race (the black man as outsider) and class (the poet as outsider)*—that is, another of the poet's bait-and-switch maneuvers. Through an elaborate series of close readings and datings, Tsaiylovskaiā demonstrates, with great insight into the poet's psychology, that in all probability Pushkin came to believe that Vorontsova had become pregnant with his child near the time he was forced to quit Odessa.

And now, with the recent publication of the poet's working notebooks, it becomes clear that Tsaiylovskaiā is indeed right: in the so-called "Second Kishinev Notebook" [Vtoraia Kishenevskaia], S. A. Bannichev has established that the draft of a passionate love letter written in French and thought to be addressed to an "unknown woman" because the order of the notebook pages suggested a time frame of June–July 1823 (the woman is unknown because scholars could not imagine to whom Pushkin would write such a letter at that time) can now be ascribed, because of its upside-down verso arrangement in the notebook, to June 1824, which is to say, to the eve of the Vorontsov entourage's departure on their family yacht from Odessa to the Crimea for two months.⁴¹ Given this dating, and given the fact of Pushkin's incredibly frank confession in the draft letter, what is probable is that Vorontsova, upon learning from her husband that he could do nothing to save Pushkin from exile, returned prematurely to Odessa on 23 July, a week before Pushkin departed for Mikhailovskoe and precisely at the moment he learned that he would not be allowed to retire from the foreign

service and perhaps remain a civilian in Odessa but would have to go into forced exile on his father's estate. It was during this week (23 July–1 August) that Vera Viazemskaiā wrote her husband that she and Vorontsova were "constantly together" and that Pushkin was visiting "every day," and it was also at this time that Vorontsova gave Pushkin his talisman ring and, presumably, they made love. In any event, while one can dispute the fact that a "swarthy" child (a daughter Sof'ia) born to the Vorontsovs in April 1825 was actually Pushkin's (there is also reason to believe that the "swarthyness" not a Vorontsov trait, may have come from Aleksandr Raevskii's "Greek" or southern features on his mother's side),⁴² what cannot be denied is that in several poems and fragments written by Pushkin that fall and winter in Mikhailovskoe the theme of a "natural child" comes to the fore. Among these works are the lyric "Mladentsu" [To an Infant], where the speaker does not dare give the child his paternal blessing,⁴³ and most convincingly, Aleko's song over the cradle of his child with Zemfira, which Pushkin composed three months after completing *Tsygany* [The Gypsies] and decided for good reason *not* to include in the poem's final version. It is, then, this latter child of love, child of nature [ditta ljubvi, ditta prirody]⁴⁴ that makes its way two years later into *Blackamoor* as the black baby of Ibragim and Countess D., a detail which was not present in the German biography of Gannibal available to Pushkin, except in reverse form (the rumor that the African's first wife had betrayed him by giving birth to a white baby).

Given this background, then, it is hard not to agree with Tsaiylovskaiā's reading of Gannibal's "blackness" in *Blackamoor*.

These last words fix our notice: "He [Gannibal] even envied people who attracted no one's attention, regarding their insignificance as a happy state." These words so suddenly interrupt the evolving theme (what's the point of the "insignificance"?) that an impression is created that one is speaking here not of a Negro among whites but of a poet among ordinary people. It seems that the author has forgotten himself and blurted out something by mistake [*progovoritsia*], given away his real thoughts and feelings. We can re-read this paragraph and hear alongside the word "Negro" another word, "poet" which resonates here as a subtext [*zvuchashchee oboznanie*]. Then this last phrase [that is, about the happiness of those who are "insignificant"] will flow completely naturally from what preceded it.⁴⁵

As already stated, for decades there has been a strong tendency among some patriarchs of Pushkin studies not to indulge fantasies about the poet's erotic

life, including the biographical truth or falsehood of his relations with women on his famous "Don Juan list." Such conjecture appears unseemly, "gossipy," while what is really important are the texts themselves. Let us stick to the "facts," goes this logic, as the rest is not really our business. Makogonenko, for example, does not believe that Pushkin could have had an affair with Vorontsova: the relations between Pushkin and the husband and the wife were simply too strained to allow the poet entrée into the Vorontsov household.⁴⁶ And earlier scholars such as Gertsenzon and Shchegolev decoded the initials of the mysterious fall 1824 correspondent as belonging to Vera Viazemskaja rather than to Elizaveta Vorontsova.⁴⁷ But the evidence on the Isiavlovskii's side is becoming more and more convincing. Thus, to dispute Isiavlovskai'a's findings seems both wrong on the face of it and wrong-headed in terms of Pushkin's psychology of creation—a case both literally and figuratively of throwing the baby out with the bath water. For it does not matter in the end whether Pushkin was in fact the father of Sof'ia Vorontsova. What matters is that this notion of paternity, which is there in the texts, became intertwined in his mind with issues of race and class (that is, acceptance in "society") in such a way that he clearly seems to have imagined his own fate as implicated in his great-grandfather's story.⁴⁸

Yet the poet's creativity did not stop with his separation from Vorontsova and his departure from Odessa, in fact it was ultimately spurred on by them, and that is our main point. His turn back to Russia from the south (that is, his house arrest that is then rewritten as his voluntary rejection of the high romanticism of Napoleon, Byron, and the sea and his equally voluntary acceptance of Karamzin, Shakespeare, and native history) is also hinted at in the storyline of *Blackamoor*, whose hero leaves behind his dreams of high-society eros and Parisian drawing rooms and decides to rejoin his godfather in his adoptive homeland. And it is here, in the return of the (erotically) prodigal godson who is also the forefather, that we can find a continuation of Isiavlovskai'a's argument.

In a poem of early 1825 written in the aftermath of the Vorontsova affair, the speaker explains the secret of his newfound passion for fame: "I desire glory so that your attention [or "hearing"—*slukh*] will be struck constantly by my name."⁴⁹ Fame is necessary wholly to impress her, to remind her of his existence. Something happens, however, during the poet's "impromptu" in Mikhailovskoe that shifts the need for fame away from the all-consuming selfhood of eros. In *Blackamoor*, begun two years later but thematically already on Pushkin's mind that first Mikhailovskoe fall through his writing of the poem "Kak zadumal zhenit'sia tsarskii arap" [How the

Tsar's Blackamoor Decided to Get Married (29 November)],⁵⁰ Ibragim is rescued from his destined-to-be-unhappy affair with the Countess D. not by an abstract wish for glory on his part (something that *he* initiates) but by the direct intercession of none other than Peter the Great.

Ibragim, left by himself, could scarcely collect his thoughts. He was in Petersburg, he had once again met the great man [Peter] in whose company, not yet comprehending his worth, he had spent his childhood. He had to confess to himself, almost with a sense of guilt, that for the first time since their separation the Countess D. had not been the sole preoccupation of his day. He could see that the new way of life that was awaiting him—the work and constant activity—would be able to revive his soul, fatigued by passions, idleness, and an unacknowledged despondency. The thought of being closely associated with a great man and of shaping, together with him, the destiny of a great nation awoke in his heart, for the first time in his life, a noble sentiment of ambition.⁵¹

The message here, one that was apparently not lost on the post-Odessa Pushkin, is that a love, no matter how passionate, that grows out of salon intrigue and that has casual infidelity as its basis, cannot be sustained and is fated to fade. But in Pushkin's rewriting of the meager facts of the German biography, it is through Peter that Gannibal receives all his lessons about self-esteem, *Russian style*: he sees that Peter cares for him as a father and treats him as someone *inherently* worthy even when it was *he* who did not first see the worth of the emperor and who now appears to want to linger in France; Peter meets him at the post station as soon as he returns home and invites him to his table as "one of us"; Peter agrees to serve as his matchmaker and sees no obstacle to amorous advancement in his "African" appearance. In a word, Peter is both tsar and fairy godfather, the all-powerful one who can confer goodness and even "attractiveness" from the *outside* in.

But the Peter of *Blackamoor* is even more than this. It is, in Pushkin's rendering, because of him, because of his faith in his servant/"slave" (here there is the obvious sound-play between *rab* and *arap*), that Ibragim can become a free man who chooses to return to Russia even when it may be in his interest to remain in France (the Europe the poet dreamed of fleeing to in his first months of immurement in Mikhailovskoe). Peter, as it were, seems to allow his godson to adopt him (what the French of *Blackamoor* care nothing about), just as he gives Ibragim a reason for living that in

time comes to counterbalance the pain of his ruptured affair with Countess D.: the "noble sentiment of ambition" to work side by side with this monarch-titan in order to "shape the destiny of a great nation." This of course is Pushkin's, now the *born* Russian's, ambition as well, only where his ancestors were more apt, as warriors, to win their historical spurs through martial deeds, the descendant must do so through words, through the consciousness of being a poet. And the story of the second half of the 1820s and the 1830s is, among other things, precisely this story of how Pushkin's maturing poetic consciousness engages, again and again, from *Boris Godunov* and *Poltava* to *Mednyi vsadnik* [The Bronze Horseman], *Istoriia Pugacheva* [The History of Pugachev], "Skazka o zolotom pushke" [The Tale of the Golden Cockerel], and *Kapitanskia dochka* [The Captain's Daughter], the consciousness of the tsar, in every instance becoming more nuanced, more historically situated, more embedded in an emerging prose or "prosaic" framework that makes the "poetry" all that much more alive and robust.

We have been discussing here one potent instance of the intersection of the autobiographical and the creative in Pushkin.⁵² But these instances abound in all of Pushkin's major works, and to repeat, they have never been properly systematized and made to yield the story that is Pushkin's life through his art. To be sure, mistakes, presumably of "over-reading," will be made, for the creative tension we are talking about is very delicate and nuanced. But as we have tried to suggest, this story cannot be accessed through the rigors of a philological approach that argues that the work exists, separate and self-contained, from the life. Nor can it be accessed through the closed circuitry of classic psychoanalysis, where the return of the repressed "explains" the cultural artifacts meant to forestall the death awaiting all of us. For at the level at which he created, Pushkin always knew, and always remembered, what he was doing.

The external facts of Pushkin's life are, by this juncture in history, essentially exhausted. Serena Vitale's discovery and publication of d'Anthès's letters to Heckeren make for fascinating reading, but they do not alter in any substantial way how we read the last months of Pushkin's life, already studied so exhaustively and well by Stella Abramovich. It is the internal "facts" of Pushkin's creative life, how he reads and reveals himself through others, that needs to be told. Perhaps it is just one story among many, but it is an important one. When Pushkin writes about his former idol Byron in 1835, at a very difficult time in his own life, that "It is said that Byron valued his genealogy more than his artistic creations. A very understandable sentiment,"⁵³ he is speaking about himself, his proud aristocratism, his

fears about the possible evanescence of the poetic word, and his urge for a life authentically lived in history. The sort of personality that stands as father-figure to a tradition, its "origin without origins," does not seem to exhibit linguistic anxiety *per se* but rather hovers at the threshold where personality becomes aware of itself by studying how words shape deeds and deeds words. Shakespeare and Pushkin model life to the point where no abstract philosophy can capture their essence and where a critic like Harold Bloom, coming full circle, can claim that the "human" as we know it is Shakespeare's creation and that Shakespeare reads Freud better than Freud reads Shakespeare. But we are now at a point in our own tradition where the human, as in the "humanities" as "author-centered" disciplines, is dispersing into the multiple and relentlessly reconstituted selves of pop culture and the information revolution. Before these centrifugal tendencies take over for good, it would be well to try to put together an interior biography of Pushkin that our two centuries of information gathering has promised but never quite managed to deliver. It is a task worthy of a new Karamzin, one that will require much time, effort, and a "monkish simplicity" bordering on satanic wisdom. But it is a task whose moment has indeed come.

Notes

1. See Annenkov, *Materialy dlia biografii Pushkina and Pushkin v Aleksandrovskaia epokhu*; and Bartenev, "Rod i detstvo Pushkina," *Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin. Materialy dlia ego biografii*, and "Pushkin v izhnoi Rossii."
2. The best overall discussion of the issues surrounding Pushkin's biography is still, despite its age (1966), *Levkovich, "Biografiia."*
3. See especially Gershenson, *Mudrosť Pushkina*; and Khodassevich, *Poeticheskoe khozaistvo Pushkina, Pushkin i poety ego vremeni*, and *O Pushkine*.
4. Gershenson, *Mudrosť Pushkina*, 220.
5. See Tomashevskii, "Biografiia," "Literature and Biography," *Pushkin. Kniga perviia*, and *Pushkin. Kniga vtoraiia*; and Veresaev, *Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin (Zhizni Pushkina)* and *Pushkin v zhizni*.
6. Tomashevskii, "Literature and Biography," 52.
7. Shabgolev, *Duel' i smert' Pushkina*.
8. Brodskii, A. S. *Pushkin. Biografiia*; and Tyrkova-Williams, *Pushkin*.
9. For Egorov, Lotman had written a biography of the poet that did not show Pushkin living his life but rationally, consciously "constructing" it (the operative word is life-creation/life construction: *zhiznestroitel'stvo*). "Pis'mo lu. M. Lotmana B. F. Egorovu," in Lotman, *Pushkin*, 388.
10. *Ibid*.

11. "If one takes into account that the historical background and Pushkin's milieu are depicted in it [Lotman's biography of the poet] more vividly than the main character, it becomes evident that for [all] its unquestionable merits, the book has not brought us closer to the creation of a genuine biography of Pushkin" (Sarat, *Pushkin*, 43).

12. "Pis'mo In. M. Lotmana B. F. Egorovu," in Lotman, *Pushkin*, 388.

13. Akhmatova, "Kamennyi gosť Pushkina," 273.

14. Khodasevich, "Knigi i ljudi."

15. Sarat, *Pushkin*, 39: "This special relation to the word [of Russian classical literature going back to Pushkin] includes an understanding of the word as an act [ponimanie slova kak deiania] that participates directly in the construction of the world." See further discussion on pp. 39–40, including Gogol's famous attribution to Pushkin of the idea that, contra Derzhavin, "the words of a poet are his deeds" [slova poeta sut' uzhe ego dela].

16. Khodasevich, "Knigi i ljudi."

17. Khodasevich, "Praded i pravnik," 493. Akhmatova comes to precisely the same point, though in a more serious key, when she concludes,

And so, in the tragedy *The Stone Guest* Pushkin is punishing himself—his young, carefree, sinful self, and the theme of jealousy from beyond the grave (that is, the fear of it) sounds as loudly here as the theme of retribution.

Therefore, a careful analysis of *The Stone Guest* brings us to the firm conviction that behind [these] externally borrowed names and situations we have, in essence, not merely a new reworking of the universal legend of Don Juan, but a profoundly personal, original work by Pushkin, the basic character of which is determined not by the *subject* of the legend, but by the personal lyrical feelings, inextricably bound to real-life experience, of Pushkin himself. Before us is the dramatic embodiment of the inner personality of Pushkin, the artistic exposing-to-view [obnashchivanie] of that which tormented and captivated the poet. (Akhmatova, "Kamennyi gosť Pushkina," 273.)

18. Khodasevich, "Arina Rodionovna": "In the poem [Confidante of Magical Olden Times] the old woman-mammy and the lovely maiden-muse appear as two incarnations of one and the same person" (185). Emphasis added. See also Khodasevich, "Iavleniia Muzy."

19. Pushkin, *Poimoe sobranie sochinenii*, 6:188: "Те ныне крест и сень ветвей / Над белой нянею моей." Hereafter referred to as Ps.

20. Khodasevich, "Arina Rodionovna," 184.

21. See Khodasevich, "Tshuе lubvi Pushkina," his review piece on M. A. Tsiaiovskii's *Rasskazy o Pushkine, zapysknye so slova ego dizei*, P. I. Vartanovym (1935), which included the Nashchokin story about Bicaquimont.

22. Pushkin, Pss, 13:116: "Отец мой, воспользуясь отсутствием свидетелей, выбегает и всему дому объявляет, что я его был, хотел быть, замаскился, мог придти" (letter 31 October 1824).

23. Pushkin, Pss, 7:118: "Он . . . он меня / хотел уойть. . . . Доказывать не стану я, хоть знаю, / что точно смерти жаждет он моей, / Хоть знаю то,

что покушался он / Меня . . . Обокрасть." See Khodasevich, "Soga s otsom," 465–468.

24. Akhmatova, "Kamennyi gosť Pushkina," 265.

25. See Bethea and Davydov, "Pushkin's Saturnine Cupid"; and Davydov, "Pushkin's Merry Undertaking."

26. Bethea and Davydov, "Pushkin's Saturnine Cupid," 17.

27. Bethea and Davydov, "The [H]istory of the Village Gortshino," 298. Emphasis added.

28. Khodasevich, "Praded i pravnik," 493.

29. See discussion in Sarat, *Pushkin*, 115–121.

30. See, Tsiaiovskii, *Letopis'*, 577; Vatsuro et al., comp., *A. S. Pushkin v vospriimaniakh*, 1:153, 2:7; Sarat, *Pushkin*, 110; Tsiaiovskii, Modzalevskii, Zenger, comps., *Rykoni Pushkina*, 637.

31. Sarat, *Pushkin*, 117.

32. E.g., "Prozetrina," "Puskai uvenchannii lyubov'iu krasoty" [Let him who is crowned by the love of beauty], "Mladentsu" [To an Infant], "Nenasnyi den' rodnik" [The gloomy day has expired], "Sozhzhennoe pis'mo" [The Burned Letter], "Zheliannie slavy" [Desire for Glory], etc.

33. Vatsuro, et al., comp., *A. S. Pushkin v vospriimaniakh*, 1:214–215.

34. Lotman, *Pushkin*, 105.

35. Ibid., 74. See also Tomaszewski, "Literature and Biography."

36. Pushkin, Pss, 6:591–592: "То вдруг ее я ненавидел, / И трепетал, и слезы лил / С тоской и ужасом в ней виден / Созданные злобных, тайных сил; / Ее пронзительные взоры, / Улыбка, голос, разговоры— / Все было в ней отравлено, / Изменной злой напоено, / Все в ней алкало слез и стона, / Пытаюсь кровью моей . . . / То вдруг я мрамор видел в ней, / Перед мольбой Пигмалиона / Еще холодный и немой, / Но вскоре жаркий и живой. // Словами вещего поэта / Сказатъ и мне позволено: / *Темира, Дидона, и Лилета*— / Как сон забыты мной давно / Но есть одна меж их толпою . . . / Я долго был пленен одною— / Но был ли я любим, и кем, / И где, и долго ли? . . . зачем / Вам это знать? Не в этом дело! / Что было, то прошло, то вадор; / А дело в том, что с этих пор / Во мне уж сердце охладено, / Закрылось для любви оно, / И все в нем пусто и темно."

37. Ibid., 6:591: "Владык чувствам, ужом / Она связла совершенством."

38. Ibid., 6:593: "Как будто требовать возможно / От мотылька виль от людей / И чувствовать глубоких и страстей."

39. Pushkin, Pss, 8:4; and *Complete Prose*, 12.

40. Pushkin, Pss, 8:5; and *Complete Prose*, 13.

41. See Pushkin, Pss, 13:65–66; Pushkin, *Rabochie tetni* [The Working Notebooks], vol. 3, PD no. 832, l. 30; and Romichyev, "Rabochiaa tetrad' Pushkina," 239–241.

42. The initial idea, developed by Tsiaiovskii, that the child was indeed Pushkin's belongs to I. A. Novikov.

43. Pushkin, Pss, 2:351.

44. Ibid., 4:445.

45. Tsiaiovskii, "Klapani menia," 358.

46. Makogonenko, *Tvorchestvo A. S. Pushkina*, 53–66, esp. 60.
47. See *ibid.*, 70–71.
48. "Who was the father of Sofia Vorontsova is for us a matter of no significance. What is important to us is the psychology of Pushkin" (Izavlovskaya, "Khramnitsa," 376–377).
49. Pushkin, *Pss*, 2:392–293: "Желая славы я, чтоб именем моим / Трой снух был поражен всечасно."
50. *Blackamoor* is linked additionally to Mikhailovskoe by the fact that it was begun there, during a now voluntary stay, in July 1827. The estates of Mikhailovskoe and Petrovskoe border each other.
51. Pushkin, *Pss*, 8:12; and *Complete Prose*, 19–20.
52. Another such instance which space does not allow us to discuss properly here is Pushkin's "serf romance" [реpositnoi roman] with Olga Kalashnikova, the pretty young servant woman at Mikhailovskoe. As Khodasevich was the first to point out, the plot of the unfinished *Rusalka* [The Water Nymph, (1829–1832)] appears to owe much of its psychological verisimilitude to the feelings provoked by Pushkin's 1825–1826 affair with Kalashnikova, which resulted in another out-of-wedlock birth. While scholars as varied as Tomashvskii, Shchegolev, and M. L. Gofman all contested Khodasevich's version of the "facts" (not knowing the subsequent history of Kalashnikova, Khodasevich had speculated that she may have drowned herself like the heroine in the play), the psychological basis for the life-to-art connection is beyond dispute: Pushkin clearly felt guilty (especially after his exorciation of such abuses in "Derevnia" [The Village]) about his role in Kalashnikova's life (she was forced to marry a local drunk in order to cover over the *barin's* mistake) and the theme of retribution for past sins, so crucial to other works such as *The Stone Guest*, is the prime mover of the plot. What is intriguing about this autobiographical nexus, however, and what was not lost on the "compositionally sensitive" Pushkin, is that now it is the peasant girl who is impregnated by the prince, where in *Blackamoor* it is the high society countess who gives birth to the *tzgot's* [social outcast's] black baby. See Khodasevich, *Poeticheskoe khodzhenie Pushkina*. In his *Pushkin i poety ego vremeni*, 1:293–345 (originally appeared as "Rusalka: Predpolozheniia i fakty" in *Sovremennye zapiski* 20 [1924]: 302–354). For complete bibliographic information on the responses (by Tomashvskii, Vinokur, M. L. Gofman, Vereasev, and Shchegolev) generated by Khodasevich's hypothesis as well as his rebuttal ("V sporakh o Pushkine" [1928]), see Khodasevich, *Pushkin i poety ego vremeni*, 1:438–439 and 2:137–147.
53. Pushkin, *Pss*, 11:275.

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