7. ALEXANDER SERGEEVICH PUSHKIN  
(1799–1837)

ALEКSАНDR СЕРГЕЕВИЧ ПУШКИН

Fig. 2-11. O. Kiprensky’s famous portrait of Pushkin

- Пу́шкин—нáще всë.
  (Аполло́н Григо́рьев)

Pushkin is our everything.
  (Apollon Grigoriev)

- Пу́шкин есть явленíе чрезвычайное и, может быть, единственное явленíе русского ду́ха: это русский человéк в его развитиí, в какóм он, может быть, явится чéрез двéсти лет.
  (Гóголь)

Pushkin is an extraordinary phenomenon, and perhaps a unique manifestation of the Russian spirit: this is the Russian as he will perhaps appear [become] after two hundred years of development.
  (Gogol)

- An entry in Tsar Nicholas I’s diary after talking to Pushkin: Се́годня я разгова́ривал с умне́йшим мûжем Россиíи. “Today I spoke with the most intelligent man in Russia.”

Pushkin is a Russian national idol. No other poet or writer has attracted as much public attention to his work, personal life, character, drafts (including the doodles on their margins), and personal letters to his wife, friends and enemies, as Pushkin. No other writer is as revered or as widely quoted as Pushkin. Russian scholars consider him the founder of contemporary Russian literature and the creator of a literary language.

Russia celebrates the anniversaries (dates are given in New Style) of his birth (June 6) and death (February 10)—not only officially but often in private. One of the most fruitful and inspired periods of Pushkin’s life, the fall of 1830 that he spent in his little village of Boldino, became a synonym for a season of productive work of the highest quality: Бóлдийская òсень. [See also Chapter 10]
Pushkin’s short life, his astounding work, his development as a writer and thinker have been studied and described by generations of scholars, literary critics and writers. His mother, Надежда Осиповна Ганибал (Nadezhda Osipovna Hannibal), was a granddaughter of the Abyssinian prince Ibragim Hannibal, a captive given to Peter the Great by the Turkish sultan; Ibragim became a favorite of the tsar and attained the rank of general. Pushkin’s pride in these biographical ties with Peter the Great shows in his unfinished novel, The Moor of Peter the Great, “Арін Петрович Великого”. His father, Сергей Львович, Sergey L’vovich, was an impoverished descendant of one of the oldest aristocratic families; the Pushkins are mentioned in The Chronicles, “Повесть временных лет” and appear in Pushkin’s Boris Godunov. As a child, Pushkin did not receive much attention from his parents; instead, he was adored by his old nanny Arina Rodionovna, a peasant woman, a serf, who told him countless folk stories and fairy-tales; his affection for her is reflected in his poems “К няне” [see 5.11] and “Буря мглы небо кроет” [see 5.6]. As soon as one hears the words няня Аріна Родионовна Nanny Arina Rodionovna every textbook: “Что за прелесть эти сказки! Каждая есть поэма!” “What a delight these fairy-tales are! Each is a poem!”

Pushkin began to write very early; his first poems, published at the age of 15, were instantly recognized as outstanding. During his Lyceum period, while still very young, he became a cherished and admired friend of liberal-minded
intellectual army officers, many of whom were later implicated in a failed revolt against Tsar Nicholas I (December 14, 1825).

Pushkin’s liberalism, independence, his scandalous duels, and his rising literary fame (including the popularity of his privately-circulated blasphemous poems and epigrams) infuriated Tsar Alexander I, who sent the poet into exile—twice (first to the south of Russia, the Caucasus, and the second time to the poet’s own village, Mikhailovskoe).

Pushkin’s marriage to one of the most beautiful women of his time, Natal’ia Nikolaevna Goncharova Наталия Николаевна Гончарова, the untoward attention paid her by Tsar Nicholas I, Pushkin’s tragic death from a lethal wound received in a duel with Georges D’Anthés, the Frenchman who widely advertised his passion for Pushkin’s wife—all this is part of the Russian Everyman’s knowledge of Pushkin, and a subject of fascinating studies and speculations on the part of scholars.

The wide use of the name “Pushkin” as a humorous reproach to someone refusing to take personal responsibility is mirrored in a very popular satirical puppet show called Puppets «Куклы», in which the puppets represent Yeltsin and other prominent political figures:

—А на культуру кто будет давать, Пушкин? “And who is going to give money to support culture, Pushkin?”

(This is a play on a line from The Happy Guys Весёлые ребята (1934), a film by Aleksandrov: see Chapter 9.)
Here are jokes testifying to Pushkin’s popularity:

(a) Два французских туриста — у памятника Пушкину:
— Ну скажите, какая несправедливость, — попал Дантес, а памятник поставили Пушкину!

Two French tourists are standing near the Pushkin monument, and one says “How unfair; it was D’Anthés who hit the target, but they erected a monument to Pushkin!”
In connection with the anniversary of A.S. Pushkin, Stalin announced a competition for the best design of a monument to the great poet. The third prize was won by a monument depicting Pushkin reading a volume of Stalin’s work; the second by one with Stalin reading Pushkin; the first prize went to one with Stalin reading Stalin.

One of the poems that best illustrates just how far Pushkin and his work have infiltrated the Russian mind and speech is «К Чаядее у» “To Chaadaev” (1818). Petr Iakovlevich Chaadaev was Pushkin’s free-thinking, Western-oriented philosopher friend. His unorthodox views led to his being declared insane.

Fig. 2-18. P.Ia. Chaadaev

We did not revel in the illusions of love, of hope, and of peaceful fame for long; the amusements of youth soon vanished like a dream, like morning mist. But our hearts still burn with yearning; under the yoke of oppression we await the call of the fatherland. In an anguish of anti-
cipation, we long, like a young lover would long for an agreed-upon rendezvous, for the moment when sacred freedom will come. While freedom still inflames us, while our hearts are still devoted, let us, my friend, dedicate to our fatherland our soul’s noble impulses! Believe, my friend: the star of enchanting happiness will rise, Russia will rouse herself from her long sleep, and on the ruins of tyranny the nation will write our names.

The sincerity and ardor of this poem can bring tears to the eyes of any Russian; just to say the words “звезд пленительного счастья” “the star of enchanting happiness” or “душ прекрасные порывы” “the soul’s noble impulses” is to step into a magic world of happiness and hope. This, however, does not prevent a Russian from enjoying the sacrilegious use of the same lines to mock the hypocrisy of the authorities, as in an old pre-perestroika joke:

— Почему у вас в КГБ на стене висит портрет Пушкина, а не Дзержинского?
— Потому что Пушкин первый сказал: «Душ прекрасные порывы!»

“Why do you have Pushkin’s portrait on the wall in the KGB office? Why not Dzerzhinsky’s [founder of the KGB]?”

“Because he was the first to say ‘Strangle the noble impulses!’”

This quotation has to be pronounced with the intonation of an imperative. The punchline is based on the coincidence between the Genitive of душ (‘soul’) and the imperative of the verb душить (‘strangle, repress’), which is of course lost in translation. Another joke of the perestroika period shows people’s bewilderment and mistrust of the entire concept of glasnost:

Товарищ, верь: пройдёт она, Эпоха горбачёвской гласности, И Комитет Госбезопасности Запомни наши имена.

Comrade, trust me: the era of Gorbachev’s glasnost will pass, and the KGB will remember our names.

Another joke makes use of lines from the poem to convey people’s disillusion with perestroika:

О перестройке: «Любви, надежды, тихой славы Недолго нежил нас обман». About perestroika: We did not revel in the illusions of love, of hope, and peaceful fame for long.
The same poem is quoted on a perestroika-era poster voicing ecological concerns. The poster promises that after purifying filters are installed “a grateful posterity will write our names”:

«Очистнёе сооружён—досрочно!
И благодарные потомки напишут наши имена».
(V. Cherenov, S. Uvarov and V. Kozlov. Environmental Pollution)

7.1. From «Узник» “A Prisoner” (1822):

2-24 Сижу за решёткой в темнице сырой,
Вскормлённый в неволе орёл молодой.

A young eagle brought up in captivity, I am behind bars in a damp dungeon.

*Use:* Since there are two expressions with the same verb *сидеть* “sit”: *сидеть в тюрьме* “to be in prison,” and *сидеть дома* “to stay home,” the above lines are often used as a joke implying that one has to stay home (that is, doing some tedious work).

7.2. From «Разговор книгопродавца с поэтом» “Conversation between a Publisher and a Poet” (1824):

2-25 Не продаётся вдохновенье,
Но можно рукопись продать.

The inspiration is not for sale, but the manuscript is.


7.3. From «Зимний вечер» “Winter Evening” (1825):

2-26 7.5.1. Буря мглою небо крьёт,
Вихри снега круты.
То, как зверь, она завоет,
То заплачет, как дитя.
A blizzard covers the sky with gloom, now howling like a wild beast, now crying like a baby.

Illustration:

(a) A passage from Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita*, in which the mediocre poet Riukhin looks at Pushkin’s monument with envy and produces the following monologue:

... [В]от приместает острый интерес. "Какой бы шаг он ни сделал в жизни, что бы ни случилось с ним, все шло ему на пользу, все обращалось в его славе! Но как он сделал? Я не понимаю … Что-нибудь особенное есть в этих словах: "Буря мглою …"? Не понимаю!.. Повезло, повезло! — вдруг ядовито заключил Рюхин [...] — стрелял, стрелял в него этот белогвардеец и раздробил бедро и обесценил бессмертие …"

Here is an example of real luck […], whatever step he took in his life, whatever happened to him—everything benefited him, everything tended to his glory! But what did he do? Unbelievable! Is there anything special in these words: ‘The storm covers the sky with gloom?’ I don’t get it! … Luck, pure luck!” Riukhin concluded with sudden venom. “That White Guard shot and shot at him, and smashed his hip and guaranteed his immortality …”

(b) The second line of the poem, “То как зверь он завоет, то заплачет, как дитя,” is often used without change to refer to poor singing (or any other loud out-of-place noise, for example, a car which refuses to start).

7.5.2.

Let’s drink, O dear friend of my poor youth, let’s drink to forget our grief. Where is the cup? It will cheer our hearts.

Illustration:

(a) The line: “Въьлем с горя. Где же кружка?” is, naturally, often quoted in a country like Russia where alcoholism is a serious problem and alcohol consumption is surrounded with elaborate rituals. You can cheer up any Russian by quoting this line whenever a drink is offered (even if the beverage is not alcoholic).
(b) A coy advertisement in Огонёк March 1997 slightly changes the immortal line: «В/ýр/é acute/пьем ЧАЮ, где же кр/uk acute/жка, с/èst acute/рдцу б/uk acute/дет весел/èst acute/й ... (мог бы сказать поэт). Путь к с/èrst acute/рдцу росси/ya acute/нина леж/izhe acute/т ... ч/èрез ча/šкучу ч/éя» “‘Let us have some TEA, where is the cup, it’ll cheer up our hearts ...’ (the poet might have said). The way to a Russian’s heart is through a cup of tea.”

7.6. The poem «19 октября» “October 19th” (1825) is dedicated to the reunion of Pushkin’s school-mates, the first graduates of the Lyceum лиц/éй, a very special higher-education school for children of the Russian nobility, where Pushkin studied with other gifted young aristocrats. It was hoped that the tsar would invite graduates of the Lyceum to form an enlightened council. The establishment of the Lyceum next to the tsar’s summer residence in Tsar’s Village (Ц/áрское Село) near Petersburg was taken by Russian society almost as a promise to transform the autocratic government into a constitutional monarchy. This never happened. Many of Pushkin’s Lyceum friends joined the secret society and participated in the December uprising on Senate Square Сен/áтская пло/щадь. Some of the Lyceists became prominent poets (Delvig, Kiukhel′beker), others government officials—but all cherished their Lyceum memories and great affection for each other throughout their lives.

7.6.1.

Друзь/ya acute/й мо/zi/my, прекр/áсен наш со/ýо з!
Он как душ/é неразд/éлим и в/éчен—

My friends, how beautiful is our union! Like one’s soul, it is indivisible and eternal.

Illustration:

(a) The line Друзь/ya acute/й мо/zi/my, прекр/áсен наш со/ýо з! is often repeated as a toast when drinking to the health of friends.

(b) One of the episodes of the TV show «К/uk acute/клы» (October 1996) was entirely based on Pushkin’s poem «19 октября»; at some point Зиóра, the puppet representing Zyuganov, the communist rival of Yeltsin, exclaims: «Друзь/ya acute/й мо/zi/my! Прекр/áсен наш Со/ýо з!» “My friends! Our Union [the Soviet Union] is beautiful.” The puppet representing Yeltsin is called Бори́ска, a diminutive/pejorative form of the name Boris that is an easily recognizable reference to Pushkin’s drama «Бори́с Годунóв», in which the dissatisfied boyars refer disrespectfully to Tsar Boris as Boriska behind his back. Boriska laments the lack of loyal friends like Pushkin’s and imagines how all of his comrades-in-arms would behave if he were Pushkin and they Decembrists: not a single one of them would go to Senate Square, there would be no uprising, and the whole of Russian history would have been different.
Fig. 2-19. The Yeltsin puppet from the television show *Puppets*

7.6.2.

Куда бы нас ни бросила судьбина,
И счастье куда б ни повело,
Всё те же мы: нам целий мир—чужбина;
Отчёство нам—Царское Село.

Wherever chance and fortune cast us and destiny bids us go, we stay the same: to us the whole world is alien, our Fatherland is Tsarskoe Selo.

7.6.3.

Служенье муз не терпит суеты;
Прекрасное должно быть величаво.

Serving the Muses is irreconcilable with fussiness; beauty must have majesty.

7.7. The poem «К ***» “To ***” (1825) is dedicated to Анна Петровна Керн

Anna Petrovna Kern:

7.7.1.

Я помню чудное мгновенье:
Передо мной явилась ты,
Как мимолётное виденье,
Как гений чистой красоты.

I remember a wonderful moment: you appeared before me, like a fleeting vision, like the embodiment of pure beauty.
Use:

(a) Whenever someone begins a sentence with «Я помню ...» “I remember ...” the person risks being interrupted with the continuation of Pushkin’s line: «чудное мгновенье» “a wondrous moment.”

(b) If someone drops by a friend’s house for a very short time, someone is bound to comment «Ну, ты как мимолётное виденье!» “Well, you are like a fleeting vision.”

In my remote corner, in the gloom of isolation, my days dragged, without divinity or inspiration, without tears, life, or love.

Use: «без божеств, без вдохновенья» can be said about any piece of writing, movie and so on, to indicate that it is dull and uninspiring.

7.8. From «Пророк» “The Prophet” (1826)

7.8.1.

Tormented by a spiritual thirst, I dragged myself through a gloomy desert, and a six-winged seraph appeared before me.

7.8.2.

I Божа глас ко мне воззвáл:
«Восста́нь, прорóк, и ви́жь, и ви́емли,
Испóлпись воле́ю моей,
И, обходя моря и земли,
Глагóлом жги сердца́ людёй». 
And then the voice of God called upon me: “Arise, my prophet! See and hear, fulfill my will! Cross the lands and seas, inflame people’s hearts with your words

_Illustration:_ An article under the headline «Глаголом жечь сердцá людéй …» “To inflame people’s hearts with a word” in _Огонёк_, February 1997 criticizes the poor quality of advertisements. The solemn headline is hilariously funny in view of the fact that the advertisements that were supposed to “inflame people’s hearts” were displayed on match-boxes.

7.9. Lines from the poem «Нáне» “To My Nanny” (1827):

Подрúга днéй моéй сурóвых,
Голúбка дрéхлaя мóй!

A loyal friend of my bleak days, my decrepit old dear!

Fig. 2-21. _Winter Evening_, a depiction of Pushkin and his Nanny

Use: These two lines are often addressed with humorous affection to a female friend (Привéт, подрúга днéй моéй сурóвых!) “Hi, loyal friend of my bleak days!” or in introducing her to someone: «А это Тáня, подрúга днéй моéй сурóвых, голúбка дрéхлaя мóй!» “And this is Tanya, a loyal friend of my bleak days, my decrepit old dear!”

7.10. The poem «Во глубинé сибирских руд» “In the depth of Siberian mines” (1827) had to be memorized in Soviet schools. Pushkin addressed it to his friends the Decembrists, sentenced to hard labor in Siberia for rising against the tsar in December 1825.

7.10.1. «Нéе пропáдёт ваш скóрбный труд» “Your sorrowful labor will not go for nothing.” This particular line from the poem became especially popular and
is used whenever one is jokingly thanking somebody for something. The full quotation is:

Во глубине сибирских руд
Храните гордое терпенье,
Не пропадёт ваш сконченный труд
И дум высохое стремленье.

In the depth of Siberian mines keep your proud patience. Your sorrowful labor and the lofty aspiration of your thoughts will not go for nothing.

Illustration: Vladimir Fedorovich Odoevsky Одзевский, a poet and one of the Decembrists, wrote an answer to Pushkin’s poem entitled «А.С. Пушкину» or «Ответ на послание А.С. Пушкину» “To Pushkin (An Answer to the Missive of A.S. Pushkin)” (1827):

Наш сконченный труд не пропадёт:
Из искры возгорится пламя.

Our sorrowful labor will not go for nothing, the spark will kindle a flame.

The line «Из искры возгорится пламя» “the spark will kindle a flame” was made popular by Lenin, who took it as a motto for his first political newspaper, Іскра The Spark.

7.10.2. Темницы рухнут — и свобода
Вас привет радостно у вхо, ..., 

The prisons will collapse and Freedom will greet you joyfully at the door.

Illustration: Headline in Общая газета. Aug. 1997, to an article about the disastrous state of the prisons: «Темницы рухнут и ...» “The prisons will collapse and ...”

7.11. The whole text of the poem «Ты и Вы» “Thou [singular] and You [plural]” (1828) used to be memorized:

Пустое вы сердечным ты
Она, обмолься, заменила
И все счастливые мечты
В душе влюбленной пробудила.
Пред неё задумчиво стою,
Свести очей с неё нет смысла;
И говорю ей как ты милый!
И мыслию: как тебя люблю!