The Loneliness of Russia's First Poet: Pushkin

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Used as narration in the film; The film is a video essay based on this text.

Do not praise him. In our vile age
Hoary Neptune is the earth's ally.
In every element man is —
A tyrant, a traitor, or a prisoner.

— Pushkin, to Vyazemsky, 1826, after the Decembrist uprising.

Free-minded dissidents in the Soviet era — or today, in the climate of constrained freedoms in twenty-first-century Russia — may recall the stories of Chaadaev, Herzen, Pushkin: people who, too, confronted the oppression of thought. They may draw from their example strength for life and for resistance in the present. But how, in his turn, did Pushkin — the first great poet of Russia — find the strength to defend a free position? With what great image could he identify himself, in order to find respite from his inner contradictions?

Pushkin is rightly regarded as the first great poet of Russia. Such an opinion, for example, was expressed by the foremost literary critic of his time, Vissarion Belinsky. Yet this does not mean that Pushkin stood alone among unremarkable figures. On the contrary, his personality developed intellectually within a society that could surpass him in education and in the courage to dissent from the realities of Russia at the turning point of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many of the bold individuals who surrounded Pushkin would later join the Decembrist uprising against autocracy, supporting liberal ideas.

And although many of these brave men made history on the battlefields of 1812 and during the uprising on Senate Square, their destinies and that of Pushkin represent two opposite kinds of immortality: historical and mental. Here lies a paradox: the vast uprising of December 1825 — unshakable in the sincerity of its sacrifice — has been treated by history like an old monument overgrown with moss, defining not ideas or personality, but merely a date: December 14.

Pushkin, by contrast, who was neither a soldier nor a member of the Decembrists' secret societies, left behind a creative legacy whose multiple levels — from the aesthetic to the semantic — contain a contribution to the moral consciousness of his era. His influence is felt even today, at the level of a person's existential experience.

Despite the authoritarianism and inherent lack of freedoms in Russia during the reigns of Alexander I and later Nicholas I, society was forming itself as highly politically conscious. And despite the failure of the uprising, the tightening of censorship, and the atmosphere of suspicion, there remained within society a demand for a dynamic political thought. Intellectuals began to discern it secretly in poetry. And Pushkin, as one of the first poets, was discussed more than anyone else in the attempt to discover a politically vital position. Here Pushkin offered not only a sense of freedom, but also examined it from the sharpest moral angles.

In Pushkin's life, the influence of the Decembrist circles to which he gravitated shaped his vocabulary with terms defining unfreedom and despotism. They formed his language of resistance. But the vocabulary of his personal sensations from life in disgrace and exile he formed himself. This feeling is unlike the monument of Peter I looming over St. Petersburg. It resembles someone walking almost just behind you — an invisible figure whom, when you turn around, you neither see nor hear, for like fear, he exists only in your mind. And in reality he is merely an unnoticed piece of clothing that strikes against you as you move, creating the sensation that someone is following.

And, illumined by the pale moon,
Stretching forth his hand on high,
Behind him rushes the Bronze Horseman
On a loudly galloping steed;

Fear, as an experience, does not exist only for the active participants of the Decembrist movement. Nor does it exist merely for some abstract future. If you are a minor official living quietly, without active participation in public life, it is unrealistic to feel yourself at the sharp edge of repression and to worry as though you were a victim of the regime. Far more painful is the feeling of an incomplete life — a feeling that is all-consuming. And although many factors may produce such a sensation, we shall consider it here as the essence of living in an unfree and backward country — backward not for lack of thinkers, but because of authoritarianism.

It was precisely such a country that Russia was as it entered the nineteenth century and passed through the Napoleonic Wars. Throughout the nineteenth century, revolutionary and liberal ideas constantly arose within the empire. Yet it would also be incorrect to imagine tsarist Russia as an iron cage of thought. One need only recall the publication of Chaadaev's *Philosophical Letters*, for which he was declared insane. Or the open promotion of liberal ideas by Nikolai Ivanovich Turgenev in the literary salons and evenings of St. Petersburg — after which he wrote to his brother: it was not for this that we embraced liberal ideas, in order to make concessions to boors. And he, in turn, encountered what every person with a opposition in an authoritarian country encounters — fear, misunderstanding, and condemnation from those around him. Often this fear was disguised as concern: "What are you saying? That's dangerous." But in reality it was less a condemnation of the other than an admission of one's own unfreedom and dependence on limits and fear.

Pushkin understood this with remarkable clarity. In his works he described precisely the psychology of society, without descending into theatrical generalizations. He diagnosed the age not by merely observing its symptoms, but, like a true philosopher, struck at the cause. And for him the cause was not the ruler, but an eternal dilemma of human nature: anxiety before unfreedom and the impossibility of fully realizing oneself.

But whatever happened, Pushkin wrote for people, and his characters, for the sake of deeper understanding, also had to be human. In the Boldino autumn of 1833, Pushkin composed the epic poem *The Bronze Horseman*. After its publication, this would become the name by which the sculpture of Peter I on horseback in St. Petersburg — mentioned by Pushkin — came to be known.

In the poem, St. Petersburg is devastated by a flood, and the Emperor of All Russia, Alexander I, justifies himself before the people for his helplessness in the face of catastrophe. Then he steps away from the balcony and weeps, now justifying his powerlessness before himself. He had a throne, authority, and the image of a reformer. But he lacked either resolve or talent… He

possessed the image of a sovereign, yet in reality he was merely a hero. And over every hero fate holds dominion. We may perceive this in the following lines:

The late Tsar still ruled Russia
With glory. Onto the balcony,
Sad and troubled, he stepped forth
And said: "Against God's elements
Even Tsars cannot contend."

Pushkin subconsciously anticipated this shame. As a lyceum student at the Tsarskoye Selo Lyceum, he had in his youth been personally acquainted with the emperor. Evidence of this lies in his "Ode to Liberty," where the theme of the murder of Paul I is touched upon. And although the ode contained no explicit judgment, the mere mention of that event embarrassed the Tsar, as Academician Yury Lotman has noted.

Pushkin deliberately places into the mouth of Alexander I a phrase in which the emperor speaks of his mission in the plural: "Against God's elements even Tsars cannot contend." He says *Tsars*, not *a Tsar*, although in Russia he alone is the sovereign with a single word of authority. Here one senses the psychology of an incomplete man — that same anxiety before unfreedom mentioned above. If in an ordinary person it manifests as fear of failing to conform to a totalitarian society, then in the Tsar a similar problem arises from the absence of genuine subjectivity — the very quality that ought to belong to a sovereign.

The tragedy of history: Alexander I was not allowed to realize himself. Even his father, Emperor Paul I — killed as the result of a palace coup — possessed the courage to pursue his own, albeit contradictory, policy. Alexander I was granted power and a voice. Yet it seems that neither a single individual nor the elites alone, but an entire epoch closed before him the path to the true realization of the ideas that had long formed within his soul, within the hopes of Alexander I. Fate placed him upon the throne of real authority burdened with ambition and with the confidence that he had already triumphed over his father, with whom he had a competitive relationship. Yet fear of angering the elites again, and guilt over his complicity in the murder of his own father, drained his strength and limited his power.

The people in this poem drift like tin soldiers, watching the catastrophe and the death of the city. They are like figures on parade, marching in formation at the front, but in times of crisis losing their shape and, in fear and without finding themselves, being carried away by the storm.

A universal characteristic of the human being outside culture is inward isolation. An uncultivated person has no true communion with others. A paternalistic, authoritarian regime, in order to control people, sets before them the goal of the state — for example, duty to the motherland. The ordinary person must identify with it in order to find belonging. Yet in moments of crisis, when the state can no longer unite society around this sense of duty, a whirlpool of events begins in which people can drift only as victims. For without an identity rooted in duty to the state, and in the absence of culture, they close themselves off inwardly and at best become passive observers. At worst — like hungry predators infected with petty ideas — they turn against culture itself.

The tragedy of Alexander I is the tragedy of every Russian of that era. And if we generalize politically, we arrive at a characterization of autocracy and authoritarianism in two words: constraint and incompleteness. In contrast stands the idea of independent philosophical thought, which unites people with views opposed to the regime and allows them to move together through crisis without the constraints of fear of conforming to it.

His dream… Or in a dream
Does he behold it? Or is all our life
Nothing but an empty dream,
Heaven's mockery of the earth?

In studying Pushkin's biography, we must boldly acknowledge: Pushkin was not a combat machine for the reform and liberalization of Russia. He had personal relations with Emperor Alexander I. And deep within, he judged him as more than merely "a ruler who failed to meet expectations." Pushkin also owned several hundred serfs. And unlike some of his Decembrist friends — for example, the Turgenev brothers — he did not receive a foreign education.

Yet no one today has the right to condemn Pushkin for any aspect of his творчество or life that at the time may have appeared complementary to the authorities. In the twenty-first century, we cannot criticize Pushkin in the way his contemporaries did. He was a complex man in a complex epoch. Nikolai Turgenev once wrote: it is not for him to judge progressive ideas. But we cannot speak so. For in that case, it would amount to disrespect toward his biography.

Answering the central question of this essay: precisely because Pushkin was one of the first poets of Russia, it fell to him to be the first to look clearly at the political condition of the empire and with hope toward forthcoming change. If in contemporary Russia a person seeks a form of life and relies on poets such as Pushkin, then in his own time Pushkin relied upon the hope of sustaining "encouraging impulses" within himself. And his hope was indeed justified — though not at the level of the system, but at the level of a tradition of thinking. And that tradition, in turn, opens the way to defining new forms of community beyond the regime…

"Oh, how many wondrous discoveries
Mind and Labor still prepare for us."

— Pushkin, 1829.

This article was written with the aid of notes from lectures by Y. M. Lotman.