

## Visions of History: Chance and Certainty in A. S. Pushkin's

### *The Bronze Horseman and Boris Godunov*<sup>1</sup>

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Proud of his ancestry which he traced back to the twelfth century, Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) displayed a profound interest both in history - with all its quirks and myths - and in historical conflict. He was especially captivated by "periods of Russian history marked by turmoil and dramatic change".<sup>2</sup> Indeed, his fascination with the apparently bizarre irrationalities and absurdities of Russia's past motivated him to pen a whole range of works in both prose and poetry. These include his Oleg cycle of lyrics (1822-29), *Poltava* (1828), and *Kapitanskaia dochka/ The Captain's Daughter* (1836). Of particular significance are his two historical masterpieces dealing with crucial turning points in the rise of the State and the development of Russian national identity. His drama, *Boris Godunov* (1825) relates to the Time of Troubles (1598-1613) and his narrative poem, *Mednyi vsadnik/ The Bronze Horseman* (1833) refers to the riddling age of Peter the Great and his reforms.

Inspired by *L'Encyclopédie* (1750–1765) of Denis Diderot (1713-84), A. S. Pushkin adopted its principles of religious tolerance and freedom of thought, as well as its rejection of the notion of uninterrupted progress. Fascinated by the theatre, he was influenced profoundly by Shakespearian drama. Moreover, in his research for *Boris Godunov* - his tragedy about the interregnum between the Rurik and Romanov dynasties - he regarded N. M. Karamzin's monolithic *Istoriia gosudarstva Rossiiskogo/ History of the Russian State* (1816-26) a particularly useful source. Closely familiarizing himself with this epic work which greatly inspired him, he dedicated his own tragedy to this legendary luminary of Russian letters.

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<sup>1</sup> This updated article is based upon a section from Nigel H. Foxcroft, 'The Principle of Conflict in Certain Historical and Lyrical Works of A. S. Pushkin: A Thematic and Linguistic Investigation', Master of Philosophy dissertation, University of Sheffield, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Svetlana Evdokhimova (1999) *Pushkin's Historical Imagination*. New Haven & London: Yale UP, xiii.

Russia's foremost poetic talent of the early nineteenth century, Pushkin was to turn to intensive historical research as his maturity increased, as had Karamzin (1766-1826), the leading sentimentalist of the eighteenth century. For the latter, the poetic charm of distance was of utmost importance, for he provided a narrative of Russian political history and the growth of tsardom up to the rise of the Romanov dynasty in 1613. Pushkin, however, *commenced* his historical survey with the reign of Tsar Boris Godunov (1551-1605), preferring to document the life of Russia's more recent past. In this respect, Jurij Striedter reaches the following assumption:

Pushkin moved... closer and closer to his own times, rather than straying to even remoter and vaguer periods in history. This reflects a general tendency in Pushkin's poetry and poetics to eschew the vague for the clear.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, Pushkin is concerned with four major periods in Russian history: the Time of Troubles (1598-1613), Peter the Great (1672-1725), the Pugachev Cossack Rebellion (1774-75), and the struggle of Russia against the tyranny of Napoleon who invaded Moscow in 1812.

In his study of Karamzin's *History* - which reached twelve tomes by the time of its author's death - Pushkin was entranced by volumes ten and eleven in particular. Spanning the epoch of Boris Godunov, they provided him with a treatment of Russian history from the sixteenth up to the beginning of the seventeenth century. Indeed, he himself confessed to Prince Peter Viazemsky (1792-1878), a leading contemporary poet, "Ty khochesh *plana*? Voz'mi konets X-go i ves' odinnadtsatyi tom, vot sebe i *plan*"<sup>4</sup> ("Do you want the *plan*? Take the end of volume 10 and the whole of 11 - that will serve as a *plan*").<sup>5</sup> However, he rejected the cyclical philosophy of the Romantics - and of Russia's elegiac poet, E. A. Baratynsky (1800-44) - who discarded the notion of progress. Hence, he developed the concept of history as a *dynamic* process bearing no simple repetition of events. His skilful use of historicisms (historical words and expressions) enabled him to appreciate the cogwheels of contemporary affairs and their relationship to the past.

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<sup>3</sup> J. Striedter (1977) "Poetic Genre and the Sense of History in Pushkin," *New Literary History* 8: 2 (winter), 295-309 (297).

<sup>4</sup> A. S. Pushkin (1937-49) *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii (v 16 tomakh)*, vol. 13. Leningrad: Akademiia nauk, 227.

<sup>5</sup> Translations into English are those of the author, unless indicated otherwise.

This fostered his recognition of the historical interdependence of these two time periods.

Although he had idolized him as a child, Pushkin's attitude towards Karamzin matured considerably in his adulthood: he grew to admire him, both as a wise narrator of history and as an honest person. He claimed that his *History* was "ne tol'ko sozdanie velikhogo pisatel'ia, no i podvig chestnogo cheloveka"<sup>6</sup> ("not only the work of a great writer, but also the deed of an honest man"). In an article, entitled "O narodnoi drame i drame *Marfa Posadnitsa*" ("On national drama and the drama, *Marfa the Mayoress*") (1830), Pushkin states that he is attempting to provide us with an artistic – though realistic - portrait of history by recreating the essence of a bygone era. He declares that his aim is to "voskresit' minuvshii vek vo vsei ego istine" ("resurrect a past century in all its truth").<sup>7</sup> However, as a poet, Pushkin's way of portraying the past was somewhat dissimilar to that of Karamzin. Despite common interests, their approach towards the depiction of history differed, as Alexander Dolinin has identified: "Although Karamzin subordinated his sources to the authority of his voice and vision, Pushkin, on the contrary, adopted his vision and voice to the diversity of his sources".<sup>8</sup>

On the one hand, an analysis of *Boris Godunov* reveals that Pushkin adheres to Karamzin's prototype, *History of the Russian State* in certain respects. From the plethora of characters in Pushkin's tragedy, only two – Kurbsky's son and Afanasy Matveyevich Pushkin – do *not* appear in the chronicles. However, on the other hand, Pushkin does *not* simply recreate the past by imitating Karamzin. The latter, paradoxically, "ascribes to God his own political reasoning" in adopting a pro-cyclical notion of historical perspectives and "tries to distance himself from all the occurrences that smack of the irrational and the incomprehensible".<sup>9</sup> Pushkin, however, attaches a new aspect to Karamzin's conception and portrayal of bygone times, as has been suggested by Striedter: "Pushkin, the poet, adds a stronger *historico-political* dimension than Karamzin, the historian. Pushkin's *Godunov* does

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<sup>6</sup> Pushkin, 5: 532.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 11: 181 and 425.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Dolinin (1999) 'Historicism or Providentialism? Pushkin's *History of Pugachev* in the Context of French Romantic Historiography', *Slavic Review*, vol. 58, no. 2 (summer), 291-308 (293).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 306. See also Evdokhimova, 43.

not fall *in spite of* his sensible reforms, but rather *because of them*".<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Pushkin brings the historic past into the present through, what Striedter calls, "the personification of history in the person of the historian as narrator".<sup>11</sup> This device, or distancing technique, has the advantage of providing historical authority while discussing the past. It involves "two separate but colluding aspects: [...] historical event and [...] the narrated study of this event".<sup>12</sup>

Although Karamzin was *not* a chronicler, the monk Pimen's role was to provide a written historical record. According to Pushkin, he is *not* an invented character, but a composite one: "Kharakter Pimena ne est' moe izobretenie. V nem sobral ia cherty plenivshie menia v nashikh starykh letopisiakh" ("Pimen's character is not my invention. I combined in him all the traits which captivated me in our old chronicles").<sup>13</sup> Karamzin's *History* is the source both of his name and of the facts woven into his monologue to provide historical authenticity.<sup>14</sup> One of his prime functions is to illuminate the nature of the other protagonists: he has the focal role of bearing witness to and relating everything which he has seen and heard.<sup>15</sup> As a chronicler, Pimen passes on valuable information to Grigory Otrep'ev regarding an eye-witness account of the murder of Tsarevich Dmitry in Uglich in 1591 – information which can be manipulated accordingly.

Although Pushkin strives for objectivity, he dissociates himself from the French school of historical thought, as Dolinin contends.<sup>16</sup> He departs from the deterministic method of depicting history designed by François Guizot (1787-1884), the French historian and statesman, which emphasizes purely causal connections between historical events. Although the latter held an "unshakeable belief in

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<sup>10</sup> Striedter, 298.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Pushkin, 7: 70.

<sup>14</sup> See L. N. Luzianina (1971) "Istoriia gosudarstva Rossiiskogo N. M. Karamzina i tragediia Pushkina *Boris Godunov* (k probleme kharaktera letopistsa", *Russkaia literatura*, I: 45-57 (48).

<sup>15</sup> See B. M. Engel'gardt (1916) "Istorizm Pushkina (k voprosu o kharaktere pushkinskogo ob'ektivizma)," in *Pushkinist. Istoriko-literaturnyi sbornik*, ed. S. A. Vengerov, vol. 2. Petrograd, 1-158 (76).

<sup>16</sup> See Dolinin, 292. Cousin, Guizot, Mignet, Thierry, and Thiers all belonged to this School.

Providence”, he underestimated “the accidental in history”.<sup>17</sup> Yet, Pushkin questions the application, to a Russian environment, of any notion of clear-cut, continuous, historical progress by asserting, “Providence is not algebra. The human mind [...] cannot foresee chance – that powerful and instantaneous instrument of Providence”.<sup>18</sup>

The impact of haphazard events on Pushkin’s historical imagination has been ascribed to the influence of the *History of the Russian Empire Under Peter the Great* (1756) by Voltaire (1694-1778), the famous philosopher and historian of the French Enlightenment.<sup>19</sup> Hence, Pushkin pleads for Russian history - with its non-linear combination both of progressive and of regressive events - to be treated as distinctive:

In his famous critique of Chaadaev’s views, Pushkin claimed that Russia, albeit separated from the rest of Europe, had its own peculiar historical mission [...] and that its unique history was decreed by God.<sup>20</sup>

He proceeds to recognize the significance of “sluchaia – moshchnogo, mgnovennogo orudiia provideniia” (“chance as the mighty, momentary instrument of Providence”).<sup>21</sup>

Bearing in mind the role of *rational* ideas and principles, Pushkin recognizes and documents the power of the *irrational* (i.e. historical coincidence) – that is, the often unexpected, unpredictable development of events, including the role of chance. Dolinin links the latter to Providence (that is, a belief in protection provided by God and/or nature, as spiritual forces) by contending: “Chance in history can be read as an annunciation and manifestation of Providence”.<sup>22</sup> Yet, he differentiates between the differing approaches of Karamzin and of Pushkin to Providence in the following way:

In contrast to Karamzin, Pushkin would never claim that it is possible to grasp some intelligible providential message in the turmoil of Russian history. For him, the foreseeing guardianship of Providence over Russia is

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<sup>17</sup> Evdokhimova, 36 & 38.

<sup>18</sup> Pushkin, 11: 127, cited in Evdokhimova, 52-53.

<sup>19</sup> See Evdokhimova, 50.

<sup>20</sup> Dolinin, 307. See also Evdokhimova, 31-32.

<sup>21</sup> Pushkin, 11: 127. See also Dolinin, 297.

<sup>22</sup> See Dolinin, 304. See also 298.

revealed only through unpredictable, random occurrences, through breaking historical laws rather than following them. Chance deviations from historical patterns and repetitions serve as indecipherable signs of an unfathomable order that cannot be comprehended but should be intuited and believed.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, it is the combination of these two opposing forces inherent in the elements of the rational and of the irrational (i.e. chance) - which precipitates much of the conflict of *Boris Godunov*, in its reflection of the history of “a unique nation with its own ‘semi-manifest destiny’ decreed by inscrutable Providence”.<sup>24</sup>

Pushkin flaws the ideas of the Enlightenment (which recognized the absolute power of rational government linked to “historical” laws) and of the Romantic Movement (which praised the wisdom of ordinary people, uncorrupted by the advances of an “unfree” civilization, in a return to nature). Polarizing the historico-literary argument, he permits *neither* the rational, *nor* the irrational to dominate the world at the exclusion of the other. Indeed, he records the inevitability of historical conflict between these two antithetical forces – a conflict full of enigmatic contradictions, as I. M. Toibin has indicated:

История предстает как собрание любопытных психологических парадоксов, как арена, где сталкиваются носители отвлеченных моральных и аморальных качеств, извечных человеческих страстей и переживаний.<sup>25</sup>

History appears as a collection of curious psychological paradoxes, an arena where the bearers of moral and amoral qualities clash, a repository of age-old human passions and experiences.

In *Boris Godunov* we observe the tragic interaction of the rational and the irrational. The tsar has both an analytical and an illogical side to his character. He appears to have a guilty conscience for a crime which he may not have committed, though he is blamed by the *narod*, the Russian people, for regicide for ostensibly ordering the assassination of Tsarevich Dmitry. Advocating benevolence, his declarations indicate a shrewd turn of mind:

Да правлю я во славе свой народ,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 307.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>25</sup> I. M. Toibin (1976) *Pushkin. Tvorchestvo 1830-kh godov i voprosy istorizma*. Voronezh, 41.

Да буду благ и праведен, как ты.<sup>26</sup>

And grant that I shall lead my people greatly,

Shall be benevolent and just, as you are.<sup>27</sup>

Linguistically, his majestic speech – for instance, on his accession to the throne - is characterized by long, solemn, historically-stylized monologues. Replete with church slavonicisms, ecclesiastical terms, and chancellery archaisms, they reflect his pledged duty to God and to the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as his professed responsibility towards his people, as a saintly, fatherly figure.

On the other hand, the populace may be viewed as a symbol of the irrational in its belief in supernatural forces and in evil spirits. Departing from the grandeur of Boris Godunov's elevated speeches, the *narod's* diction consists largely of colloquial and idiomatic phrases, as illustrated by the following dialogue which refers to its faith in the existence of a “bogeyman”:

Баба /с ребенком/

Агу! Не плачь, не плачь; вот бука, бука

Тебя возьмет! агу, агу!... не плачь!...

Первый

Право любо!

Баба /с ребенком/

Ну, что ж? Как надо плакать,

Так и затих! Вот я тебя! Вот бука!

Плачь, баловень!

/Бросает его об землю. Ребенок пищит/<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Scene 4: “Kremlevskie palaty”/ “Palace in the Kremlin,” in Pushkin, 7: 15.

<sup>27</sup> Antony Wood's translation in Chester Dunning (2006) *The Uncensored Boris Godunov: The Case for Pushkin's Original Comedy*. London: The U of Wisconsin P, 269.

<sup>28</sup> Scene 3: “Devich'e pole. Novodevichii monastery”/ “Maiden's Field. Novodevichy Convent” in Pushkin, 12-13.

*Woman*

*(with an infant)*

Stop crying! Stop crying! Here comes the bogeyman,  
The bogeyman will get you! No more crying, now![...]

*Another*

A sight to see![...]

*Woman*

*(with the infant)*

Now what's this?

Just when you should be crying you go all quiet!

You'll catch it now! Here comes the bogeyman...

Now cry, you brat!

*(Throws the infant to the  
ground; it yells.)*<sup>29</sup>

Subject to the duality of the volatile whims of fluctuating loyalties,<sup>30</sup> the apathetic *narod* is both unappreciative and immoral, as exemplified by the following quotations. Compare the discourteousness of:

Вот черни суд: ищи-ж ея любви.<sup>31</sup>

The rabble's judgement who would seek its love!<sup>32</sup>

with the ingratitude of:

Нет, милости не чувствует народ:

Твори добро – не скажет он спасибо,

Граб и казни – тебе не будет хуже.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Dunning, 265.

<sup>30</sup> See Engel'gardt, 68 and Evdokhimova, 58-59.

<sup>31</sup> Scene 8: "Tsarskie palaty"/ "The Tsar's Palace," in Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 7: 27.

<sup>32</sup> Dunning, 295.

No, mercy the people never feel or notice:  
 Do them good – they'll never thank you for it,  
 Rob, execute – they'll not think worse of you.<sup>34</sup>

Given the unpredictable, inconsistent, and irrational behaviour of the populace, the current ending of *Boris Godunov* – in which Pushkin has amended its final cheer to a deadly silence - is particularly intriguing. This finale - when the “narod v uzhasse molchit” (“the people grow silent in horror”) and then “bezmolstvuet” (“keep their silence”) – has been ascribed either as a refusal to endorse the Pretender, or as a passive submission to fate, or else active accusation.<sup>35</sup> The *narod's* response has been described by Tony Briggs as both “a taunt directed at the autocracy” and as “a sharp reminder of the political preoccupations of the play”.<sup>36</sup> Yet, it is plausible that Pushkin's alterations were influenced by artistic, or else censorship considerations, rather than by a complete reversal in implication.<sup>37</sup>

The paradoxical nature of the popular mind is fully comprehended by Pushkin's Grigory Otrep'ev, who relies on the people's coexistent belief both in the miracle of the resurrection of Tsarevich Dmitry by divine intervention and in Godunov's guilt for allegedly murdering him. Reinforced by the apparent intercession of divine will in the sudden death of Godunov in volume eleven of Karamzin's *History*, this conviction was explained by I. Z. Serman who identified the following illogicality in the *narod's* mind-set:

[...] If the people believe that the authentic living tsarevich has appeared, the very same person whom Boris Godunov had wanted to kill, it would seem to follow that Boris is not a murderer. But in the folk consciousness, as Pushkin shows it, there coexist, in utter defiance of logic, two mutually irreconcilable ideas. For if the Tsarevich Dmitry were alive and were truly the tsarevich and not a pretender, then Boris did not kill him, and was not a regicide, and in fact was not a criminal at all. If, on the other hand, Boris

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<sup>33</sup> Scene 22: “Moskva. Tsarskie palaty”/ “Moscow. The Tsar's Palace,” in Pushkin, 7: 89.

<sup>34</sup> Dunning, 429.

<sup>35</sup> Evdokhimova, 60. See also B. M. Gasparov (1992) “Epilog: *Mednyi vsadnik*,” in *Poeticheskii iazyk Pushkina kak fakt istorii russkogo literaturnogo iazyka*, Wiener Slawistischer Almanach, sonderband 27, Wien, 287-319 (297).

<sup>36</sup> A. D. P. Briggs (1983) “The Limited Success of Pushkin's Drama,” in *Alexander Pushkin: A Critical Study*. Beckenham: Croom Helm, 157-86 (160).

<sup>37</sup> See Evdokhimova, 25 & 61.

were a murderer and a criminal, then the person calling himself the tsarevich must be a pretender.<sup>38</sup>

In addition, he alluded to Pushkin's ingenuous grasp of the *narod's* mentality in contending that it relied upon belief in the supernatural:

Pushkin, in contrast to Karamzin, did not seek logic and consistency in the popular consciousness. He understood that a faith in miracles released the people from the tedious necessity of seeking a rational explanation of events.<sup>39</sup>

Yet, it is the simultaneously incompatible and contradictory elements in popular consciousness which reveal that the *narod* comprehends the world in a way which is quite different from that of a Europeanized Russian of the 1820s. This divergence of world-views was discerned by Serman who maintained:

In this opposition between the Europeanized Russian consciousness of the "Russian European" and the traditions and customs of the people, Pushkin revealed the universal and perhaps chief conflict in the spiritual life of the Russian nation in general. [...] The people have been living in the traditional hope of a miracle; they are apparently incapable of taking a sober view of themselves and their own situation. Precisely this constitutes the prophetic significance of Pushkin's tragedy, and its sense of history.<sup>40</sup>

The anticipated miracle is fulfilled by the *narod's* belief in the possibility of divine intervention, particularly since False Dmitry, in claiming the throne opportunely, asserted that he had escaped death in 1591 owing to such intercession.

Hence, in evaluating the various clashes between the forces of certainty and chance, Pushkin's tragedy explores tensions arising between the elements of historical determinacy and indeterminacy, for, as Evdokhimova claims, "Pushkin does not deny causality but argues powerfully against determinism by focusing on the dynamics of chance".<sup>41</sup> Boris Godunov and the Pretender represent two quite different concepts of history, for the rational calculations of the former exclude "everything accidental", whereas the latter relies on chance and good fortune in his

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<sup>38</sup> I. Z. Serman (1986) "Paradoxes of the Popular Mind in Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*", *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 64:1 (January): 25-39 (35). For an analysis of the role of divine retribution in Pushkin's *History of Pugachev*, see Dolinin, 300.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-39.

<sup>41</sup> Evdokhimova, 65.

improvised “disregard for historical laws and causality”.<sup>42</sup> Belief in the Pretender turns history into a narrative of Tsarevich Dmitry, a truly historical figure. Although the former lives on fake success, his reliance on popular opinion and good luck inevitably leads to his downfall, as “there are no winners in Pushkin’s play. History defeats equally those who attempt to calculate it as algebra and those who refuse to see historical patterns in it”.<sup>43</sup>

This double approach towards historical conflict also exists in *The Bronze Horseman* - a masterpiece of duality. It reflects the two separate, contradictory traditions of interpreting the significance of the founding of St Petersburg in 1703. The first variant of this myth is evident in oral poetry, folklore, popular sayings, and the prophecies of the Old Believers. In these sources, St Petersburg - conceived as a “window to the West” - is referred to as an unnatural and un-Russian phenomenon. Ostensibly conceived by a satanic anti-Christ, by will of fate, it is perceived as the focus of evil. Recorded on 8 February 1718 by Tsarevich Alexei and then published by N. Ustrialov, this legend predicted the inevitable fall of Russia’s new capital.<sup>44</sup>

In contrast, the second school of thought views St Petersburg as a symbol of good and creation – that is, as “a cosmogonic myth”, in Evdokhimova’s phraseology.<sup>45</sup> Crafted through divine inspiration and foresight, it is seen as the beginning of a Golden Age, for it is “born as a result of the transformation of unorganized chaos into organized cosmos”, as a means of assuming the “sacral center of the world”.<sup>46</sup> Found both in official documents and in literary works, this version considers Peter’s capital – constructed from the enduring materials of granite, stone, and bronze – to be representative of the eternal, indestructible power of the Russian state. Initiated by the archbishop and statesman, Feofan Prokopovich (1681-1736) and by the poet and playwright, Alexander Sumarokov (1717-77), this tradition was continued by the diplomat and man of letters, Prince A. D. Kantemir (1708-44) in his *Petriada* (1730).

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 56. See also 62.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>44</sup> See N. Ustrialov (1859) *Istoriia tsarstvovaniia Petra Velikogo*, vol. 6. St Petersburg, 457.

<sup>45</sup> Evdokhimova, 211. See also Gasparov, 287.

<sup>46</sup> Evdokhimova, 212. See Gasparov, 292.

This second interpretation of St Petersburg's genesis also appears in the Classical odes of Vasily K. Trediakovsky (1703-68) – for example, in his “Pokhvala Izherskoi zemle i tsarstvuiushchemu gradu Sanktpeterburgu” (“Praise to the land of Izhersk and to the reigning city of St Petersburg”) /1752/ - and of Mikhail V. Lomonosov (1711-65), Russia's great polymath, scholar, and scientist. It is based on an adulation of Russia's westernizing tsar, Peter the Great, who is perceived as a superhuman personality - a hero, titan, and demigod - as we discover from a survey of the traditional poetry of State power, the odic literature of eighteenth-century Russia.<sup>47</sup> However, in *The Bronze Horseman* Pushkin does *not* attempt to restore the ode, but to recreate a new one *sui generis* - by combining and developing conventional themes which hitherto arose independently.

*Mednyi vsadnik* muses on Peter the Great's bronze horseman and on the disaster-prone foundation, on swampland, of the Tsar's new capital, St Petersburg. It was indeed inspired by the odes of M. Lomonosov, G. R. Derzhavin (1743-1816) (to whom Pushkin recited his examination poem in the Tsarskoe Selo Lyceum in 1815), D. Khvostov, S. Bobrov, and K. Batiushkov (1787-1855). With its linguistic and stylistic contrasts, it may be seen as a dialogue with the eighteenth-century odic tradition which Pushkin admired and rejuvenated.<sup>48</sup> However, he desired to liberate modern Russian literature by incorporating universal themes, for example, the conflict between the State and the individual, which is lacking in odic conventions.

Furthermore, as in *Boris Godunov*, Pushkin blends, in a measured manner, church slavonicisms with colloquial terminology in *The Bronze Horseman*. In so doing, he combines thematic, socio-political, and moral conflict with parallel linguistic contrast. One of the ways in which church slavonicisms are used in *Mednyi vsadnik* is for the purpose of irony in the narrator's portrayal of the Bronze Horseman. After all, it is the stark reality of the latter's existence which has undermined the social standing of Evgeny who has failed to change his status in his non-performance of the transition of 'initiation'.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See L. Pumpianskii (1939) “*Mednyi vsadnik* i poeticheskaia traditsiia XVIII veka,” in *Vremennik Pushkinskoi komissii*, vol. 4-5. Moscow-Leningrad, 91-124 (92).

<sup>48</sup> Dolinin, 292. See also Gasparov, 288.

<sup>49</sup> Evdokhimova, 221: Evgeny's name comes from the Greek, meaning 'well-born'. See also 222-24.

Satire is achieved via free indirect speech which has the dual function of expressing both admiration and reserve for Peter's achievements:

Евгений взрогнул. Проянились  
 В нем страшно мысли. Он узнал  
 И место, где потоп играл,  
 Где волны хищные толпились,  
 Бунтуя злобно вокруг него,  
 И львов, и площадь, и того,  
 Кто неподвижно возвышался  
 Во мраке медною главой,  
 Того чьей волей роковой  
 Под морем город основался...  
 Ужасен он в окрестной мгле!  
 Какая дума на челе!  
 Какая сила в нем сокрыта!  
 А в сем коне какой огонь!<sup>50</sup>

Yevgeny shuddered. His thoughts became terribly clear within him. He recognized the place where the flood had played, where the rapacious waves had crowded, angrily rioting around him, and also the lions, and the square, and him who motionlessly held his bronze head aloft in the darkness, him by whose fateful will the city was founded by the sea... Terrible was he in the surrounding gloom! What thought was on his brow! What strength was hidden within him! And in that steed what fire!<sup>51</sup>

In contrast, in his characterization, Pushkin introduces elements of colloquial Russian through the narrator's description of Evgeny's predicament:

Итак, домой пришед, Евгений  
 Стряхнул шинель, разделся, лег,  
 Но долго он заснуть не мог  
 В волненье разных размышлений.  
 О чем же думал он? О том,

<sup>50</sup> Part Two, lines 145-58, in Pushkin, 5: 147.

<sup>51</sup> John Fennell (2001) *Pushkin: Selected Verse*. London: Bristol Classical P, 252.

Что был он беден, что трудом  
 Он должен был себе доставить  
 И независимость и честь;  
 Что мог бы бог ему прибавить  
 Ума и денег. Что ведь есть  
 Такие прадные счастливыцы,  
 Ума не дальнего, ленивцы,  
 Которым жизнь куда легла!<sup>52</sup>

And so, having come home, Yevgeny tossed aside his cloak, undressed, lay down. But for a long time he was not able to fall asleep, in the turmoil of his diverse thoughts. What, then, did he think about? About the fact that he was poor, that by toil he had to win for himself both independence and honour; that God might have granted him more brains and money; that after all there are lazy lucky folk, of limited brain, idlers, for whom life is oh so easy...<sup>53</sup>

Thematically, Pushkin unites *three* different historical eras in *The Bronze Horseman*:

- (i) The age of Peter the Great (that is, when St Petersburg was constructed);
- (ii) The time of the 1824 Flood – i.e. over a hundred years later;
- (iii) His own era (nine years after the Deluge).

However, the synthesis of past and present represents a *causal* analysis of the historical events - of universal moral, social, and political significance - which precipitated the current state of affairs. This raises the question of conflict between the rationality of the founding of Russia's northern capital in the interests of the State, on the one hand, and the paradoxical consequences for individuals like "poor" Evgeny who suffer as a direct result, on the other. Yet, we empathize with the tragic fate of the latter, struck by the apparent irrationality of his hallucinations and

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<sup>52</sup> Part One, lines 27-39, in Pushkin, 5: 139.

<sup>53</sup> Fennell, 239.

by the senselessness of rebellion against what was to become a repressive and regimented regime.

Reflecting the clash between public and private worlds, the twin role of the tsar, both as divine ruler of State and as benefactor of his subjects, is pertinent to the tragedy of Pushkin's own life. Forced into internal exile, a victim of the freedom-restricting edicts resulting from the whims of the obsessed Count A. K. Benckendorff (1783-1844) - the political censor to Tsar Nicholas I (1796-1855) - Pushkin was crushed by society which, through its gossip-mongering, precipitated his fatal duel with Georges-Charles d'Anthès in 1837. This conflict between the rights of the State (ostensibly representing the community) and those of the individual, between 'public good' and 'private interest' is skilfully presented in *The Bronze Horseman*. Therein, the disparity between Peter the Great's authoritarian rule and the consequent fate of Evgeny is reconciled only in the latter's madness. We witness his futile attempt to escape the shackles of an insoluble, psychological, moral, and spiritual dilemma:

В 'петербургской повести', будучи естественным следствием происшедшего, безумие в сцене бунта предстает и как функция неразрешенного противоречия. В следующем затем эпизоде оживления статуи эта функция передана фантастике.<sup>54</sup>

In the "Petersburg story", as a natural consequence of what has transpired, madness in the revolt scene acquires the role of an unresolved contradiction. In the ensuing episode of the enlivenment of the statue this function is entrusted to fantasy.

On a second plane, the collision between the two epochs – i.e. the Petrine era and Evgeny's own time – is unified in the symbol of the Bronze Horseman, which has been described by Toporov as being "the equivalent of the 'world pillar', or the 'world tree'".<sup>55</sup> Commonly referred to as a "thunder-stone", it possesses traits characteristic of the mythological, Slavic storm-god. Evdokhimova identifies this deity with the idol of Perun who, as the legend goes, as "a rider on a horse or chariot [...] strikes the serpent-like enemy with his weapon" in a duel – not unlike

<sup>54</sup> E. A. Toddes (1968) "K izucheniiu *Mednogo vsadnika*", *Uchenye zapiski Latviiskogo gos. Universiteta: Pushkinskii sbornik*, 106: 92-113 (112).

<sup>55</sup> V. N. Toporov, 'Drevo mirovoe' (1980), *Mify narodov mira*, vol. 1. Moscow, cited in Evdokhimova, 213.

the image of the Bronze Horseman.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Perun was the most supreme being and the god of storms, thunder, and lightning in pantheistic, Slavic mythology. With his copper beard, he was associated with weapons, made firstly of stone and then of metal, in the form of an almighty axe, or hammer. Such materials are reminiscent too of those used in the construction of Peter's the Great's capital, St Petersburg, as suggested earlier.

On a further plane, the Bronze Horseman is mirrored in the contrast between Peter the Great's revolutionary westernization of Russia, on the one hand, and the stagnation of the policies of his unenlightened heirs, on the other. In this respect, immediately upon his accession, Emperor Nicholas I brutally suppressed the Decembrist Uprising (1825) and sent its ringleaders to the gallows. For sure, Pushkin himself would have been incriminated too if he had not been in exile on his mother's estate in Mikhailovskoe, near Pskov. To this, he admits in his conversation with Tsar Nicholas I:

[Nicholas I:] 'You were a friend of quite a number of those men that I sent to Siberia.'

[Pushkin:] 'Yes, Your Majesty, I have held a number of them in the greatest friendship and esteem, and my feelings have not changed.' [...]

[Nicholas I:] 'Would you have been apprehended in the rising of 14 December if you had been in Petersburg?'

[Pushkin:] 'Without the slightest doubt, Your Majesty. All my friends were in the plot. It would not have been possible for me to desert them. Only my absence saved me, and thank God it did.'<sup>57</sup>

The historical conflict between Peter's *unnaturally rational* and Evgeny's *irrationally natural* frame of mind is heightened by the recurring clash between the forward-looking, cultural and architectural achievements of the Europeanizing Peter the Great, on the one hand, and the heritage of a backward and, in many ways, uncivilized past, on the other. The irony of our return to the imagery of the introduction at the very end of *The Bronze Horseman* is the recognition that the many thousands of lives lost during the construction of St Petersburg - in an attempt to reclaim the marshland from nature – has been at a heavy price.

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<sup>56</sup> V. V. Ivanov & V. N. Toporov (1982) 'Perun', in *Mify narodov mira*, vol. 2. Moscow: Sovetskaya entsiklopediya, 307, cited in Evdokhimova, 214.

<sup>57</sup> Cited in Tatiana Wolff (1998) *Pushkin on Literature*. London: The Athlone P, 179.

Indeed, despite the advances of civilization and the “taming” of the environment, the elements are still able to take their toll on human life. In this respect, Peter the Great’s magnificent achievements appear to have resulted in a worsening of the plight of the city’s impoverished inhabitants, for the Tsar failed to foresee the Flood’s danger to an ever-growing, more populous capital. Hence, Russia’s afflictions are reflected in Pushkin’s description not only of the historic Baltic swamps, but in the more recent, dire poverty of certain quarters of St Petersburg, such as that where Evgeny’s fiancée, Parasha lives.<sup>58</sup> Suffering as a direct consequence of Peter’s actions, Evgeny is traumatized in his inability to defend himself and to protect the livelihood of his beloved. His idle passivity is eventually transformed into active revolt as the succession of events culminate in the irrational and illogical enlivenment of the Bronze Horseman - an incident which precipitates Evgeny’s insanity.

Yet, it is the Deluge which is depicted as “war-like” - a reflection of the earlier-mentioned theme of Perun, according to Evdokhimova.<sup>59</sup> Just as in *Boris Godunov* the *narod* has coexistent, yet contradictory beliefs, in *The Bronze Horseman* Peter the Great may be viewed both as a new Christ and, simultaneously, as an Anti-Christ. In his cosmic battle, he is challenged by the aqueous elements of the Flood – a reminder of the serpentine Veles, the god of the Underworld, who, in a parallel narrative of history, unsuccessfully combats Perun.

In conclusion, the dynamic conflict between the rational and the irrational is perceived by Pushkin as being inherent both in historical events and in the forces of nature. In *The Bronze Horseman* it is symbolized by a clash between “hard” and “soft” elements of St Petersburg - a rationally-planned, capital city. The “hard” ones include the stone embankment, or “bereg”, the Bronze Horseman itself, the marble lions depicted, as well as objects of copper, iron, gold, and granite. In contrast, the “soft” ones are exemplified by the unsettled, anarchically freedom-loving, waters of the River Neva in her battle for survival between the forces of order and disorder. In this conflict, *neither* the guilt-ridden Boris Godunov, *nor* the visionary Peter the Great, whom Pushkin conceived both as a man of Napoleonic volition and as a

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<sup>58</sup> The Christian name ‘Paraskeva’ (Parasha) is an equivalent of the pagan ‘Mokosh’, associated with water (Evdokhimova, 216).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

Robespierre, is unable to impose order in a chaotic world, without unleashing unpredictable, irrational, revolutionary forces.<sup>60</sup>

In the tumultuous historical conflict of Pushkin's works, *either* divine retribution is procurable by the *narod* in *Boris Godunov* and by Evgeny in *The Bronze Horseman*, or else insanity will ensue. In this respect, Pushkin's own profound fear of madness - a common theme in nineteenth-century Russian literature<sup>61</sup> - is expressed in the poem, "Ne dai mne Bog soiti s uma"/ "God grant that I go not mad" (1833). Linked to his criticism of the sheer rationalism of the Enlightenment, his psychosis is signified by the conflict between the forces of creation and destruction. This clash is evident in the natural cycle of events in his poems, "Obval"/ "The Avalanche" (1829) and "Osen (otryvok)"/ "Autumn (an excerpt)" (1833). It is also the product of an individual's unsuccessful attempt to liberate the spirit, as is the case with Evgeny. In Part One of *The Bronze Horseman*, Pushkin raises the question:

Он это видит? Иль вся наша  
И жизнь ничто как сон пустой,  
Насмешка неба над землёй?<sup>62</sup>  
(lines 152-53)

Or is he dreaming this? Or is all our life nothing but an empty dream,  
heaven's mockery at earth?<sup>63</sup>

In this joint struggle for survival and for control over the narratives of history, either one loses one's way and goes mad, like Evgeny, or else one conquers, like the paranoid Boris Godunov, the imaginative Peter the Great (as a rejuvenated

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<sup>60</sup> In his article, 'On the Nobility', Pushkin declares: Pierre I est tout à la fois Robespierre et Napoleon (La Révolution incarnée)" ('Peter I is both Robespierre and Napoleon combined [The Revolution incarnated'] (Pushkin, 8: 146, cited, with translation, in Evdokhimova, 44). See also Gasparov, 311.

<sup>61</sup> Madness is portrayed, for example, in Alexander Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit* (1833) (in the character of Chatsky); Nikolai V. Gogol's *Diary of a Madman* (1835); Fyodor M. Dostoyevsky's *The Double* (1846), *Crime and Punishment* (1866) (re Raskol'nikov), and *The Idiot* (1869) (re Myshkin); and in Leo Tolstoy's *Memoirs of a Madman* (1884).

<sup>62</sup> Pushkin, 5: 142.

<sup>63</sup> Fennell, 244.

Perun), and Pushkin himself. The latter's love for the heartbeat of life is expressed in the following verses composed in 1830-36:

О нет, мне жизнь не надоела,  
Я жить люблю, я жить хочу.<sup>64</sup>

O, no, I am not bored with life. I love living. I want to live.

The significance of these words is evident in the paradox, expressed in his "Elegia"/ "Elegy" (1830) when he confesses:

Но не хочу, о други, умирать;  
Я жить хочу, чтоб мыслить и страдать.<sup>65</sup>

But, O my friends, I do not wish to die; I wish to live, in order to think and suffer.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 3, Pt 1: 447.

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<sup>66</sup> Fennell, 61.

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