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# NATIONAL IDENTITY IN RUSSIAN CULTURE

*An Introduction*

EDITED BY  
SIMON FRANKLIN AND EMMA WIDDIS



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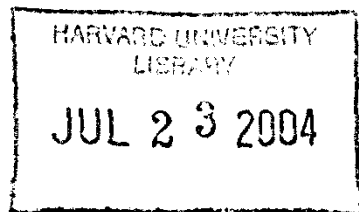
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## CHAPTER II

### *'Pushkin' and identity*

*Stephanie Sandler*

The love for Pushkin, which is incomprehensible to foreigners, is the true sign of a person born of Russian culture. You can like or dislike any other Russian writer, that's a matter of taste. But Pushkin as a phenomenon is obligatory for us. Pushkin is the pivot on which Russian culture turns, he connects the past to the future. Take away the pivot and the connections will disintegrate.<sup>1</sup>

Lidiia Ginzburg

Jubilee Pushkiniana, 1999: vodka bottle, tea cosy, tea cup, plastic shopping bag, wall hanging, book mark, calendar, quill, key ring, pin, playing cards, candy wrapper, advertisements.<sup>2</sup>

#### I. THE PUSHKIN MYTH

More than two hundred years after his birth, Aleksandr Pushkin (1799–1837) stands as a towering emblem of Russian culture, as more than just a monument: the example of his life and work is perceived as giving meaning to the nation's identity. This myth was articulated well by the conservative critic Stanislav Rassadin: 'we who seem to have lost everything there is to lose – above all, ourselves as a nation and as a people – we possess a hope of remembering our face and suddenly repossessing our soul *when we look at Pushkin*'.<sup>3</sup> When Russians 'look at Pushkin' in this sense, they see all that they hope to be: a symbol of integrity, creativity, and spiritual values, and a dynamic, liberating mind that challenges what seems stultifying or intolerant elsewhere in their culture. Rassadin, a supporter of national ambitions that inform his language of nostalgia and fervent affection, reminds his readers that he speaks from a historical moment of disarray (the early 1990s), but his hopes for Russia are meant to be timeless. Pushkin lives as if outside of time, and contemplating him offers the possibility of reacquiring a soul, itself a timeless notion of identity and spirit.

Pushkin's place in the culture was described differently by a contemporary St Petersburg poet, Elena Shvarts, who speaks from a more

marginal cultural position (she was an underground writer in the Soviet period). Writing at about the same time as Rassadin, the early 1990s, she focuses on death, not life, and on myth-making, rather than national self-understanding: 'To a certain extent all poets are mythological figures. There is nothing real about Pushkin or Baratynskii.<sup>4</sup> The real person dies and the myth is all that's left.' She adds, 'the greater the poet, the more inescapable the myth.'<sup>5</sup> Shvarts also puts Pushkin outside any specific temporal frame, because of cultural processes that cross over time's boundaries. She suggests a new question: how a myth comes into being. She sees the poet as trapped by the processes of mythmaking and, unlike Rassadin, she does not celebrate its benefits for ordinary Russians. What matters is how the moment when 'the real person dies' figures in the poet's 'inescapable myth'. The myth is as inescapable as human mortality, and it makes Pushkin a mortal man, rather than the god-like figure imagined by Rassadin. Myth begins where life ends, so, for her, the Pushkin myth draws its energy from the premise of his death.

Pushkin's death has held the attention of every generation since 1837, the year of his fatal duel. Death, 'the most meaningful event in his biography',<sup>6</sup> centres Russia's myth of a national poet. Pushkin lives, but he thrives beyond a death that Russians have loved to contemplate. He *became* Pushkin only when he died in a duel, and those who believe that 'Pushkin Lives!' have never stopped exploring the circumstances and symbolic meanings of his death. He has been imagined as both alive and dead, one state sustaining the other; he is animated into a present that mourns his absence.

Who actually built Pushkin's legacy? This is another way to ask who has imagined Russian identity through the Pushkin story. Shvarts implies that this work occurs inevitably, and as if anonymously. For Rassadin, the viewer, the reader, and the museum visitor make the myth: every Russian who sees into his or her soul by means of contemplating Pushkin renews the myth. The divergence between Shvarts's and Rassadin's points of view here has its own history, suggesting for Pushkin two identities. The first, Pushkin as the founder of a culture, takes him as a praiseworthy public figure, as someone whose achievements can be studied; the second, Pushkin as the cherished object of affection, brings closer contact with him. It is personal, even intimate. It permits identification and self-exploration, whereas tributes to his cultural primacy come not from *individuals* but from *Russia*, undifferentiated and united in the ways symbolic nations always are.

The dispute over 'my' vs. 'our' Pushkin has existed since he was first mourned; at times polemics have grown out of one side's outrage at the

attitudes of the other, but the two sides have also often co-existed. Pushkin has maintained his hold on Russia's cultural imagination because he has seemed 'our' Pushkin as well as 'my' Pushkin. For Rassadin, he is largely a shared symbol, yet individuals can contemplate the poet's meanings with private reverence. Shvarts, too, works from the premise of a public figure, one who is made into a myth, yet, like some in the dissident camps of the Russian intelligentsia, she implies that only an individual's view of the poet is legitimate.

Often this idiosyncratic appropriation of the poet has been expressed as a form of love. The poet Fedor Tiutchev (1803–73) wrote 'Like a first love, / The heart of Russia will not forget you'.<sup>7</sup> Pushkin created modern Russian culture not because he gave things their names, like some Slavic Adam, but because he himself remains the poet Russians most love to contemplate. His writings and the quickly emergent legends about his life enabled others to write, paint, sculpt, film, and dramatise ideas that had great powers of national definition. His individual, specific traits have assumed larger-than-life significance, but he is also the symbol of the poet; he stands in the minds of Russians for all that poetry is meant to be.

In the language of psychoanalysis, as rephrased by Adam Phillips: the figure of the poet is 'a highly valued internal object, and one who is often linked . . . with fantasies of freedom and independence: the poet represents the apotheosis (at least for some people) of self-becoming, of individuality, of difference wrought to a distinctive pitch through style.'<sup>8</sup> A number of different individuals may occupy this symbolic pride of place in a given culture, but Pushkin, as noted by Lidia Ginzburg in the epigraph given above, is obligatory. That obligation translates into an intense emotional investment that accompanies any glance in his direction. Love has many complexities: it can involve anger, possessiveness, poor judgement, and projection. A first love is often the source of embarrassment and error. Through the decades, love for Pushkin has been tempered by irritation, disputatiousness, and a desire for distance. From every side, Pushkin and his writings have been passionately possessed, and they have become vehicles for ardent self-expression and determined argumentation. These emotional, individual responses to Pushkin have contributed to larger cultural debates about what it means to be Russian, what role the poet is fated to play in the drama of national self-definition, and how all who live after Pushkin's death can comprehend themselves as Russians through and against his experience.

This process continues in Russia today, where essays dispute the political implications of reading him as uniquely Russian, quarrel about the religious meanings of his poems, and put forth differing versions of why he still

matters for Russian culture in these days of chaotic change. No story has offered the promise of greater national coherence than has Pushkin's, and the allure of some remnant of shared national self-definition propels many ongoing disputes and dialogues.

The prestigious status of Pushkin's story in Russian culture invites one to think of it as a myth. That term is worth clarifying, as it names several things. First, myths as we know them from ancient cultures are explanatory narratives, tales that tell us how the world has come to be, how nature's forces change, or how human actions are ordained by the gods. Myths point to origins, offering us explanations of how something came into existence. The Pushkin story is a myth in this sense – a narrative in which modern Russia sees signs of its own beginnings. For example, he is taken as the first modern Russian writer because he worked in a European and not purely Russian context, and because he was a professional writer trying to earn his livelihood through his work. These aspects of his experience become symbolic stages in the culture's emergence into modernity.

Mythic origins are also sacred origins, a fact not diminished by narratives about secular and national beginnings. Anthropologists have noted that modern cultures create “‘mythical’ beings’ who are ‘excluded from everyday life and relegated to the vague and frightening zone where everything that was an object of religious belief was assumed to belong’.”<sup>9</sup> Legends of gods and heroes who inhabit this other zone can play powerful roles in the cultural attitudes of modern people: attitudes, preferences, and appropriate forms of behaviour may be modelled on them. Since 1837 Pushkin has inhabited this special zone for Russians, but it is difficult to assess how much this placement depended on his own piety, Orthodoxy or sense of spiritual quest. Particularly in the 1990s (reprising more harshly a concern from a century earlier), arguments over the broad question of Pushkin and Christianity raged, a symptom of the culture's larger anxiety about how to reclaim its own traditions of Orthodoxy in the post-Soviet era.<sup>10</sup>

Myths in the modern world also suggest a third meaning: explanatory systems that are false. A myth can be an erroneous belief, perhaps widely shared but also strengthened by official ideologies. This aspect of the Pushkin story complicates the simpler elevation of him to quasi-divine status, since false stories about him and his work have flourished. At times a Pushkin cult has perniciously distorted his reputation. The boundaries separating false from true are not always well defined, however, and false stories have long challenged dedicated readers to re-establish the truth. The fear of a pervasive false image has kept alive a passion for the ‘real’ Pushkin, always just beyond reach. Which aspects of the Pushkin story are worth fighting over

changes: for some the central questions are political, for others religious, and for still others as mundane as the question of whether Pushkin loved his wife, slept with his sister-in-law, and fathered a child by one of his serfs.

Some aspects of the Pushkin myth can, then, be named, for they have recurred across the decades since his death, subject to repetition, resistance, and revision. The first element is that Pushkin was a beacon amid the seeming morass of Russian history, a spot of light and clarity that promises to illuminate the future as well as the past. Russian expressions of self-consciousness have often turned on an image of shared national tragedy and apocalyptic rhetoric. When Russia's influential writers, poets, and philosophers take up the task of defining their nation, they speak in tones of prophecy and lament, concentrating on Russia's history of destruction and loss. Against this tragic national self-image, some (including Rassadin, quoted earlier) say that Pushkin has offered Russians hope. His role has been restorative, palliative, and spiritually enriching.

Yet for every Russian who beams happily at the thought that Pushkin once lived and wrote, another finds in him the very national tragedy he is imagined as curing. Tragic tales of Pushkin abound. Many of them focus on Pushkin's death, an event through which Russians proclaim themselves unified in grief. Some of his writings have seemed retrospectively to speak to these themes. Fedor Dostoevskii made excellent use of Pushkin's Romantic narrative *The Gypsies* (*Tsygany*; 1824) and his lyric poem 'The Prophet' (*Prorok*; 1826) in his influential speech in 1880 at the dedication of Pushkin's statue in Moscow; others have found tragic notes in Pushkin's historical writings, including his problematic and brilliant play *Boris Godunov* (1825) and his late tale *The Captain's Daughter* (*Kapitanskaia dochka*; 1836). The variety within Pushkin's *oeuvre* has meant that serious or agitated writing could always be balanced by what the scholar Victor Erlich called Pushkin's 'sacred play', just as those who sought political justifications for their admiration for Pushkin could point to one set of poems and stories whereas others interested in aesthetic complexity could insist on the importance of another.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to these quite different views of Pushkin's place within Russia's tragic self-definition, there is a third position, distinguished by its rejection of the tragedy altogether. It was well expressed in the work of the Tartu scholar Iurii Lotman (1922–93), who lauded Pushkin's brilliant adaptation to repressive social mechanisms. For him, Pushkin's life and work are tightly bound to one another, each dense in self-expression and interpretable meaning. Lotman and others after him have also seen how the myths of Pushkin have paradoxically repeated some of the very

repression Pushkin fought. An early almanac for an avant-garde poetry movement, *Latin Quarter* (*Latinskii kvartal*; 1990), had as its cover photograph a picture of a Pushkin monument encased in scaffolding (fig. 11.1); this irreverent image created a literalising parody of the then pervasive political term 'restructuring' (*perestroika*), yet contributors to *Latin Quarter* presented themselves as reinventing Russian culture. As poets, they would rescue Pushkin from the confining structures of scaffolding and thus liberate Russian culture for future glory.

This variety of responses to a Pushkin myth begins to answer the question of why *Pushkin* became Russia's national poet. The timing was also vitally important: Pushkin appeared at that moment early in the nineteenth century when post-Napoleonic Romantic nationalism made nations search for a native genius. The only other writer and poet who might then have fitted the bill was Pushkin's slightly younger and even shorter-lived contemporary Mikhail Lermontov (1814–41). However, Pushkin's having written with authority and clarity in every genre, and his having died in a duel marked by romantic intrigue, rather than the all-male dispute of Lermontov's duel, helped him become the more appealing figure. Pushkin's death was itself a poetic subject that catapulted the young Lermontov to fame when he wrote a widely circulated poem on the subject, 'The Death of the Poet' (*Smert' poeta*; 1837).

The circumstances of Pushkin's death were especially conducive to the mythmaking process. Contemporaries saw his death as a time of coming together, and their belief in a national reaction to tragedy became a foundational moment in myths of Pushkin. Nicholas I's government recognized the magnitude and danger of the response at once: Pushkin's body was wheeled out of Petersburg in the dark of night to be buried at the distant Sviatogorsk Monastery near Pushkin's family estate at Mikhailovskoe. The absence of the body enabled an especially spiritual aspect of the Pushkin myth, although his meagre property was treated with a reverence that belies any absolute denial of the material. The relics of his life include his library, sanctified by Pushkin's gesture of farewell to his books as he was dying, as well as the expected paraphernalia of death that can still be seen in Russian museums: death masks, the waistcoat with its bullet hole, the duelling pistols, the divan on which he lay.

The removal of Pushkin's body was brought about by political considerations (the Tsar's informers claimed that the crowds would get out of hand, and the very idea of such attention being paid a mere writer, and one whom they also found politically untrustworthy, was not to be borne), and then the death itself came to seem politically meaningful. Pushkin had



11.1 Cover photograph for the poetry almanac *Latin Quarter* (*Latinskii kvartal*), 1990.  
Courtesy of the editor, Victor Kulle

died from a duel motivated by a gentleman's sense of family honour, but the intervention of the Tsar into funeral arrangements reminded friends that he might have prevented the duel altogether. Lermontov's widely circulated poem blamed Russian high society. Particularly when compared to other elegies on Pushkin's death, Lermontov's offers a vividly disembodied poem, and it initiated the politics of Pushkin as state martyr in a way that required this negation of the body. One hundred years later, when Stalin urged Russians to celebrate the anniversary of Pushkin's death, the 1937 Pushkin Jubilee engaged the rhetoric of martyrdom fiercely and coincided with the height of Stalin's purges.

Monuments to Pushkin have often been erected during anniversary celebrations, including those of 1937 and 1949. They act as what Pierre Nora has called 'lieux de mémoire', his name for sites, events, and artifacts that keep alive an otherwise fragile memory. Nora aptly calls them the markers of 'commemorative vigilance'.<sup>12</sup> Pushkin monuments have proliferated, repeating a small number of iconographic poses to fix images of the poet declaiming his verse, relaxing on a park bench, or standing contemplatively, head bowed. The monuments' stillness and similarity suggest a static, rather than dynamic Pushkin, which is ironic: erecting a monument to a private person in 1880 was actually quite a daring thing to do in a nation that previously so honoured only autocrats and generals. But the monuments are consonant with a disembodied version of the Pushkin myth where there is no place for stories and legends of the poet that suggest bodily energy, erotic inventiveness, transgressive desire, and physical difference. This myth long shaped the inherited canon of Pushkin's writings, expurgating letters and lyrics and keeping obscene texts, like *Gavriliad* (*Gavriliada*; 1821), almost entirely out of the hands of readers.<sup>13</sup> But like all myths these, too, have generated resistance. Opponents include the poets Vladimir Maiakovskii (1893–1930) and Marina Tsvetaeva (1892–1941), and the creators of popular legend and endless anecdotes. Perhaps the best example of the anecdotal rejection of Pushkin as a monument comes in the expression that asks 'Who's going to do that? Pushkin?' In this rhetorical expression, the verb is endlessly replaceable by activities of daily life – sweeping, mending, laundering. Another almanac cover from the *perestroika* period brought this expression to life with its picture of Pushkin innocently holding a broom, ready to sweep (fig. 11.2). The wish to bring Pushkin down from his monument reacted against mindless elevations of him in official discourse, at the same time as it reinvigorated and renewed affection for him, keeping his image alive before a changing public.

# 1 ГРАЖДАНЕ НОЧИ



11.2 Cover illustration for the almanac *Citizens of the Night* (*Grazhdane nochi*), 1990

A vivid sense of the range of Pushkin's public image emerges when we examine some of the best-known clichés about him. He was a 'radiant name' (*svetloe imia*) from the beginning, a 'happy name' and the 'sun of Russian poetry'. These names share metaphorical references to light and to gaiety, and they reflect great optimism. The light-filled aura of Pushkinian presence has him illuminating Russia as the sun lights the earth, but it also lends impermanence and fragility to his image: Pushkin's death was described as the setting of the sun as early as 1837,<sup>14</sup> and the metaphor later informed an essay by the modernist poet Osip Mandelshtam (1891–1938)

that evoked 'the poet's sun-filled body', and placed the sun 'in its coffin at night'.<sup>15</sup> Mandelshtam's 'night sun' reminds us of the tragedy hidden in the bright light of official cheer (and refers to the dark time when Mandelshtam lived).

In the early Soviet period, another cliché about Pushkin began to seem more appropriate, 'Pushkin is our everything' (*Pushkin – eto nashe vse*).<sup>16</sup> This emphasis on unity suggests a gigantic vessel able to contain any experience shared by Russians. The word *our* is also important, emphasising that Pushkin absorbed fully Russia's being, its spirituality. 'Pushkin is our everything' implies a levelling in which all of the experiences that could be drawn into the vessel *Pushkin* have equal value and equal meaning. Its claim lifts Pushkin out of history into an absolute realm where heroes do not change and where nations are defined by their heroes. The association of Pushkin with light is ahistorical because of its grounding in the world of nature, but the association of Pushkin with 'everything' goes further, obliterating distinctions like nature vs. culture, past vs. present. It contemplates him in an emotional rather than rational way, demonstrating by its own extravagance that attitudes toward Pushkin properly exist in the superlative.

These verbal formulae exemplify a shared perception of Pushkin as light-filled and clear, as capacious and profoundly Russian. Through them, Pushkin becomes as inevitable as sunshine, as all-encompassing as the world around us. The clichés concentrate a number of the implicit myths of Pushkin: the national poet whose brilliant achievements demonstrate the greatness of the nation that produced him; the protean writer in whom successive generations of Russians saw themselves (and their political or aesthetic agendas); the martyred artist whose early death helped a nation understand its own tragic fate and showed the ruthless power of an indifferent state; and the integrity-filled man of genius, an inspiring example to later generations of artists, thinkers, and citizens. Now, over 150 years after Pushkin's death, it is difficult to read any of his texts without this mediating interpretative activity, without these myths.

## 2. ANNIVERSARIES

As a case study in the workings of the Pushkin myth we can consider the cultural production generated around Pushkin anniversaries, and in particular the celebrations of the bicentennial of his birth. Pushkin has been celebrated in a number of anniversary years – 1880, 1899, 1921, 1924, 1937, 1949, 1987, and the bicentennial in 1999. Nearly all marked 'round' numbers of years from the times of Pushkin's birth or death and they occasioned

public rituals of remarkable continuity. They stand in self-conscious relation to one another and their effect is cumulative; amid much repetition, the rituals have changed in response to political and cultural pressures. Anniversary dates are thus abstractly valuable, a narrative device that organises the Pushkin story in Russian culture. They cluster larger numbers of responses to Pushkin in a single day or month, urging writers, thinkers, and public figures to note their attitudes and reflections on particular texts. These statements and images in turn drive a more generally intensified attention to Pushkin among the larger population. The anniversary appears not to be an artificial occasion – its timing is determined by a fateful repetition, the day or year when something important happened 50 or 100 or 150 years ago. Yet there is rich artifice in any anniversary celebration, particularly in the elaborately coordinated events of the twentieth century. This paradox of a natural, powerful love for the poet made manifest in a centrally organised celebration is itself a constituent feature of the Pushkin myth in Russia.

The most complex and influential celebration in the twentieth century was in 1937, with its centralized control of jubilation against a background of terror. It is also the best test case against an either/or theory which would see official celebrations as false, unworthy of those who 'truly' love Pushkin: even in 1937, remarkable individuals participated and important new views of Pushkin emerged. No imposition of a mandated approach to Pushkin could ever be wholly successful, and each anniversary shows interesting fractures of belief and commitment. Commemorations typically include a great range of events, and within this broad diversity one finds unexpected signs of Pushkin's enduring capacity to help Russia invent itself over time. In 1937, as in 1999, a transitional society used public rituals for the purposes of cultural exploration and stabilisation.

In 1999, the commemoration was meant to demonstrate that the new Russia could function as a governing state, to put it simply. Its celebration was a financial as much as an ideological triumph, against great odds. Moscow spent some four million dollars. Another five million was allocated for restoring the three Pushkin museums in the Pskov region. Money, lots of it, became the measure of respect for Pushkin in the bicentennial of his birth. One recipient of a Pushkin medal hoped (in vain) that he would receive a cash award.<sup>17</sup> Despite worries that the crumbling Russian economy would never support a sufficiently lavish celebration, it was quickly obvious that Pushkin, having survived the Stalin Terror in the 1937 Jubilee, would do fine in the era of financial default.<sup>18</sup> His image was put to good commercial use, resulting in memorable advertising campaigns: 'Pushkin knew how to put words together into a poem. We know how to assemble an

excellent automobile', promised one company; another did a direct mailing that began 'Dear Muscovites! We congratulate you on the two-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin! If you want to rent a cottage in the country, please call us.'<sup>19</sup> An exhibit that compared Pushkin and Goethe memorabilia (1999 was also the 250th anniversary of the great German national poet's birth), provoked a splendid riff by the post-modernist poet Lev Rubinshtein on 'Pushkin as an object of kitsch'. He laughed at the symbolism of Pushkin appearing on a vodka label whereas Goethe was used to sell brandy; when he saw Goethe's image on a package of women's stockings, he found it regrettable that Pushkin's name was not put to the same use – after all, Pushkin had famously celebrated women's legs in *Eugene Onegin*.<sup>20</sup>

Russian commentaries predictably found the commercialization of their national poet and the show-business atmosphere tremendously off-putting. There was much condemnation of supposedly wrong-headed books or films or exhibits. The critic Valentin Nepomniashchii took on the English film *Eugene Onegin* (directed by Martha Fiennes) but mostly to air his somewhat stale ideas on Western vs. Russian art, a grand gesture very much in the Jubilee tradition.<sup>21</sup> Some critics praised the Jubilee as spiritually purifying; they found public complaints about vulgar events to be a sign that the masses retained their instinctive tact and good taste.<sup>22</sup> Most publications implied that past commemorations had been better in all senses and had been more significant in shaping attitudes toward Pushkin. The Kultura television station aired a new documentary, *The Bronze Pushkin: Seven Jubilees* (*Mednyi Pushkin: sem' iubileev*), about previous Pushkin jubilees.<sup>23</sup> This nostalgia for past commemorations sweetened the bitter cynicism of some coverage. The prominent Moscow critic and editor Natalia Ivanova fled to St Petersburg, still many Russians' fantasy site for authentic culture, where she was gratified to find an atmosphere of happy celebration: 'surprising as it seems, it all worked'.<sup>24</sup>

What made it work, though, if that is what happened, is that there was a tremendous mix of events, publications, promises, and predictions. The end of censorship meant that almost anything was possible, including a remarkable slew of errors – in the most noted, the nineteenth-century dictum, 'Pushkin is our everything', was attributed to Boris Eltsin (still President of Russia in 1999). More than any earlier celebration, television played a large role in setting the tone, conveying information, and exemplifying modes of celebration. A cameraman for channel ORT stopped people on the streets to recite one line from *Eugene Onegin*, and a stanza was given every night in these different voices and faces. The vast number of responses,

much in the tradition of factory workers and farmers reciting Pushkin across the Soviet land, imitated an old idea of democratic 'levelling' and broad access to high culture, but it also suggested in microcosm the variety of voices that could be heard in 1999.

In this atmosphere, the possibility for carnival was vast, and one critic noted that the real motivation for large-scale events was the urge to celebrate something, anything.<sup>25</sup> Various balls were announced for the public squares in Moscow, collectively named 'Love! Russia! Sun! Pushkin!' Sergei Penkin blasted out his rock-and-roll version of an intimate Pushkin lyric ('I loved you'; *Ia Vas liubil*) on Moscow's Manezh Square.<sup>26</sup> Newspapers joined in the foolishness with mockeries of their own. The high-brow newspaper *Ex libris* treated Pushkin as if he were a contemporary writer, with all due disrespect. Several Pushkin texts were reviewed as if just published by the imaginary 'Our Everything' (*Nashe vse*) Press in Moscow, with laments that poor Pushkin had received neither the Booker nor the Anti-Booker prize that year. The issue asked various contemporary writers why they were not the same as Pushkin, and the always outrageous prose writer Eduard Limonov blasted back, 'I don't want to be Pushkin. To be him means to be a poet of calendars, a poet who founds cities, rivers . . . I would not want to be this monument-monster.'<sup>27</sup> Another high-profile publication printed a spicy story heard from Semen Geichenko, the staid director of Mikhailovskoe (Pushkin's family estate, now a museum), about a strophe of *Eugene Onegin* that was accidentally used by the poet as toilet paper.<sup>28</sup>

Such irony and irreverence marked a striking departure from Soviet anniversaries. The leading *Literary Gazette* (*Literaturnaia gazeta*) trumpets its direct link to the Pushkinian tradition by printing his famous self-portrait in profile on the front page of every issue, along with a banner announcement that the paper was founded in 1830 with the participation of Pushkin, then 'renewed' in 1929. It had an entire section about the Jubilee in its 6 June 1999 issue, as one might expect, but on the front page of its next issue it had a small boxed epigraph, just under the Pushkin profile, quoting a letter from Pushkin to his wife: 'I am sitting out all these festivities at home.'<sup>29</sup> The most vibrant mix of homage and verbal irreverence may have been the collection *Pushkin's Overcoat* (*Shinel' Pushkina*; 2000), with its brilliant introduction by the cultural critic and literary scholar Andrei Zorin that described Pushkin as the modern incarnation of safe sex for Russia: 'rarified pleasure practically guaranteed without the slightest undesirable consequence.'<sup>30</sup> Zorin concluded that Pushkin's relevance to Russian self-definition had conclusively been proven by the 1999

commemorations: he was an equally appropriate national hero for tsarist, Soviet, and commercially self-obsessed post-Soviet Russia.

New poems to Pushkin, often prominent in earlier commemorations, were less important, as if the genre were almost too *retro* for renewal. Several poetry publications involved a form of recycling. Bella Akhmadulina, well known as a poet who gained prominence in the 1960s, gathered all her writings on Pushkinian themes in *Enclosed in Winter* (*Zimniaia zamknutost'*; 1999), subtitled *An Offering for the Two-Hundredth Anniversary of A. S. Pushkin*, but her volume attracted little attention. More interesting was the older avant-garde poet Genrikh Sapgir's completion of Pushkinian fragments, written in 1985, quietly published in 1992, and made widely available in the journal *The Peoples' Friendship* (*Druzhba narodov*) in May, 1999. Sapgir chose little-known Pushkin poems for completion, although he includes the famous line 'And I could have . . .' that Pushkin wrote above a sketch of gallows in his notebooks, long taken as a contemplation that he might have shared the fate of five hanged Decembrist conspirators in 1826.<sup>31</sup> Sapgir did three poems based on this broken line, keeping the well-known context of the gallows but amplifying it with references to dance, and layering Pushkin's intonation of fear and regret with notes of pride. The three poems subtly increase in possible violence, creating a successful if entirely inadvertent resonance with the violence of daily life in Russia in 1999.

Another republication project was the conceptualist poet Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov's 1992 rewriting of *Eugene Onegin*.<sup>32</sup> It appeared in 1998, a supposed facsimile of the only surviving portion of the project. A preface claimed it was the fruit of Prigov's wish to copy out this 'sacred' text of Russian culture. Prigov also said he was inspired by a late Soviet legend of a mother whose son would only read samizdat literature, so she copied out Tolstoi's *War and Peace* for him on a typewriter. He made *Onegin* his own, changing all epithets to either 'insane' or 'unearthly' (*bezumnyi*, *nezemnyi*), choices which made the text more Lermontovian, he said.<sup>33</sup> The changes are more interesting than that, however, substituting *bezumnyi* (insane) so often as to render the familiar text truly otherworldly and crazed. In the 1998 edition, illustrations by Aleksandr Favorskii add a quaintly loony touch (the bottom right corner of each page features a line drawing of Pushkin, with top hat and cane, just enough different from one page to the next that, if you flip through the pages quickly, you get the effect of a cartoon image, doffing his hat). Because the tissue-thin 'facsimile' pages are imitations of *samizdat*-era typescript, there is something nostalgic about the entire production, despite its use of clever formatting.

The 1999 anniversary also offered films about Pushkin, some quite innovative. The documentaries were perhaps more interesting than the feature films, but they were sadly ignored. Andrei Khrzhanovskii's two small Pushkin films were screened to a negligible audience at the Sochi film festival and a few other festivals. The short films, each under half an hour, are enigmatic and charming, particularly the second, the nearly wordless *'Let's Fly Away!'* (*The Pushkin Can Now Take Off*) (*'Davai, uletim! . . .'* (*Pushkinu vzlet razreshen*)). Its title comes from a helicopter sculpture with Pushkin's face as its front window, and from a real helicopter named *The Pushkin*.

*'Let's Fly Away!'* focuses on an art exhibit that opened in October 1998, featuring thirteen soft and kinetic sculptures created by children. It begins with the Russian flag fluttering in the wind and intercuts many images from the 1999 commemoration: buildings draped with banners showing Pushkin's face or body; shop windows with Pushkin's name or image on boxes of chocolates; shopping bags with *Pushkin 200 Years* imprinted on them; billboards with words like 'passion', 'love', 'beauty' alongside Pushkin's face; and Pushkin rugs, with the selling price visibly marked. As such, the film is an excellent compilation of visual imagery from the Jubilee, and a fine demonstration of how Pushkin was marketed to the new Russia. *'Let's Fly Away!'* preempts the cynical inference that one might draw from the commodification of Pushkin – that his 'image' has lost all value – when it lingers over the sculptures in the children's exhibit, entitled *Pushkin, Again* (a title with its own irony). By showing the process of making the sculptures, Khrzhanovskii indulges his own favourite cinematic moment, showing how art is created. We see the application of lips to face, of red paint to the lips, of extra pieces of tape to hold things together, which means that we see the pleasure and efforts of the young creators as vividly as we see the final product. The editing and camera work de-naturalises the sculptures, using extreme close-ups and rhythmically repeating shots to make the faces grotesque. They are already grotesque in several instances, with disproportionate lips or eyes and garish colours thickly applied. An early sequence has one of the sculptures carried by unseen people through the streets, with a stop-start action that has interesting effects. The film-maker suggests that Pushkin as ghost walks the streets of the city that commemorates his birth. Khrzhanovskii has several Pushkins in this watchful role – the artworks of children, the images on billboard and shop window that look out onto the Moscow scene, and a small Pushkin monument unveiled at the end of his film that looks as if it is made of wax and is also the work of a child. All defamiliarise Pushkin, a remarkable feat in a film that shows how exceedingly familiar his image was in the 1999 celebrations.

Moving the Pushkin sculpture through the Moscow streets almost makes it seem to come alive. The movement is not naturalized: the puppet remains an object, manipulated by film-maker and viewers. The same is true of the art objects in the exhibit *Pushkin, Again*: some can be activated by visitors, for example the chair shaped like Pushkin's body (his arms are the chair's arms). Others have motors, like the helicopter, or internal mechanisms. One mattress-like face invites children to lie on its cheeks, making the face move. An eerily beautiful wire sculpture, seen from several angles, casts its shadow on a wall. But the real suggestion of movement in these images is not just human movement, it is flight. The reality of Pushkin's never having left Russia and his various experiences of limitation are as important as the dynamism, as when images of Pushkin are shown behind the bars of a shop window – the film's first words are Pushkin's 'I am imprisoned behind bars' from 'The Prisoner' (*Uznik*; 1822). How to liberate Pushkin? asks the film. The answer is shamelessly romantic – put him in the hands of children, let the imagery be grotesque and irreverent and loving, let him soar if only in our imaginations.

Somewhat less successful is Pavel Gromov's *Three Songs of Pushkin* (*Tri pesni o Pushkine*; 1999), but it is a valuable film for its historical retrospective and use of documentary footage. Like the Dziga Vertov film from which it takes its title (*Three Songs of Lenin*; *Tri pesni o Lenine*; 1934), *Three Songs of Pushkin* is a compilation, mixing documentary footage from newsreel and other sources to recreate historical moments from a past that seems distant. It is didactic in the extreme, using relentless voice-over to hammer home its message of the lasting evil of Stalin's regime. Its first 'song' interprets the 1937 Jubilee as a terrible celebration in a desperate time. As the film moves forward in time, it tries to do the same with the regimes of Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev from the late 1950s to the early 1980s, but less exclusively, and much of the footage about the 1960s and 1970s shows the young poets who emerged at that time. The film's last 'song' looks at what has been built on the ruins of the past in contemporary Russia. Signs of commercialisation are shown, the most expressive a Pushkin *matrioshka* doll lined up next to one of President Bill Clinton with his saxophone. People on the street are asked about Pushkin, each responding with more clichés than the next. At the film's end, old footage from earlier in the movie is intercut into contemporary street scenes, suggesting that past Pushkins live into the present, which implies, in this film's view, that the Pushkin created in 1937 cannot be displaced.

If you take that image as a residue of violence and autocratic excess, then the one 1999 feature film based on Pushkin's works proves Gromov's

point: the epic production of *The Russian Uprising* (*Russkii bunt*), directed by Aleksandr Proshkin. This self-described 'big-budget' film reflects its creation during the disorganised advent of capitalism of the 1990s and it was not released in Russia until the autumn of 2000. The result is hard to watch, an aesthetically confused film more bloody than Pushkin's *The History of Pugachev* (*Istoriia Pugacheva*; 1834) and considerably more romantic than *The Captain's Daughter* (*Kapitanskaia dochka*; 1836), to name the film's two source texts. Like Soviet film adaptations that turned Pushkin's restrained writings into over-the-top spectacles, *The Russian Uprising* has some good acting, and elaborate costumes and sets, but it differs in its treatment of sex and violence.

The violence in the film corresponds to the new taste: a severed head is delivered to Russian officers when Belgorsk fortress is stormed, bodies of just-hanged men twitch in the agony of death, and the camera lingers on battlefield injuries and assaulted peasants. The Captain's wife, Vasilisa Egorovna, is improbably made to witness more than her fair share of these injuries, including the severed head, which she unwittingly removes from its cloth cover for all to see. As in Pushkin's tale, she finds her husband hanged, but Proshkin adds a camera shot of her pendulous breasts as she rips her shirt in mourning, just before she is felled by a pistol shot. Women and their sexuality are meant to bring life to the film, as when Masha Mironova and the young officer Petr Grinev nearly have sex in a threshing barn, with close-up shots of spilling grain unsubtly duplicating Masha's eager sexuality. Never mind that such an encounter, especially at Masha's initiative, was unthinkable for the characters Pushkin created in *The Captain's Daughter*, where an epigraph stresses the point of honour. It make some sense for the film to pile on details about Catherine's decadent life at court, but Pushkin did not imagine his young heroes as similarly dissolute. When the villain Shvabrin forces himself on Masha, her sense of honour and her personal revulsion equally help her resist his advances. He responds by ripping open her shirt for another gratuitous flash of women's breasts.

For whom are these bodies on display? *The Russian Uprising* hoped for an overseas audience as well as one at home. The same income could be generated in the 1990s by a single showing on European television as by an entire year of revenues in the Russian market. Russian films made in the 1990s often keyed into the desires and expectations of a foreign audience, and *The Russian Uprising* is no exception. For every idealizing shot of countryside loveliness meant to stir the hearts of Russians nostalgic for a landscape destroyed by Soviet ecological disasters and urban growth, the film also provides an allegory of the 'Russian soul' as the West has come to

fantasize it. The director, perhaps anticipating criticism for his deviations from historical accuracy, tried to make the film seem less about the past than about the moral effects of the past on the present. He claimed that his goal was ethical, meant to expose the cruelty of such national heroes as Pugachev and of the government's reaction to them. Proshkin compared Pugachev's uprising to the present-day war in Chechnia: 'We live in a society where we are daily shown blood and dead bodies on TV. We have grown accustomed to the sight of death.'<sup>34</sup> Whatever one thinks of the film, then, its director's ambitions follow the Jubilee tradition of using Pushkinian material for contemporary commentary, and of taking on issues no less significant than the nature of good and evil.

Art exhibits during the Jubilee also addressed ethical issues. At the prestigious Moscow gallery of Marat Gelman, Ira Valdron showed seven tapestries under the title *Fak-iu, Dantes* (i.e. 'Fuck you, D'Anthès' – Georges D'Anthès being the man who killed Pushkin). The images are as dramatic as that title, mixing words with animals and faces, and Valdron successfully mixes scandalous images with Pushkin's words of grief and outrage, but the gallery's website directs our attention not just to her mix of high and low but to a historical moment when all values are being reassessed, when Pushkin remains perhaps the only shared national language.<sup>35</sup> The constructivist Iurii Avvakumov chose a more direct indicator of his interest in the question of value in his exhibit *Pushkin and Money* (*Pushkin i den'gi*) which opened at XL Gallery in Moscow on 29 January 1999 (the day of Pushkin's death according to the pre-revolutionary calendar). Avvakumov used graphic works and computer-generated voice-over, relying entirely on Pushkin's own plaintive requests for money.<sup>36</sup> The voice-over made it seem as if Pushkin himself were in the gallery, but the exhibit's mode was not realist. The graphic works were stylized, changing the handwriting and lettering to suggest a personal letter, a desperate note, a public announcement. Pushkin is presented as the nation's currency, he is solid gold to those who value him but pure exchange value to his cynical detractors. Avvakumov suggests that he was vulnerable to the difficulties of getting money, but also strangely usable as if he were himself made of coin.

Two new monuments in Moscow were unveiled, both to Pushkin and his wife, a first in Pushkin commemorations and a sure sign of both the continuing fascination with his marriage and the ebbing tide of criticism toward the woman who married Pushkin. In Petersburg, a proposal to erect a chapel on the site of Pushkin's duel surfaced, but it was linked to an odd wish to demolish the obelisk now there. A letter signed by the head of the Union of Russian Writers, Valerii Ganichev, repeated an old Petersburg



11.3 Pushkin Monument, Moscow: photograph by Lev Melikhov, from *New Literary Review* (*Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*), 1999

rumour that the obelisk placed on Chernaia Rechka by the Soviets in 1937 had been illicitly taken from someone else's grave.<sup>37</sup>

The idea that Pushkin monuments might be tainted by some secret or might themselves contain a secret is old, as old as Pushkin's own writings, where a monument (to Peter the Great) turns out to have terrifying magical powers in *The Bronze Horseman* (*Mednyi vsadnik*; 1833). The revolutionary poet Vladimir Maiakovskii in his 1924 anniversary poem (*Iubileinoe*) had a Pushkin monument come beneficently to life. Representations of monuments have remained as significant as the objects themselves, as was shown dramatically by a series of photographs published in a 1999 issue of a prestigious Moscow literary theory journal: four photographs by Lev Melikhov of the Moscow Pushkin monument used the style of Soviet Constructivist photography to distort the familiar monument by using extreme close-up (of Pushkin's hat and the drape of his coat), odd camera angles, or, in the example reproduced here, placing the monument into the background, with a man's head seen from the rear and in extreme close-up in the foreground (fig. 11.3). The man wears earphones and watches a handheld television that is nearly obscured from view. A woman to his right watches as well. Here is Pushkin truly in the background, standing guard over a man absorbed in the technological innovations of the late twentieth century, but in the layout of the photograph, the monument seems to arise from the man's head as if it were his idea, as if whatever he watches on his tiny screen also has to do with Pushkin.

Pushkin's words and ideas were used in films, stories, poems, advertisements, dramatic spectacles, and popular festivals at anniversaries across the twentieth century. Individual Russians continued to find his words and his image compelling. From the top down, there was every attempt at self-importance, but in 1999 there were voices to answer in many tones, including lightness: as the theatre director Kamo Ginkas put it, Pushkin never goes out of Russian consciousness precisely because of his unbearable lightness.<sup>38</sup>