

**Pushkin for President:  
Russian Literary Cults in the Transition from Communism**

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## **Abstract**

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This dissertation examines commemoration of Russian poet Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin from the late Soviet period to the present, as a study of the nature and function of literary commemoration in a time of social, political, and economic instability. Since its inception in the late nineteenth century, the Pushkin cult has been Russia's largest-scale government-sanctioned literary cult, showing remarkable endurance through the transitions from imperial to Soviet rule and then from Soviet to capitalist rule. In the post-Soviet context, Pushkin-related commemoration and the resulting debates address a key question in Russian culture: can old literary "heroes" continue to play a central role in national identity in a society that no longer grants central political importance to literature? If they do retain a broader political and social significance, how are they used to navigate nostalgia, on one hand, and a sense of cultural exhaustion, on the other? Scrutiny of the Pushkin myth today demonstrates how postmodernism and irony have been turned to the re-stabilization of an authoritative discourse about identity, which nonetheless continuously provokes parody and satire.

I also examine the recently formed "cult" of Sergei Dovlatov (1941-1990), a late Soviet prose writer who was unable to publish his work at home and immigrated to the US, under government pressure, in 1979. Pushkin is central to Russia's image of Dovlatov, who spent time working as a tour guide at the Pushkin estate museum in Pskov oblast in the 1970s and wrote a satirical novel about the experience, which I analyze alongside real-life accounts of the estate museum. Dovlatov achieved huge posthumous

popularity in Russia almost immediately after his death, and is now the object of a distinctively post-Soviet literary cult, which I discuss in relation to the evolving Pushkin cult. In this way, I illuminate the peculiarities of Russian writer cults during a period when the social status of literature declined dramatically. I conclude that the Dovlatov cult serves as a vehicle for a carefully circumscribed variety of Soviet nostalgia, one that admits the many failings of the Soviet Union while also recalling many of its aspects with fondness and regret. As with Pushkin, the Dovlatov cult is used to create the impression of reconciliation among discordant political epochs and ideologies.

My study of the Pushkin and Dovlatov cults is organized around two types of literary commemoration, both of which have deep roots in European culture: the jubilee, or anniversary celebration, and the literary house museum. I begin with a detailed study of the almost-forgotten 1999 Pushkin jubilee, the first large-scale post-Soviet Pushkin celebration. My analysis of the jubilee and the reactions it provoked from the press and the intelligentsia shows that while the jubilee was widely derided, it unintentionally united diverse factions of the press and intelligentsia, who banded together to defend Pushkin against exploitation by Russia's new political elite. However, many writers also saw the jubilee as a confirmation that the possibilities of Russian literature had been exhausted: I explore some literary responses to this fear in my second chapter. I then move to Pushkin house museums, showing how they express different aspects of the Pushkin myth and Russian "national idea." I show how the recently founded Dovlatov House museum, like the Dovlatov cult more broadly, parodies the Pushkin cult while also reinforcing many of the basic practices and purposes of Pushkin worship.

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At the inception of this project, Cathy Popkin nurtured my ideas about “zombie Pushkin.” At the end, her eagle eye for kinetic sentences and her ruthless approach to half-baked claims were a tremendous asset as I edited a draft. Jessica Merrill’s insightful and encouraging comments greatly improved the structure of the dissertation and the clarity of its argument. A Pushkin seminar with Boris Gasparov helped inspire my interest in Pushkin and in the vast and at times perverse body of scholarship that constituted Soviet-era Pushkiniana. I also appreciated his comments on a portion of this dissertation at an earlier stage.

The late Cathy Nepomnyashchy was the first person who ever told me about the Pushkin cult, and her amused enthusiasm for the topic aroused my first interest in it. I know that she was planning to write more on this subject, and I hope that in some small way I have helped to carry on her work. Tatiana Smoliarova was characteristically supportive and pointed me to several sources that proved highly productive. During her time at Columbia, she opened my eyes to so much of what is beautiful about Russian



culture, from poetry to theater to art history. When I wrote my MA theses at the Harriman Institute and in the Slavic department, Rebecca Stanton was a model advisor. She encouraged and refined my work on Soviet censorship and the spectrum between official and illicit writing, questions that underlie this dissertation as well.

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## **Introduction: Commemoration and Rupture**

*“Хороший текст о П невозможен. Пародия на какой бы то было текст П (или о П) невозможна. Как бы ни был остроумен и изощрен текст, при упоминании П он обращается в труху.”*

*“A good text about P is impossible. A parody of one of P’s texts (or of a text about P) is impossible. No matter how clever and cultivated the text, as soon as P is mentioned it turns to dust.”*

-Mikhail Novikov, “The Insurance Will Not Be Paid Out,” 2000

### *Unfamiliar Pushkin*

My first serious encounter with Pushkin took place when I was already in my twenties. One winter night in Kiev, my Ukrainian boyfriend read Pushkin’s story “The Blizzard,” from *Tales of Belkin*, aloud in his deep, smoky voice. A musician with minimal formal education, he loved Pushkin with an innocent fervor. Sometimes he’d recite a Pushkin poem and shed a few tears. I watched these performances with a mixture of admiration and alarm: I wasn’t used to seeing people weep while reciting poetry, especially not men. Then again, part of what had attracted me to Russia and Ukraine on my first visits had been their apparent reverence for writers. I had never seen so many places named for writers, so many author statues and literary house museums. I agreed with Mandelstam’s famous remark that the persecution of writers, horrible though it was, had been a testament to Russia’s outsized faith in the power of literature.

I fell in love with Pushkin quickly and easily. His writing was limpid enough that even I could understand it, with my shaky Russian, and yet I recognized the richness and complexity of the very best literature. My boyfriend regaled me with anecdotes about Pushkin’s life, and I was delighted by the stormy romances, the exiles to exotic lands, the

hot-headed quarrels, the episodes of frenzied creativity, the channeling of an inspiration that seemed almost divine. These last two elements reminded me of the Mozart of Miloš Forman's film *Amadeus*, a longtime favorite; only later did I learn that *Amadeus* was based on Pushkin's "little tragedy" *Mozart and Salieri*. I didn't know it, but Pushkin had reached me when I was still a child.

I soon learned that Pushkin wasn't always greeted with such naïve joy. During one of my first graduate seminars at Columbia, Professor Tatiana Smoliarova remarked offhandedly, "You know, with Chekhov it is like marriage. You are in love, but you are tired." It turned out that many people felt the same way about Pushkin. For Russians, Pushkin was ubiquitous. Children were raised on Pushkin's fairy tales, and on the Soviet cartoon versions. They memorized Pushkin's poems from their first days of school. Meanwhile, public life was dripping with Pushkin quotations. This saturation had consequences. On the first day of our Pushkin seminar at Columbia, Professor Boris Gasparov observed that when you are Russian, "Pushkin becomes your everyday companion, and you lose the sense of his complexity. It's like with Russian culture—the more it concentrates on itself, the less it understands itself."

At a recent production of *Hamlet*, I found that I could hardly process the play because it was so overflowing with "winged phrases," as Russians call them, quotations from literature or history that pass into general usage. You do not need to have studied Shakespeare, or even read or seen his plays, to recognize "to thine own self be true," "to be or not to be: that is the question," "neither a borrower nor a lender be," and so on. These lines, and many others from Shakespeare, are often taken utterly out of context, and used in ways that directly contradict their original meaning. At this production of

*Hamlet*, I had the odd impression that I was watching a postmodern mash-up of quotations delivered by men in tights, a work of Conceptualist performance art. Though I recognize *Hamlet*'s greatness, I couldn't feel it; it was all too familiar. This, I think, is how many Russians feel about Pushkin. It's not that they don't like him—they recognize that he's a great poet and a charming man. But too many lines of Pushkin are painfully familiar, associated with bad teachers, irritating relatives, vacuous advertisements, and cynical politicians.

For the vast majority of Russians, I would venture to say, it is impossible to read Pushkin with fresh eyes. I was lucky: when I first read Pushkin, as an adult already accustomed to the study of literature, everything seemed new. Pushkin was never shoved down my throat. This has meant that I am at a distinct disadvantage in recognizing Pushkinian allusions, but it has also inoculated me against Pushkin fatigue.

As I worked on this dissertation, I often met with surprisingly vituperative opposition. "Why are you writing about Pushkin?" asked an illustrious Russian poet who teaches at an American university. "Nobody wants to hear about that. You should write about Ukraine instead. Now that's an interesting topic." Many intelligent people, I have learned, share this poet's sense that despite the continued value of his writing, Pushkin is a worn-out topic, hopelessly tainted by overuse and political exploitation.

"My dissertation isn't really about Pushkin," I answered, on this and many other occasions. Most of the greatest Russian literary critics and scholars have written at length about Pushkin, and I wouldn't dare to compete with them. Pushkiniana is a realm so vast it boggles the imagination. To name just a few examples, there's Viktor Vinogradov's *Dictionary of Pushkin's Language* [*Slovar' iazyka Pushkina*] (1956-1961), a pre-digital

four-volume compilation of every word Pushkin ever wrote, with information about where to find that word and every form in which it is used. There's Vikentii Veresaev's 1932 *Pushkin in Life* [*Pushkin v zhizni*], a compendium of virtually all testimonials about Pushkin's activities. Perhaps the pinnacle of the attempt at Pushkinian biographical completism was Mstislav Tsiavlovskii's *Chronicle of Pushkin's Life and Work* [*Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva Pushkina*], which aspired to offer an exhaustive day-by-day account of Pushkin's time on earth. Tsiavlovskii only made it to 1826 before he died, in 1947. The *Chronicle* was eventually completed by his wife and later generations of Pushkinists, and a full four-volume edition was released in honor of the 1999 Pushkin jubilee. Lazar' Chereiskii's 1975 *Pushkin and His Circle* [*Pushkin i ego okruzhenie*], Chereiskii's only work, strove to provide information about every person Pushkin ever met, all the way down to such figures as Konrad Rutch, the Petersburg tailor who charged Pushkin 405 rubles in 1834, and Varia, an "old gypsy woman" who told Pushkin's fortune sometime between 1826 and 1827.<sup>1</sup> When I looked at the Pushkin section in Columbia's Butler Library, I was sometimes tempted to weep. The internet only made things worse. Because of the huge number of institutions and places named after Pushkin, googling "Pushkin" in Russian is like googling "Smith" in English. As a search term, "Pushkin" has been drained of significance, much as his name and image became a kind of empty vessel in Soviet and then post-Soviet culture.

"If it's not about Pushkin," the skeptics inquire, "then what *is* your dissertation about?"

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<sup>1</sup> L.A. (Lazar') Chereiskii, *Pushkin i ego okruzhenie* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo "Nauka," 1988), 60, 380.

Well, it's about the *idea* of Pushkin, about the so-called "Pushkin cult." In this context, the word "cult" is used in its historical-anthropological-archaeological sense, as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "A particular form or system of religious worship or veneration, especially as expressed in ceremony or ritual directed towards a specified figure or object." In particular, I am interested in the Pushkin cult from the late Soviet period to the present, and in what it can tell us about the nature and function of literary commemoration in a time of social, political, and economic instability. I have chosen the Pushkin cult primarily because, since its inception in the late nineteenth century, it has been Russia's largest-scale government-sanctioned literary cult, showing remarkable endurance through the transitions from imperial to Soviet rule and then from Soviet to capitalist rule. Since the late nineteenth century, the Pushkin cult has functioned as a bellwether of the relative cohesion of national identity, and as a marker of the prominence of literature and writers in formulating this identity. In the post-Soviet context, Pushkin-related commemoration and the resulting debates address a key question in Russian culture: can old literary "heroes" continue to play a central role in national identity in a society that no longer grants central political importance to literature? If they do retain a broader political and social significance (and I will argue that they do), how are they used to navigate nostalgia, on one hand, and a sense of cultural exhaustion, on the other? Examination of the Pushkin myth today demonstrates how postmodernism and irony have been turned to the re-stabilization of an authoritative discourse about identity, which nonetheless continuously provokes parody and satire.

I also examine the recently formed "cult" of Sergei Dovlatov (1941-1990), a late Soviet prose writer who was unable to publish his work at home and immigrated to the

US, under government pressure, in 1979. He achieved huge posthumous popularity in Russia almost immediately after his death: his humorous writings appealed to many ordinary people who appreciated his gently comic approach to Soviet life. He was neither strident dissident nor haughty intellectual; he was approachable. That said, Pushkin is central to Russia's image of Dovlatov, who spent time working as a tour guide at the Pushkin estate museum in Pskov oblast in the 1970s and wrote a satirical novel about the experience, *Zapovednik* [*The Sanctuary*, published in the US as *Pushkin Hills*]. In the world of the Dovlatov cult, this association with Pushkin, along with Dovlatov's real-life relationship with Joseph Brodsky, gives this writer a sheen of high literary respectability. Pushkin infuses Dovlatov's image with the memory of the Golden Age of Russian literature, the glorious essence of the Russian spirit, while Brodsky imparts a secondhand sense of defiance and anti-Soviet principle. As a package, the Dovlatov cult serves as a vehicle for a carefully circumscribed variety of Soviet nostalgia, one that admits the many failings of the Soviet Union while also recalling many of its aspects with fondness and regret. On the tails of Pushkin's frock coat, Dovlatov appears as an ideal post-Soviet literary hero, allowing the reconciliation of elements of imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet culture.

*Time and space: Two types of literary commemoration*

In this dissertation, I focus on two of the primary manifestations of literary cults: the jubilee, or anniversary celebration, the subject of Part I, and the house museum, the subject of Part II. Jubilees divide time into reassuringly regular intervals. They produce a sense of comforting recurrence, like the cycle of the seasons: it's Pushkin's birthday

again, and we love him more than ever. Literary house or estate museums, on the other hand, are a form of commemoration organized primarily around space and material objects, relics. The two forms of commemoration intersect: jubilees are very often the occasion for the founding or renovation of house museums, and for a dramatic increase in publicity for these institutions. Commemorative time renews commemorative space.

Both jubilees and house museums are designed to help quiet anxieties about modernization, the passage of time, the loss of old ways of life, cultural forgetfulness. The preservation or restoration of a literary shrine reassures visitors that they will not be swept away by time, modernity, or globalization. If Pushkin's house is kept as it was when he lived there, perhaps Russian literature and Russian identity can still be preserved as well. I will ask to what extent the literary house museums I examine attempt simply to preserve the past and offer visitors a sense of communion with the writer, and to what extent these institutions express a revised concept of national identity. To what extent do they revise Soviet models of the house museum? How do they treat the Soviet period, if at all? Part II is focused on the Pushkin estate museum in Pskov oblast, which is now accompanied by a nearby private house museum dedicated to Dovlatov and his time working as a Pushkin tour guide.

Reading is a largely private experience, a moment of communion between author and reader. Commemoration, by contrast, is a public practice, albeit one that can occur on very different scales. This creates one of the central tensions in literary commemoration: that between public and private. Jubilees are public events, usually state-sponsored, and their only private element is the relationship individual readers feel with the author. In



many cases, as I will show, resistance to jubilees and other modes of public writer-worship takes the form of an insistence on the private “versions” of the writer.

The house museum poses a somewhat different balance of public and private. A central part of the conception of the European literary house museum has always been the hope that visitors will feel a sense of contact with writers. This connection is often facilitated by material objects that serve as mediums: writerly relics—the desk, the pen, the worn divan—that furnish the house museum. The perceived authenticity of these relics (which are very often facsimiles or stand-ins, though curators do not highlight this fact) is central, because they are imbued with a semi-magical power to connect visitors with the writer’s spirit. House museum visits are also imagined as a way of enriching the readerly experience; having looked out the same window from which Pushkin gazed as he composed his poems, his admirer will have a new insight into his work. This is an intimate experience that occurs largely in the mind of the individual visitor, and therefore has a strong private aspect.

At the same time, literary house museums are institutions that are open to the public. In many cases, notably the Soviet and Russian ones, they are often government institutions, and are associated with mass tourism. The rise of literary commemoration—including the house museum and the jubilee—was intimately linked with the rise of national consciousness, as nationality replaced religion and empire as the foremost component of identity. With language an essential aspect of national identity in Europe from the seventeenth century on, writers were central to the formation of a national culture, of a national canon that crystallized the nation’s peculiar genius. This “nationalizing” treatment of writers was the driving force for state-sponsored literary

commemoration and the key component in the formation of state-sanctioned writer cults. Like the very public tradition of jubilees, it provoked resistance, recalcitrance, even disgust and anger, from those (including Dovlatov) who objected to the use of beloved writers as icons of national identity. State-sanctioned writer cults, in this view, were a violation of the privacy of the readerly experience, and an abuse of the writer's image and oeuvre.

Religious overtones are an essential component of literary commemoration, obvious in the language used to discuss it: "jubilee," "pilgrimage," "relics." The religious aspect of literary commemoration has been extensively examined elsewhere, in the Soviet as well as the broader European context; as it is not an essential part of my own argument, I do not scrutinize it. I mention the religious component throughout this dissertation, however, because it is essential in understanding how certain objects, such as death masks, can seem to be invested with almost magical powers, and why discussion of literary commemoration so often involves supernatural elements. The religious aspect is also important in relation to the question of public and private memory. The individual's relationship with God is in many ways a private one, like the reader's relationship to an author. At the same time, religious worship is a communal practice that often takes place in groups and has a strong public aspect; religion assembles communities. The successful reconciliation of public and private in religion offers a template for this process in literary commemoration, and helps explain the ease with which much of the population seems to accept, or at least tolerate, literary jubilees and literary house museums. It is usually a small subset of writers and other intellectuals who challenge commemorative practices as violations of literary true religion.

Finally, literary commemoration has stimulated concern about commercialization and mass culture. Jubilees, in particular, provoke anxiety that the writer's memory is being debased by the mass production of kitschy souvenirs and other trivial objects. Such concerns are closely linked to broader anxieties about the commercialization of literature. Should a great writer be made so immediately available? Or does he demand a more rarefied atmosphere? Should he be handled only by those fully equipped to understand his genius, in all its sophistication? These questions have been prominent parts of virtually every Pushkin jubilee, and of many European literary jubilees throughout history. In the post-Soviet context, they were granted further complexity by grief and fear over literature's diminished social prestige and the rapid privatization of Russia's formerly national assets.

Just outside the borders of my project stand the many Pushkin monuments in the former Soviet Union and beyond. Though monuments, which are among the most visible and enduring types of public commemoration, resonate on many levels with my themes, I have chosen not to include a separate section on them here for fear of becoming embroiled in an encyclopedic project. Nevertheless, monuments make a number of cameo appearances, as they are intimately linked to jubilee celebrations and to iconoclastic attacks on the Pushkin cult.

Late and post-Soviet literary commemoration is hard to parse without some understanding of its history and roots. For that reason, I will now offer a brief overview of the development of the practice of literary commemoration, in Russia and in Europe more generally. I will show how Soviet and Russian literary commemorative practices grew out of European ones while also pointing to the particularities of Russian practices.

This overview sets up thematic threads that will reappear through this work: national identity; anti-establishment “counter-commemoration”; the tension between public and private; the threat of commercialization and the conflict between populist and elitist approaches; religious and supernatural overtones; and the treatment of the landscape itself as a kind of museum.

*A short history of literary commemoration in Europe*

Pushkin is intimately entwined with the idea of Russianness, and the exceptional visibility of literary commemoration in the Soviet Union means that such practices are often viewed as a peculiarly Russian or Soviet phenomenon. I certainly saw them this way before I embarked upon this project. As I delved into the history of European literary commemoration, however, I found that the cultural (and also historical) commemorations of the late imperial and Soviet periods had clear roots in a larger European tradition of cultural commemoration that had emerged much earlier. I discovered a fascinating body of recent scholarly work on this tradition, but it included only the occasional article on Russia.

Meanwhile, otherwise excellent works on Pushkin commemoration tend to spend little, if any, time situating it within the larger tradition of Russian commemoration, let alone European commemoration. For Pushkinists, Pushkin has a tendency to eclipse all else. This is understandable—Pushkin alone can fill a scholarly lifetime, as we have seen. But it makes it harder to understand Pushkin commemorations as part of the broader European tendency to construct national identity through public commemoration of cultural heroes, or to grasp the way that specific European examples—notably the French

and German ones—helped shape Russian cultural commemoration. In order to remedy this problem, I will now offer a brief overview of the cultural history of jubilees and house museums, respectively, first in the European context and then in the Russian one. As familiar as Pushkin commemoration may seem, it can be viewed in a new light when considered in the wider European and Russian historical context.

### *Invented tradition and writers as national heroes*

Eric Hobsbawm defined “invented tradition” as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.” This sense of continuity is often meant to paper over a moment of historical rupture: Hobsbawm gives the example of rebuilding the British parliament on the same spot and in the same nineteenth-century faux-Gothic style after it was bombed during World War II. Invented traditions are a conscious choice, explicitly conceived and implemented, unlike customs, which arise more naturally over time. Traditions are invented more frequently in eras of rapid transformation, when a sense of rupture and instability generates an increased need for the illusion of continuity and social cohesion.<sup>2</sup>

Until about 1790, commemorative celebrations in Europe were mostly dynastic, municipal, or religious: feast days of martyrs and saints and of institutions like cities and

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, “Inventing Traditions,” introduction to Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1-11. See also John R. Gillis, “Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship,” introduction to John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3-24.

guilds, and eventually fifty-year jubilees of religious and dynastic figures, as well as universities and university doctors. (The term “Jubilee” initially referred to the year of celebration and forgiveness that Jews and Christians marked every fifty years. It later came to signify an important anniversary of dynastic rule,<sup>3</sup> and it was eventually employed for a wide range of culturally and historically significant anniversaries.<sup>4</sup>) As the Middle Ages gave way to the early modern period, dynastic and religious identities began to be replaced by civic and ultimately national identity. Historical, political, and cultural figures alike became candidates for public commemoration.<sup>5</sup>

Early European literary centenary commemorations—which occurred on the anniversaries of both birth and death—were explicitly inspired by classical conventions: a bust of the hero in question was crowned with laurels and poems were recited. Later in the nineteenth century, these traditions were replaced with a more scholarly, historical approach, with lectures and exhibitions.<sup>6</sup> Monuments, which had grown from the laurel-crowned busts of early commemorations, became an important component, establishing the honoree’s permanent presence in public space. The opening of monuments was so widespread in the nineteenth century that there was discussion of “statue mania.” Though

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<sup>3</sup> Julie Buckler and Emily D. Johnson, “Introduction,” in *Rites of Place: Public Commemoration in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 7.

<sup>4</sup> K.N. Tsimbaev, “Jubilee Mania in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Russian Society,” *Russian Studies in History* 47, no. 2 (Fall 2008), 23.

<sup>5</sup> Ann Rigney and Joep Leerssen, “Introduction: Fanning out from Shakespeare,” in *Commemorating Writers in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Nation-Building and Centenary Fever* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 7-9.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Quinault, “The Cult of the Centenary, c. 1784-1914,” *Historical Research* 71, no. 176 (October 1998). Quote on p. 310.

nations often saw their activities as an affirmation of their national uniqueness, commemorative methods followed consistent patterns across Europe, part of a continent-wide practice reaffirmed through mutual communication and observation.<sup>7</sup>

Writers received particular commemorative attention, as nations associated their identity and authority with the accomplishments of those writers anointed as cultural heroes. In his influential 1840 work *Hero-Worship*, for instance, Thomas Carlyle celebrated Shakespeare as a kind of classical hero: a demigod of the nation, essential to its existence and identity, even more important than its colonies. In this conception, literary conquest was even more meaningful than military conquest.<sup>8</sup> Literary centenary celebrations (along with centenary celebrations more generally) took off in the mid-nineteenth century, fueled by a combination of commercial interests, new ease of travel, burgeoning national feeling, and a firmly entrenched understanding of the cultural hero as crucial to national identity. As Ann Rigney and Joep Leerssen put it, “The lasting and constantly renewed canonicity of literary works and the men who wrote them helped reconcile the state’s history with the nation’s memories, bringing together different periods and regimes in a timeless sanctuary of collective self-recognition linked to a canon of ever-reproducible texts.” Lavish celebrations became historical events in themselves, establishing secure links in the chain of public memory.<sup>9</sup>

In most cases (with France offering notable exceptions), the choice of writers for commemoration was not disputed. Arguments focused instead on the means of

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<sup>7</sup> Ann Rigney and Joep Leerssen, “Introduction,” 4-5.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Carlyle, “The Hero as Poet. Dante: Shakspeare [*sic*],” in *The Works of Thomas Carlyle (Complete)*, vol. 12 (New York: Peter Fenelon Collier, 1897). 328-341.

<sup>9</sup> Ann Rigney and Joep Leerssen, “Introduction,” 9-16.

commemoration, the social ownership or significance of the writer, or which of the writer's works were most worthy of celebration. The events were usually focused on projecting the image (often illusory) of consensus, creating the impression of universally shared jubilation over a common hero and a common achievement, and of a respite from social divisions.<sup>10</sup>

As with other types of "invented traditions," commemorations were often used to shore up national self-confidence, but they could also serve to highlight, rather than elide, divisions within society. Some commemorations were politically radical in their orientation, as in the case of Scottish national writer Robert Burns, involving student parades and political calls to action.<sup>11</sup> Commemoration controversy could heighten the tension between continuity and rupture that is always present in commemorative practice. After its humiliating defeat by the Germans in 1870, for instance, France sought ways of reestablishing itself on the European stage. As the country organized a world fair for 1878, the Republican press pushed for a commemoration of Enlightenment luminaries Voltaire and Rousseau. Activities were planned by an organizing committee of Parisian municipal councilors, but they met with resistance, in large part thanks to Voltaire's atheism and the association of both writers with the controversial French Revolution. There were fervent counter-commemorations, and in the end the events served to make visible dissension and division rather than to create the impression of national unity. They did, however, maintain the Revolution-era practice of replacing the cults of religion and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 10.



monarchy with the cult of great thinkers.<sup>12</sup> The Voltaire and Rousseau commemorations thus projected an alternative sense of continuity, with the revolutionary tradition rather than with the status quo. These French commemorations would be an important inspiration for Russian literary commemorations, which were infused from the beginning with a revolutionary tendency.

*Russian literary commemoration: The imperial period*

Russian history is rich in rupture, and correspondingly rich in invented tradition and grandiose commemoration. Julie Buckler and Emily D. Johnson point out that ever since the dramatic reforms ordered by Peter the Great in the early eighteenth century, Russia has struggled with a sense of cultural trauma.<sup>13</sup> Russian writers and social thinkers still argue, even now, about whether the “Petrine revolution” was for the best, or whether it threw Russia off its natural path of development. History went on to furnish Russian thinkers with a long list of other traumatic ruptures, including the chaos following the 1861 emancipation of the serfs, mass migration from country to city, industrialization, the 1917 revolutions and their aftermath, and the end of the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup>

In Russia, commemoration of writers became significant only in the second half of the nineteenth century—later than in Western Europe, but expanding along with the broader European jubilee mania of the period. At first, Russian writer commemorations

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<sup>12</sup> Pierre Boudrot, “Voltaire 1878: Commemoration and the Creation of Dissent” (translated by Ann Rigney), in *Commemorating Writers in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Nation-Building and Centenary Fever* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 152-168.

<sup>13</sup> Russia experienced historical and cultural traumas before this, of course—notably the Time of Troubles. See Marcia Morris, *Writing the Time of Troubles: False Dmitry in Russian Literature* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Buckler and Johnson, “Introduction,” 5.

were decidedly anti-establishment. The Russian doctrine of “official nationality,” enshrined in the 1830s, demanded unquestioning loyalty to the Emperor and rejected individualism. It was seemingly incompatible with the idea that cultural heroes played a central part in national identity.<sup>15</sup> Considering this fact and given Russia’s burgeoning revolutionary movement, it is perhaps not surprising that early Russian cultural commemorations had more in common with French commemorations, which highlighted dissent, than with the consensus-oriented, nationalist, and often pro-establishment versions that dominated elsewhere in Europe. Russian radicals usually commemorated the deaths rather than the births of their writer-heroes. This was a way of celebrating the writers’ achievements rather than the simple fact of their existence. From a political perspective, it was also a way of marking what could be perceived—and was portrayed in obituaries and other commemorative literature—as the writer’s martyrdom at the hands of a hostile, unjust government.<sup>16</sup>

One of the first writer commemorations in Russia was contentious even within its radical milieu. In 1858, people involved with St. Petersburg’s *The Contemporary* [*Sovremennik*] journal held a ceremonial dinner [*torzhestvennyi obed*] in honor of the tenth anniversary of the death of Vissarion Belinskii, the progressive lead critic for *The Contemporary*. (Belinskii died of tuberculosis just before he was to be arrested for political reasons, one of many writer-heroes who died tragically early, under the shadow

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<sup>15</sup> Neil Stewart, “Pushkin 1880: Fedor Dostoevsky Voices the Russian Self-Image,” in *Commemorating Writers in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Nation-Building and Centenary Fever* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 212.

<sup>16</sup> Aleksei Vdovin, “Godovshchina smerti literatora kak prazdnik: Stanovlenie traditsii v Rossii (1850-1900-e gg.)” in Alexander Graf (ed.), *Kul'tura prazdnika v russkoi literature XVIII-XXI vv.* (Munich: Herbert Utz Verlag, 2010), 82-84.

of government persecution.) One of the guests at the dinner was writer, critic, and revolutionary democrat Nikolai Dobroliubov, who later expressed his contempt for the idea of holding a boozy feast in honor of Belinskii's lofty ideas. (Dobroliubov would die in 1861.) Nikolai Chernyshevskii, another influential radical writer, did not attend the commemoration, but subsequently expressed similar disdain for such frivolous events. Radical students, the kind who admired Belinskii, Dobroliubov, and Chernyshevskii, preferred to honor the memory of their intellectual heroes with demonstrations—for example at the grave of Dobroliubov on the anniversaries of his death. These were not only anti-government protests, but protests of official pomp. Instead of a liturgy, there was a simple trip to the cemetery; instead of a grand, formal meal, a shot of vodka at the nearest tavern.<sup>17</sup>

These radical commemorations sometimes met, unsurprisingly, with direct government opposition: when students tried to publicize the tenth anniversary of Dobroliubov's death, in 1871, newspapers refused to publish any related material, on orders from the government. In 1881, revolutionaries released a proclamation entitled, "On the twentieth anniversary of the death of Dobroliubov," calling for Russia to "honor his memory with festivities" [*pochtit' prazdnestvom ego pamiat'*]. In the text of the proclamation, commemoration of Dobroliubov's early death from tuberculosis was set in contrast with the birthday celebrations of the "wife of the all-Russian despot" (i.e., the empress). The contrast was explicit: commemoration of a writer's death was an act of

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

protest against the state, while celebration of the empress' birthday was an empty official holiday that underscored the state's authoritarianism.<sup>18</sup>

The tsarist government chose not to allow the anniversaries of writers' deaths to become the sole territory of radicals. The first major official commemoration in Russia of the anniversary of a writer's death was the 1865 centenary of the death of Mikhail Lomonosov, the poet, scholar, scientist, and co-founder of Moscow University. Lomonosov was quite the opposite of a political radical, and was clearly a plausible candidate for a state-sponsored commemoration that sought to assert the solidity and continuity of Russia's intellectual achievement and institutions, as well as the unity of literature, scholarship, and the state. The event mixed religious rituals with activities related to Lomonosov's professional achievements, and would serve as a model for future Russian writer jubilees.<sup>19</sup> Lomonosov had worn many hats in the course of his career, not all of them strictly literary, and he was a versatile object of commemoration. It would be some years before another writer received such a momentous official celebration. The Russian literary canon was still being established, and while radicals already had an abundance of martyrs, there were not many writers who could generate the impression of social consensus that was desirable in a state-sponsored commemoration.

The practice of celebrating the anniversaries of writers' deaths remained controversial (especially when the writer in question had died in a duel, as duels were illegal), but a number of coinciding factors would make this a widely accepted practice

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 82-84.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 81-82.

by the end of the century. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Russia saw a rapid increase in the social status and significance of writers, at a moment of political turmoil and diminishing authority of the church and state.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, the Russian literary canon reached a tipping point of consolidation, with a well-stocked literary pantheon, and a number of round-number anniversaries of the births and deaths of famous writers began to tick by. There were also foreign examples to emulate, most notably the 1878 commemorations of the deaths of Voltaire and Rousseau, which had a revolutionary flavor that appealed to Russian liberals and revolutionaries. Democratic Russian literary publications, keen to assert the political significance of the intelligentsia, argued that literary jubilees played an important role in the formation of national consciousness, positing a direct relationship between the degree to which a country was civilized and the development of jubilee culture.<sup>21</sup> The Russian intelligentsia would soon organize a literary event that would become seminal to the Russian literary jubilee tradition and to the formation of Russian national consciousness via literary commemoration: the 1880 Pushkin celebration.

### *The birth of the Pushkin cult*

Commemoration of Pushkin had a rocky start. Upon the poet's death in 1837, chief of gendarmes Count Benkendorf followed orders from Nicholas I to suppress public expressions of grief at Pushkin's death, due to uncertainty about whether crowds were

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<sup>20</sup> Gregory Friedin, "By the Walls of Church and State: Literature's Authority in Russia's Modern Tradition," *Russian Review* 52, no. 2 (April 1993), 149-165.

<sup>21</sup> Vdovin, "Godovshchina," 85.

mourning Pushkin the poet or Pushkin the liberal; Benkendorf could not allow a “spectacle of triumph for liberals.” Portraits of Pushkin were collected and buried, and any mention of how Pushkin had died (in an illegal and immoral duel) or of his funeral was forbidden.<sup>22</sup>

Anti-Pushkin feeling was not confined to the state apparatus. Over the next decades, Pushkin was attacked rather than celebrated by some members of the intelligentsia. In the 1860s, radical Dmitrii Pisarev saw Pushkin as part of the loathsome establishment, calling *Evgenii Onegin* “nothing but a brilliant and sparkling apotheosis of a most joyless and senseless status quo.”<sup>23</sup> This is an early example of a tendency that would become more marked over time: Pushkin was taken as a stand-in for aesthetic dogma, associated with the status quo, and he therefore became the target of all manner of iconoclasts and revolutionaries. During the same period, Slavophiles attacked Pushkin from a reactionary, Orthodox Christian standpoint. For them, Pushkin represented the hegemony of the atheistic, hedonistic European values that were continuing, in the aftermath of the Petrine reforms, to destroy Russian heritage and national identity.<sup>24</sup> For all these reasons, Pushkin was debated and read in the four decades after his death, but he was not widely commemorated.

In 1880, sculptor Aleksandr Opekushin’s Moscow Pushkin statue, erected after several decades of efforts to raise the necessary funds, became the city’s first monument

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<sup>22</sup> Marcus C. Levitt, *Russian Literary Politics and the Pushkin Celebration of 1880* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 19-20.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Levitt, *Russian Literary Politics*, 28.

<sup>24</sup> Levitt, *Russian Literary Politics*, 29-32.

to a hero of culture. Between 100,000 and 500,000 people attended the unveiling on June 6, Pushkin's birthday. Delegates carried wreaths and flags. As the "shroud" was removed from the statue, onlookers cheered and wept. The unveiling was described using the word *lik*, an archaic word for "face" that carries strong religious connotations, and some witnesses described the celebration as an almost religious experience.<sup>25</sup> When the ceremony was over, the crowd threw themselves at the wreaths that had been placed at Pushkin's feet. They wanted souvenirs, physical reminders—not only of Pushkin, but of the very possibility of immortality.<sup>26</sup> The celebration also included speeches, banquets, a church service, and literary and musical presentations.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 1, 83-85, 123-124.

<sup>26</sup> Natal'ia Vershinina, "Pushkinskie prazdniki 1880 i 1899 godov v kul'turno-obrazovatel'nom prostranstve." in Graf, *Kul'tura prazdnika*, 112-113.

<sup>27</sup> Levitt, *Russian Literary Politics*, 1.



Figure 1: The opening of the Pushkin monument in 1880.

Like other writer jubilees and like the Pushkin jubilees that would follow, the 1880 celebration was about much more than Pushkin. Critic N.K. Mikhailovskii wrote that for years Russians had “waited for the chance” to “publicly, loudly, and freely declare their own existence...Pushkin was the pretext, symbol, cloak—what you will, only not the immediate hero of the celebration.”<sup>28</sup> As a writer whose work was accessible but also highly sophisticated, Pushkin had the potential to reconcile the people and the intelligentsia while also validating the intelligentsia’s importance. A Pushkin commemoration, therefore, had an ideological utility and versatility that had not been

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Levitt, *Russian Literary Politics*, 117.



evident in commemorations of either anti-government writers (Belinskii, Dobroliubov), or of writers who had held prominent positions within the state (Lomonosov). (Like many upper-class Russian writers, for whom this type of work was almost inescapable, Pushkin also held a rank and did state service, but he was an irresponsible and ineffective civil servant who saw his state work as an irritating distraction from his writing.<sup>29</sup>) Meanwhile, Pushkin's unhappy experience of censorship made him an appealing figure for those who wished to advocate for greater freedom of expression in Russia.

During the three-day celebration, Pushkin became a powerful symbol of Russia's political and intellectual hopes, which were, in Marcus Levitt's words, "concentrated on the liberating role, and rightful place, of a free literature—personified by Pushkin."<sup>30</sup> The poet represented Russia's hope of becoming an articulate member of European society, no longer the "great dumb monster" described by Thomas Carlyle in 1840, to the indignation of the Russian intelligentsia.<sup>31</sup> Some argued that the successful organization of the Pushkin "holiday" showed that the intelligentsia had both the capacity and the right to serve as Russia's moral and spiritual leaders.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, the intelligentsia's

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<sup>29</sup> For an example of Pushkin's rebellion against the requirements of his state service job, see T.J. Binyon's account of his resistance to an assignment to study the locusts of southern Ukraine: *Pushkin: A Biography*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003, 176-177.

<sup>30</sup> Levitt, 3.

<sup>31</sup> In *Hero-Worship*, Thomas Carlyle made the stinging remark, "The Czar of all the Russias, he is strong; with so many bayonets, Cossacks and cannons; and does a great feat in keeping such a tract of earth politically together; but he cannot yet speak. Something great in him, but it is a dumb greatness. He has had no voice of genius, to be heard of all men and times. He must learn to speak. He is a great dumb monster hitherto. His cannons and Cossacks will all have rusted into nonentity, while that Dante's voice is still audible. The Nation that has a Dante is bound together as no dumb Russia can be." Carlyle, "The Hero as Priest," *Works*, 341.

<sup>32</sup> Levitt, *Russian Literary Politics*, 1-16, 33-34, 60.

desire for union with the people, the *narod*, was somewhat undermined by its outrage at the popularity of Pushkin souvenirs during the celebration; it wanted the people to celebrate Pushkin only on the terms set by the literary elite.<sup>33</sup>

Fedor Dostoevsky's nationalist attitudes set him apart from much of the intelligentsia and from the main organizers, including fellow writer Ivan Turgenev, of the 1880 Pushkin celebration. While Turgenev ultimately declined to rank Pushkin among the greatest "universal" poets, such as Shakespeare and Goethe,<sup>34</sup> Dostoevsky described Pushkin as a prophet who revealed Russia's national self-awareness, a "great national writer," a painter of the Russian people. Had Pushkin only lived longer, Dostoevsky speculated, he might have made the Russian soul intelligible to Europeans and brought Russia greater respect from the rest of Europe. He might also have reduced the "strife and misunderstanding" within Russia, serving as a reconciler of opposing factions.<sup>35</sup>

While acknowledging the influence of European writers on Pushkin, Dostoevsky asserted Pushkin's absolute independence and originality. "Had there been no Pushkin," he said, "perhaps our faith in our Russian individuality, in the family of the European nations, would not have manifested itself with so unyielding a force as it did later." In a paradox that has since been frequently noted, Dostoevsky characterized Pushkin as both utterly Russian and more "universal" than any other literary genius of European history.

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<sup>33</sup> Stewart, "Pushkin 1880," 217.

<sup>34</sup> Levitt, *Russian Literary Politics*, 108-110.

<sup>35</sup> Fedor Dostoevskii, "Pushkin (Ocherk): Proisneseno 8 iunია v zasedanii obshchestva liubitelei rossiiskoi slovesnosti," in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 18 tomakh*, vol. 12 (Moscow: Voskresen'e, 2004), 320-330. The translated passages are from F.M. Dostoevsky, *The Diary of a Writer*, vol. 2, trans. Boris Brasol (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 967-980.

Pushkin was more capable of embodying in himself an “alien nationality” than was any other great European writer, taking on the mantle of the genius of all other countries and times—and this capability made him the greatest possible embodiment of the Russian national character. “For what else is the strength of the Russian national spirit,” Dostoevsky asked, “than the aspiration, in its ultimate goal, for universality and all-embracing humanitarianism?” This paradox of individuality in universality was not unique to Dostoevsky or to the treatment of Pushkin, appearing frequently in European literary commemorations, especially in imperial nations.<sup>36</sup> Colonialism, after all, is a way of attempting to make the specific universal, justified by a claim to a unique identity and value. Dostoevsky’s speech was therefore in harmony with one of the predominant strains in European commemoration of cultural heroes. Cultural commemoration, including Pushkin commemoration, very often combines insistence on the uniquely national character of the writer with assertion of the universal, transcendent qualities of his work, which supposedly appeal to the whole world and bolster his homeland’s claim to international prominence. The national writer should embody the national essence while also succeeding as an export product.

While organizers were eager to present it as the fruit of intelligentsia efforts, the 1880 Pushkin celebration must also be understood against the broader Russian political backdrop. Disappointment over the results of the 1861 reforms had contributed to political radicalization and mounting terrorism. In November 1879, the radical terrorist group People’s Will [*Narodnaia volia*] bombed the Emperor’s train, and in February

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<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Coppelia Kahn, “Remembering Shakespeare Imperially: The 1916 Tercentenary,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (Winter 2001), 456-478.

1880 they put a bomb in the Winter Palace. Meanwhile, Russia had just experienced a substantial political blow after fighting a costly 1877-78 war with the Ottoman Empire and being subsequently humiliated at the 1878 Congress of Berlin, where Russia had to give up much of the Balkan territory it had conquered on behalf of fellow Slavs like the Bulgarians. In 1880, there was a widespread sense that the question of Russia's identity and place in the world, which had their origins in the Petrine reforms, were reaching a crisis point. The intelligentsia was divided between Slavophiles and Westernizers, and conservative journalists blamed the intelligentsia for encouraging terrorism. The Pushkin celebration was permitted as part of the government's attempt to win the intelligentsia back to its side, taking place under intense police surveillance.<sup>37</sup> This period of strained conciliation was short-lived. Alexander II's assassination in March 1881 led to a new crackdown on radicals and an increase in censorship. In retrospect, Marcus Levitt writes, the 1880 Pushkin celebration marked the end of the Emancipation era, with its hopes for top-down reform.<sup>38</sup> The Pushkin celebration did, however, mark the beginning of an enduring link between Pushkin and Russian national identity, and a faith in the power of Pushkin commemorations to bridge the divides separating the intelligentsia, the people, and the government.<sup>39</sup>

There were quarrels about whether and how to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Pushkin's death, in 1887, with debates in newspapers about whether it was even appropriate to mark the anniversary of the death of a great poet, and if so, how to do

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<sup>37</sup> Stewart, "Pushkin 1880," 209-212.

<sup>38</sup> Levitt, *Russian Literary Politics*, 13-17.

<sup>39</sup> Stewart, "Pushkin 1880."

it. Some thought only a solemn liturgy would be suitable, while others argued that it was essential to honor the poet's achievements on this anniversary. One commentator argued that Pushkin's death day was the "first day of Pushkin's immortality," saying that "in the name of this eternal life and eternal memory," it was necessary to remember and celebrate the poet's day of death in particular.<sup>40</sup> In the end, the anniversary passed without much fanfare. But the copyright on Pushkin's work expired the next day, leading to havoc at bookstores, where thousands of copies of a cheap new edition sold out in hours. In that year, 12-18% of books published in Russia were by Pushkin, who was responsible for an extraordinary expansion of Russian publishing; such proliferation encouraged the sense that Pushkin *was* Russian literature. By the 1890s there was a class of "Pushkinists," or professional Pushkin scholars. Meanwhile, the promulgation of Pushkin and other classics among the people became an important component of the intelligentsia's "small works" movement, though the value of Pushkin's oeuvre as a teaching tool for the masses was disputed by both the intelligentsia and the state from the 1860s until the end of the nineteenth century, because of Pushkin's sophistication and questionable ideology.<sup>41</sup>

At the end of the century, the Russian political elite entered a period of mania for jubilees in general. In response to mounting social instability, it attempted to quell rebellious sentiment by offering—or imposing—festival-spectacles that presented an idealized view of Russian society and Russian history. By the turn of the century, the

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<sup>40</sup> Vdovin, "Godovshchina," 87.

<sup>41</sup> Marcus C. Levitt, "Pushkin in 1899," in Boris Gasparov, Robert P. Hughes, and Irina Paperno, eds., *Cultural Mythologies of Russian Modernism: From the Golden Age to the Silver Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 191.

Russian periodical press was writing about “jubilee mania.”<sup>42</sup> The ideological utility of literary jubilees had become clear, and various political contingents, including the state, fought to be the chief celebrators of important anniversaries.<sup>43</sup> This changed dynamic was evident in the state-sponsored celebration of Pushkin’s hundredth birthday, in 1899, at the symbolically significant turn of the century. The celebration became the focus of substantial state effort, and of a struggle over the nature and meaning of literary commemoration.

By 1899, the state had come to see Pushkin’s work as a potentially valuable means of drawing non-Russian nationalities and peasants into Europeanized Russian secular culture, and reaffirming Russia’s imperial prowess. In 1899, the government organized an empire-wide Pushkin jubilee of unprecedented scale, as a literary holiday became a political and ideological tool of the state.<sup>44</sup> Activities included liturgy and requiem services in municipal churches and school chapels; gala celebrations; the presentation of Pushkin’s works in imperial theaters; the distribution of Pushkin’s works and portrait to schoolchildren; the renaming of places in honor of Pushkin; and the state’s assumption of control of the Pskov oblast Pushkin estate, Mikhailovskoe, from Pushkin’s descendants after it had been purchased with funds donated by the public. Needless to say, the version of Pushkin presented in the official proceedings was politically obedient and devoted to autocracy, while the state was presented as a reliable defender of Russian literature. The clergy was reluctant, however, to celebrate Pushkin, given his immoral

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<sup>42</sup> Tsimbaev, “Jubilee Mania,” 14-30.

<sup>43</sup> Vdovin, “Godovshchina,” 90.

<sup>44</sup> Levitt, *Russian Literary Politics*, 154-158.

behavior and sinful death. Though the Holy Synod agreed to the official program, Russian clergymen expressed reservations about honoring Pushkin in church, exhorting their followers to pray for his soul instead. Some refused to allow services to be held for him in their localities; the bishop in Simferopol' criticized the practice of clergy blessing monuments to Pushkin, suggesting that it might be mistaken for idol-worship.<sup>45</sup>

This 1899 celebration was thoroughly commercialized, with a superabundance of items bearing Pushkin's image: Pushkin cigarettes, tobacco, rolling papers, matches, candy, steel pens, stationery, ink stands, liqueur, knives, watches, vases, cups, shoes, dresses, lamps, fans, perfume called "Bouquet Pouchkine," and even a board game called "Pushkin's Duel." There were also plans for a privately organized "All-Russian Bicycle Race in Pushkin's memory" and a dinner including only foods mentioned in *Evgenii Onegin*, though the latter became embarrassing in light of the famine that coincided with the jubilee.<sup>46</sup> This commercialization seemed a symptom of the commercialization of literature more generally, its increasing accessibility to the masses and its resulting vulgarization—phenomena that were a source of ongoing anxiety for intellectuals of the period. Many members of the intelligentsia found the jubilee trashy and phony, while noting that Pushkin was being used, disingenuously, as the banner for a new type of

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<sup>45</sup> Levitt, "Pushkin in 1899," 185-191. E. Shpineva and T. Geichenko, "Veshchi imeiut svoiu sud'bu, inogda sovershenno neveroiatnuiu": S.S. Geichenko, *U Lukomor'ia*." In *Pushkinskii zapovednik i ego khranitel': K 100-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia Semena Stepanovicha Geichenko*. Exhibit catalogue. (Pskov: Gosudarstvennyi muzeia-zapovednika A.S. Pushkina "Mikhailovskoe", 2003), 29-57. "Spravka o muzee," Pushkinskii Zapovednik, <http://pushkin.ellink.ru/museum/msm16.asp>. Accessed May 12, 2019.

<sup>46</sup> Levitt, "Pushkin in 1899," 192-193.

“official nationality.”<sup>47</sup> Some viewed the jubilee as a manifestation of the fragmentation of Russian society, with many groups competing to present their own Pushkins and the grotesque spectacle of a government feast in a time of famine. Some municipal dumas refused to fund any jubilee activities, saying that Pushkin had not visited their cities or done anything else for them.<sup>48</sup> The 1899 Pushkin jubilee, then, was far from an unqualified success, and did not manage to create the impression of social unity and consensus. At the same time, the 1899 celebration was the first in a series of lavish, commercialized Russian state-sponsored Pushkin jubilees, followed by a backlash from the intelligentsia.

The new century ushered in peak jubilee mania in Russia, reflecting the government’s increasingly precarious position. The number of Russian state-sponsored jubilees—especially jubilees related to military victories—spiked after Russia’s humiliating 1905 defeat in the Russo-Japanese War. Social, scholarly, cultural, and commercial groups celebrated any jubilee available for their field, and anniversaries of all sizes. Perhaps counterproductively, the empire avoided any celebrations related to past political reforms; these jubilees were about the status quo, not the possibility of change.<sup>49</sup> The government included politically palatable literary anniversaries alongside military and historical ones in its ever-expanding roster of jubilees: there were celebrations of Gogol, the still-living Tolstoy, and Lermontov. But these literary jubilees, in the context of the “jubilee mania” of a weak and discredited government, were greeted with

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<sup>47</sup> Levitt, *Russian Literary Politics*, 159.

<sup>48</sup> Levitt, “Pushkin in 1899,” 193-197.

<sup>49</sup> See Tsimbaev, “Jubilee Mania.”



disapproval by the press, which focused on the unsatisfactory nature of the official celebrations. Meanwhile, the last decades of tsarism saw a renewed growth in the influence of the old radical paradigm of opposition holidays that offered a sense of authenticity set in contrast to official celebrations.<sup>50</sup> Tolstoy's funeral, in 1910, became the occasion for anti-government demonstrations.<sup>51</sup>

In 1913, the imperial government celebrated the tercentenary of the Romanov dynasty, in the midst of ever-increasing political opposition and criticism. As Richard Wortman explains, the celebrations served to highlight conflict and disagreement rather than to promote consensus or unity. Russian imperial ceremony from the time of Peter the Great tended to ignore the dynasty's Muscovite past and to promote the Romanovs as Western-style rulers. By the late nineteenth century, however, the seventeenth century became an object of nostalgia, depicted as a time before Russia's contamination by the West. In the wake of the establishment of a parliamentary system, the Romanov tercentenary became a means of reasserting the sense of continuity from the seventeenth century to the early twentieth century and the direct, timeless, quasi-mystical union between the tsar and the people. Needless to say, many Russian subjects did not feel this

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<sup>50</sup> Vdovin, "Godovshchina," 90.

<sup>51</sup> Jeffrey Brooks, "Russian Nationalism and Russian Literature: The Canonization of the Classics," in Ivo Banac, John G. Ackerman, Roman Szporluk, eds., *Nation and Ideology, Essays in Honor of Wayne S. Vucinich* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1981), 322-323. See also William Nickell, *The Death of Tolstoy: Russia on the Eve, Astapovo Station, 1910* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 115-142.

unity, and the tercentenary only aggravated the tensions between Nicholas and the advocates of representative and constitutional government.<sup>52</sup>

By creating a sense of continuity from past to present and from present to future, jubilees were intended to downplay the possibility of future historical rupture; in other words, they were implicitly anti-revolutionary. But they were not always successful or effective. The demoralized armed forces were unenthusiastic about military jubilees, and religious processions often replaced military parades during these events. Meanwhile, the jubilees that occurred in the last years of the tsar's reign only served to irritate political activists and the general public. The jubilees' use of history was ineffectual as political propaganda, and no convincing unifying idea was apparent. With the future so obviously contentious, the backward-looking celebrations served to underscore the tsarist regime's lack of a viable plan rather than to reinforce its authority. State jubilees did not attract large crowds, and half of the people in attendance consisted of Okhrana agents.<sup>53</sup> The failure of these late tsarist jubilees presaged the failure of some early post-Soviet jubilees, which tried unsuccessfully to push a spectacular myth of the past on a skeptical or disdainful public focused on the uncertainties and perils of the present and future.

#### *Early Soviet Pushkin jubilees*

As a new government and new social system, established after years of revolution and civil war and sustained by violence and coercion, the Soviet Union had a particularly

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<sup>52</sup> Richard Wortman, "'Invisible Threads': The Historical Imagery of the Romanov Tercentenary," *Russian History* 16, nos. 2-4 (1989), 389-408.

<sup>53</sup> Tsimbaev, "Jubilee Mania," 28.

pressing need for invented tradition. It introduced atheist alternatives to old religious holidays, spaces, and customs, and engaged in vigorous commemoration of the births and deaths of important political, cultural, and historical figures, such as Lenin and Pushkin, and of historical victories, notably that of the October Revolution and, later, World War II. Large-scale commemorations like jubilees reinforced Soviet belief systems, encouraged a sense of collective identity, and urged Soviet citizens to forget their personal suffering in a celebration of the Soviet march towards progress.<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps in response to the jubilee “hyperinflation” of the pre-revolutionary period, Soviet authorities at first returned to the older understanding of the jubilee as a celebration of large, round numbers—though they were still willing to celebrate an occasional 185<sup>th</sup> jubilee, for example.<sup>55</sup> The state also strove to control commemorations in order to ensure that they were appropriate vehicles for suitable ideological messages. But commemorations, including jubilees, were popular for non-ideological reasons as well: they offered access to government funds and opportunities to accrue prestige and consolidate local authority, and they offered a respite from the daily grind. Though Sovnarkom, the Council of People’s Commissars, issued decrees in 1920 and 1941 that aimed to restrict jubilees, which were seen as wasteful in terms of both money and worker effort, jubilees remained a widespread phenomenon in Soviet culture.<sup>56</sup>

The Soviet period saw a continued tension between state celebration and the ceremonies of the intelligentsia. In February 1921, some of the most prominent writers of

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<sup>54</sup> Emily D. Johnson, “Jubilation Deferred: The Belated Commemoration of the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of St. Petersburg/Leningrad,” in Buckler and Johnson, *Rites of Place*, 84.

<sup>55</sup> Tsimbaev, “Jubilee Mania,” 17.

<sup>56</sup> Johnson, “Jubilation Deferred,” 85.

the Silver Age commemorated the eighty-fourth anniversary of Pushkin's death. There were memorial events, speeches, exhibitions, and concerts, mainly in St. Petersburg (then Petrograd). As a private event organized by the intelligentsia, this 1921 commemoration had much more in common with the 1880 Pushkin commemoration than with the state-sponsored jubilee of 1899, and several of the texts from the 1921 event referred back to Dostoevsky and Turgenev's speeches of 1880. Asserting Pushkin's eternal life through his work, participants protested the harassment of writers by bureaucrats and censors. There was a strong sense of the instability of the political moment, the rupture with the past, and the threat this rupture posed to literary tradition, with a corresponding desire to find a reassuring anchor in the memory and work of Pushkin. With this longing came a sense of anxiety that the commemoration of Pushkin's death might also mark the death of the poet's memory, as Russian history was irrevocably transformed by the new Soviet order. The poet Aleksandr Blok, himself not long for the world, delivered the famous lines, "And it absolutely was not d'Anthès's bullet that killed Pushkin. He was killed by the absence of air. And his culture was dying with him."<sup>57</sup> The year 1921 was not a round-number anniversary of Pushkin's birth or death, so the choice of February (the month Pushkin died, according to the Gregorian calendar) rather than June (when Pushkin was born, again according to the Gregorian calendar) was profoundly significant. This was a mourning ceremony. As they commemorated Pushkin's death, with the Russian Civil War raging on, the Petrograd writers must have felt an acute sense of their own mortality, and of the vulnerable position of the Russian literary tradition.

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<sup>57</sup> Robert P. Hughes, "Pushkin in Petrograd, February 1921," in *Cultural Mythologies of Russian Modernism*, 204-213; Stephanie Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin: Russia's Myth of a National Poet* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 89-97.

The Soviet Union, on the other hand, was still in the midst of its birth pangs. In 1922, Pushkin commemorations were moved from February to June, in preparation for the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the poet's birth, in 1924. In that year, Anatolii Lunacharskii, the commissar of education, proclaimed that Pushkin would soon "live as an instance of the present and a great teacher of the new life." A prominent essay explained, on thin evidence, "Why Lenin Loved Pushkin," adding the even more surprising assertion that Lenin resembled Pushkin in many aspects of his personality. The year's commemorations focused largely on Mikhailovskoe and its surrounding landmarks, though these were still in very bad condition.<sup>58</sup> The year also generated Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem "Jubile" ("Tubileinoe"), in which he imagined bringing the Moscow Pushkin monument from its plinth and taking his fellow poet for a chat. The poem is suffused with a sense that poets are vanishing, or at constant risk of death.

### *Pushkin and purges: 1937*

All previous Pushkin jubilees, and all previous Soviet literary celebrations, were eclipsed by the epic commemoration of the 1937 centenary of the poet's death. The commemoration, which ran from December 1935 to February 1937, was initiated in 1933 by the Pushkin Commission of the Academy of Sciences, an academic organ. The commission's central project was a complete academic edition of Pushkin's work, a textological monument. It also began to gather Pushkin's manuscripts and papers into a single archive, and took command of Mikhailovskoe and Moika 12, the St. Petersburg

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<sup>58</sup> Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin*, 97-104.

apartment where Pushkin died. At the same time, Pushkinists began compiling a huge volume of Pushkin studies and newly discovered documents with commentary. In 1934, the party and government took responsibility for the Pushkin jubilee. The most explicit model for the jubilee was Germany's 1932 commemoration of the centenary of Goethe's death, which had been closely watched by Soviet academics.<sup>59</sup> Over 13 million volumes of Pushkin's work were printed, with translations into many of the languages of the USSR, and 6.5 million gramophone recordings were pressed. Places and institutions were renamed for Pushkin, countless works were produced, and surveys were conducted on questions like "Why do we love Pushkin?" Schoolchildren memorized Pushkin's poems, performed his plays, produced projects in his honor, and even visited factories to promote Pushkin among the workers.<sup>60</sup> Quotations were closely monitored and controlled by censors and officials striving to ensure that the picture of Pushkin that emerged from the jubilee was one in harmony with the period's ideological values.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Jonathan Brooks Platt, *Greetings, Pushkin! Stalinist Cultural Politics and the Russian National Bard* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016), 25-28.

<sup>60</sup> Platt, *Greetings, Pushkin!*, 1. See also Iurii Molok, *Pushkin v 1937 godu: Materialy i issledovaniia po ikonografii* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2000), Karen Petrone, "A Double-Edged Discourse on Freedom: The Pushkin Centennial of 1937," in *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 113-148, and Stephanie Sandler, "The 1937 Pushkin Jubilee as Epic Trauma," in Kevin M.F. Platt and David Brandenberger (eds.), *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

<sup>61</sup> A.V. Blium, *Sovetskaia tsenzura v epokhu total'nogo terrora. 1929-1939* (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2000), 170-172.



Figure 2: Gustav Klutskis, “Glory to the Great Russian Poet Pushkin!”, 1937.<sup>62</sup>

While many of the activities of the 1937 celebration were familiar from imperial-era jubilees, the attempt to present total unity was typical of Stalinist public culture and a departure from the imperial-era commemorations, which had included substantive, open disagreements among the state, the church, and the intelligentsia, and among factions of

<sup>62</sup> At <http://cultobzor.ru/2017/06/pushkin-17-37/02-5008/>. Accessed Oct. 3, 2018.

the intelligentsia.<sup>63</sup> The return to Pushkin, a pre-revolutionary cultural hero without a radical pedigree, has been interpreted as an expression of Stalin's "Great Retreat" from revolutionary politics and of his assumption of a Russocentric, quasi-imperialist idea of Soviet identity, and also as a move away from iconoclasm and willful temporal rupture to "monumentalism," with its emphasis on continuity. (The Soviet Union suffered from an acute case of "statue mania.") The resurrection of past heroes has also been seen as part of a Stalinist tendency to erase the difference between past, present, and future.<sup>64</sup>

At the peak of the 1937 Pushkin jubilee, front-page articles about the poet and the celebrations were often juxtaposed with headlines about the latest purges.<sup>65</sup> Stephanie Sandler argues, "The discourse of death and punishment, previously renamed in the show trials, is transferred onto the narrative of Pushkin's death as a form of martyrdom.

Trotsky's "hirelings" [*naimity*] who deserve death for their treason are named with the

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<sup>63</sup> On Stalinist public culture and festivals, and for more on the 1937 Pushkin jubilee, see Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous*.

<sup>64</sup> On the "Great Retreat" and return to Russocentrism, see Nicholas Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1946); David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Brandenberger and Platt, eds., *Epic Revisionism*; Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001). On monumentalism vs. iconoclasm, see Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) and Platt, *Greetings, Pushkin!*. On eclipsing the distinction between past, present, and future, see Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin!: Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). In *Greetings, Pushkin!*, Jonathan Brooks Platt argues that the Pushkin jubilee, and high Stalinism more generally, achieved simultaneous monumentalism and iconoclasm/eschatology.

<sup>65</sup> Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin*, 111, and Blium, *Sovetskaia tsenzura*, 169.



same word as the foreign “hireling” (d’Anthès) who murdered Russia’s national poet.”<sup>66</sup> This example does show that there was overlap between the language and rhetoric of the show trials and of the jubilee, but an almost morbid focus on death and an emphasis on martyrdom were a common feature of commemorations before the Russian Revolution, as well. Nevertheless, the irony of commemorating Pushkin’s death in the same year as political purges became an important part of collective memory of the jubilee, as evidenced by a famous joke that even if Pushkin had been born a hundred years later, he still would have died in ’37.<sup>67</sup>

#### *Post-war Pushkin: 1949*

When the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Pushkin’s birth rolled around, in June 1949, the Soviet Union was still recovering from the devastation of the Second World War. Stalin was busy with his final purges, his campaign against “servility towards the West” [*nizkopoklonstvo pered zapadom*], which sought to eliminate enthusiasm for foreign arts and literature and to minimize the influence of Western culture on Russia,<sup>68</sup> and his campaign against “rootless cosmopolitans” (many of them Jewish intellectuals who were supposedly in a Zionist plot). Soviet leadership was also intensely anxious about the dangers of nationalist movements in areas under its control. With a repertoire of activities similar to that of the 1937 jubilee, the 1949 celebrations depicted a Pushkin who was a progressive and a revolutionary at heart, a Russian patriot who despised nationalism, and

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<sup>66</sup> Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin*, 112.

<sup>67</sup> Platt, *Greetings, Pushkin!*, 25-28.

<sup>68</sup> Olga Voronina, “‘The Sun of World Poetry’: Pushkin as a Cold War Writer,” *Pushkin Review* 14, 2011, 64-65.

a Russian poet whose work was compelling in translation as well as in the original, someone capable of uniting the multilingual peoples of the Eastern Bloc and inspiring them in their common struggle against the bourgeois capitalist oppressor.

The celebrations, which lasted from mid-April into July, were the biggest post-war Soviet spectacle after the 1945 Victory Parade.<sup>69</sup> Forty-five million copies of Pushkin's work were published as part of the jubilee activities.<sup>70</sup> The foundations were laid for a new Pushkin monument in Leningrad, and a Pushkin obelisk opened outside Moscow.<sup>71</sup> There was a large ceremonial meeting [*zasedanie*] in Moscow; the *New York Times* reported that Pushkin was cast during the speeches as a scourge to rootless cosmopolitans and the Western bourgeoisie.<sup>72</sup> The jubilee speech of Konstantin Simonov, editor of *Novyi Mir*, one of the USSR's most important journals, specifically mentioned Peter I as the origin of Russian servility towards "everything foreign," echoing Stalin's own attribution of the origins of the (supposed) problem back to Peter.<sup>73</sup>

Jubilee activities and publicity heavily emphasized the alleged love for Pushkin in the non-Russian Soviet republics and countries of the Eastern Bloc, both in the original and in translation. An *anekdot*<sup>74</sup> from 1948 or 1949 highlights some of the irony of late

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<sup>69</sup> Voronina, "The Sun of World Poetry," 63.

<sup>70</sup> Levitt, *Russian Literary Politics*, 167.

<sup>71</sup> Voronina, "The Sun of World Poetry," 63.

<sup>72</sup> "Pushkin is Hailed: Simonov Says Poet Attacked Western Bourgeois Culture," *New York Times*, June 7, 1949, 3.

<sup>73</sup> Voronina, "The Sun of World Poetry," 64-65.

<sup>74</sup> *Anekdoty*, a distinctly Soviet genre of story-joke, were a significant part of the unofficial and underground response to the Soviet Pushkin cult.

Stalinist efforts to cast Pushkin as a writer for all the socialist lands at a time when authorities were fixated on nationalist threats, and punishing many Soviet citizens—including many writers—as a result. In the joke, Lermontov, Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, and Blok are denied admission to the Russian Writers' Union. Lermontov is accused of being Jewish and using a pseudonym; Pushkin is told to apply to the Abyssian or Latvian Writers' Unions; Gogol is told to write in Ukrainian and join the Ukrainian Writers' Union; Tolstoy is denied admission because of his wife's German name; and Blok is denied because of his own German name and German father.<sup>75</sup> If Stalinist categories of Russianness were applied retroactively, the joke suggests, there would be no Russian literature at all.

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<sup>75</sup> Mel'nichenko, *Sovetskii Anekdot*, 761.



Figure 3: A cartoon accompanying an excerpt of Pushkin's poem "To the Slanderers of Russia" in the June 7, 1949 issue of *Izvestia*<sup>76</sup>

<sup>76</sup> The selective excerpt reads "...And why is it that you hate us?/Pray tell, is it because...we did not defer to the brazen will/Of him, before whom you trembled?/Is it because we cast the idol that oppressed/All the realms into the abyss/And bought, with our blood,/Liberty, honor and peace for Europe?" The excerpt obviously aims to imply a parallel with Russia's victory over Hitler. Translation from Voronina, "The Sun of World Poetry," 79. Voronina notes the particular significance of the excerpt's omission of the words "on the ruins of burning Moscow," which should come after the excerpt's second line. Voronina argues that this omission served to avoid any allusion to the disastrous failure of the defense of Moscow in 1941 and also to make the poem sound more relevant in the context of the Cold War, when the question was more one of propaganda than of military invasion.

*The development of literary tourism and house museums in Europe*

Literary commemoration in Europe occurred not only through centenary celebrations, but also through the establishment of museums (and the building of monuments). This started early, and was linked at first to a novel way of looking at literature rather than to the celebration of national identity. From the sixteenth century, new attention to the biographies of authors stimulated interest in the places where famous writers had lived, in the belief that these places had shaped or been shaped by the author's writing and could thus offer visitors an opportunity to establish a new type of contact with the author. Petrarch's residence in Arquà was the first writer's house that became a destination for travelers, who often treated their journeys as semi-religious rituals. From the beginning, skeptics questioned the authenticity of the objects in Petrarch's house, many of which had indeed been added by more recent proprietors. To this day, it is not known whether Petrarch even lived in the house that has become his shrine. Nevertheless, popular interest outweighed skepticism, and Petrarch's house became a common stop on the Grand Tour.<sup>77</sup> The next major literary house museum was Shakespeare's supposed birthplace in Stratford-on-Avon, popularized by the Shakespeare jubilee of 1769. The house—which may not, in fact, have been the site of Shakespeare's birth—was furnished with relics such as a chair in which Shakespeare had supposedly sat. As with Petrarch's house, the dubious authenticity of the residence and the objects

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<sup>77</sup> Harald Hendrix, "Writers' Houses as Media of Expression and Remembrance: From Self-Fashioning to Cultural Memory, in *Writers' Houses and the Making of Memory*, ed. Harald Hendrix (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1-11.

within it did not hinder its establishment as a major international tourist attraction and cultural pilgrimage site.<sup>78</sup>

The popularity of literary pilgrimages continued to rise, in tandem with the success of literary biographies in the marketplace; each phenomenon fed the other.<sup>79</sup> In 1750, Samuel Johnson wrote that the business of the biographer was “to lead the thoughts into domestic privacies, and display the minute details of daily life.”<sup>80</sup> The biographer could provide new insights into the subject’s experience, character, and creative process by granting the reader new access to the author’s private life. In both literary biography and literary tourism, the familiarity of banal details could bolster a reader’s own sense of possibility, while scandalous personal lives could offer pleasing titillation.

Writers did not always appreciate the new fascination with their homes and biographies. Coleridge and Wordsworth, for instance, deplored accounts of writers’ domestic or personal lives, deeming them invasive.<sup>81</sup> Pushkin himself criticized the popular obsession with writers’ lives. In an 1825 letter to his friend Petr Viazemskii, Pushkin remarked that there was no reason to be upset over the loss of Byron’s correspondence, as Byron had “confessed” [*ispovedalsia*] in his poems. By comparison, Pushkin argued, Byron’s letters would have been deceptive and manipulative. The hunger

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<sup>78</sup> Michael Rosenthal, “Shakespeare’s Birthplace at Stratford: Bardolatry Reconsidered,” in *Writers’ Houses and the Making of Memory*, 31-44.

<sup>79</sup> Julian North, “Literary Biography and the House of the Poet,” in *Literary Tourism and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Culture*, ed. Nicola J. Watson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 49-62.

<sup>80</sup> *The Rambler*, no. 60 (1750), in *The Rambler*, ed. W.J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 321. Cited in North, “Literary Biography,” 50.

<sup>81</sup> North, “Literary Biography,” 51.

of the “crowd” [*tolpa*] for Byron’s letters was a result not of respect, but of a vulgar desire to see a great man debased, brought down to the level of ordinary people.<sup>82</sup>

Almost as soon as it emerged, literary tourism began to carry a stigma that it bears to the present, one far greater than that attached to literary biography.<sup>83</sup> Since the 1790s, collective tourism in general has been presented as devoid of individuality, unreflecting and inauthentic, inferior to the experience of the more prestigious independent “traveler.”<sup>84</sup> In the case of literary tourism, this collective quality is often seen as antithetical to the unique quality of artistic genius. Many scholars find literary tourism trivializing of the author’s work, embarrassing, an extreme example of the biographical fallacy, while writers themselves may find it intrusive or banal. In some views, literary tourism sidelines literature, preferring mass consumption of the experience of feeling close to the author himself.<sup>85</sup>

The derision that literary tourism can evoke is counterbalanced by the intense, almost spiritual importance attributed to it by its devotees. It is not a coincidence that literary tourism trips are often called pilgrimages. Like religious ones, literary pilgrimages are closely tied to death and the spirit world; the death of the author is a prerequisite for the transformation of his home into a public shrine. Visitors come in part

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<sup>82</sup> Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin, *Sobranie sochinenii v 10 tomakh*, vol. 4, 214-215. Accessed online on August 13, 2018 on [https://rvb.ru/pushkin/01text/10letters/1815\\_30/01text/1825/1357\\_174.htm](https://rvb.ru/pushkin/01text/10letters/1815_30/01text/1825/1357_174.htm).

<sup>83</sup> Nicola J. Watson, “Introduction,” in *Literary Tourism*, 1-12.

<sup>84</sup> North, “Literary Biography.” See also Jonathan Culler, “The Semiotics of Tourism,” in *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990). Last accessed online on Nov. 24, 2017 at <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/culler1.pdf>.

<sup>85</sup> North, “Literary Biography,” 52.

to commune with his ghost, which haunts his old dwelling place. The most cherished objects in a house museum are those that belonged to the author, that were in close proximity with his body. Death masks, which evoke the touch of the author's skin and show his genuine features at the boundary between life and death, occupy a special place of honor; so do his desk, his pen, and his inkwell, the objects through which he channeled his genius. There is a clear parallel here with religious relics: an object acts as a medium between the worshipped and the worshipper. Words, ideas, literature are not enough; there must be a sense of a link between bodies, through the medium of physical objects and place. At the same time, museums do not allow visitors to touch the objects, creating a tantalizing barrier to the desired physical connection that constitutes one of the central attractions of the house museum.<sup>86</sup> (Pilgrims cannot even kiss the glass protecting the relic, as visitors to churches often do.)

Imagined houses are useful aids to memory, as in the ancient "memory palaces." House museums give this practice a literal form, fixing a particular account of the writer's biography and persona in the public mind. The life of the writer is presented through a tour of the rooms of his house. While the memory palace is the domain of the individual imagination, the house museum is an aid to collective memory.<sup>87</sup> In many cases, the "religion" that motivates literary pilgrimages is not faith in the power of art, or

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<sup>86</sup> Alison Booth, "House and Things: Literary House Museums as Collective Biography," in Kate Hill (ed.), *Museums and Biographies: Stories, Objects, Identities* (Suffolk UK: Boydell Press, 2012), 234-235.

<sup>87</sup> Hendrix, "Writers' Houses," 5. See also Booth, "House and Things," 232.



the worship of literary genius, but national identity.<sup>88</sup> House museums facilitate the rise of writer cults, since collective memory is more easily sustained with the help of *lieux de memoire*, provided that the house seems to express a version of the writer in harmony with dominant ideas.<sup>89</sup> As the remembered writer comes to stand for the nation, a national biography is expressed through synecdoche, in the biographical narrative fixed by tours of the physical space of the writer's house.

### *Literary tourism in Russia*

Russian travelers took part in Europe's burgeoning vogue for literary pilgrimages. At first, their trips had little to do with a celebration of Russian identity. Karamzin's journey through Europe, chronicled in his *Letters of a Russian Traveler, 1789-90*, followed an itinerary strongly influenced by his interest in various non-Russian authors, both living and dead. Andreas Schönle points out that in the *Letters*, Karamzin is more interested in visualizing his knowledge than verifying it; he does not want to have intellectual debates with the authors he meets, but to capture and store the memory of the author's appearance, domestic setting, family life.<sup>90</sup> Karamzin's goal is in keeping with the period's ideas about the value of literary biography and glimpses into writers' houses in allowing readers to glean a new, intimate insight into a writer and his work. It also

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<sup>88</sup> Linda Young, *Historic House Museums in the United States and the United Kingdom: A History* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 25.

<sup>89</sup> Hendrix, "Writers' Houses," 1-6.

<sup>90</sup> Andreas Schönle, *Authenticity and Fiction in the Russian Literary Journey, 1790-1840* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 49.

demonstrates the desire to have a sense of personal contact with a favorite author, a chief part of the appeal of literary house museums.

Karamzin describes his trip to the island of St. Pierre, where the recently deceased Rousseau “took refuge from the wickedness and intolerance of mankind.” He wanders the island, “seeking everywhere traces of Geneva’s citizen and philosopher, beneath the boughs of ancient beech and chestnut trees, in the beautiful walks of the dark forest, in the faded meadows and the rocky prominences of the shore.” The forest and meadow sigh, as if sharing in Karamzin’s grief.<sup>91</sup> In Meillerie, Switzerland, the setting for Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, the real landscape allows Karamzin to come closer to the imagined characters, to feel that he is entering almost physically into the fictional work.<sup>92</sup> At the same time, Karamzin feels he has new access to Rousseau’s own experience: “The beauty of these places must have made a profound impression upon Rousseau’s soul.”<sup>93</sup> Here, the landscape functions as a version of the literary house museum, a place suffused with the essence of the departed writer and a medium through which the visitor can feel closer to the writer, better understanding the writer’s own experience as well as his oeuvre. This early example of Russian literary tourism abroad—to honor an anti-establishment writer—is an intensely personal, intimate version of literary tourism, very different from the creation of a national “memory palace.”

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<sup>91</sup> Nikolai Karamzin, *Letters of a Russian Traveler, 1789-1790* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 162-163.

<sup>92</sup> Schönle, *Authenticity and Fiction*, 10-11.

<sup>93</sup> Karamzin, *Letters of a Russian Traveler*, 141-2.

Karamzin's literary tourism includes actual houses as well as landscapes. At Alexander Pope's former house in Twickenham, Karamzin examines the poet's study, his armchair, and the bower where he translated Homer. Karamzin plucks a keepsake twig—a memento, a relic—from the willow “beneath which the philosopher loved to think, the poet to dream.”<sup>94</sup> Upon arriving in Calais, Karamzin immediately asks a young officer for “the room in which Laurence Sterne lived.” “Where he ate French soup for the first time?” the officer replies, launching a long exchange in which the two men share in their delight at *A Sentimental Journey*.<sup>95</sup>

Trips to Western Europe, and travel writing documenting these journeys, were an important part of the development of Russian culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>96</sup> The late nineteenth century and turn of the twentieth century saw increased tourism within Russia, with mounting interest in historically important sites.<sup>97</sup> This growth included what could be termed literary tourism. At the end of the nineteenth century, a recently formed Russian tourist association initiated Tolstoy tours, with visits to the (still-living) writer's estate at Iasnaia Poliana.<sup>98</sup> Historical sites were also key

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 255-6.

<sup>96</sup> For example, see Schönle, *Authenticity and Fiction*; Derek Offord, *Journeys to a Graveyard: Perceptions of Europe in Classical Russian Travel Writing* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005); and Sara Dickinson, *Breaking Ground: Travel and National Culture in Russia from Peter I to the Era of Pushkin* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006).

<sup>97</sup> Stephanie Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin*, 49.

<sup>98</sup> Louise McReynolds, “The Prerevolutionary Russian Tourist,” in *Turizm: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism*, ed. Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 28.

destinations for tourism, and large-scale commemorations of the War of 1812, in 1912, and the founding of the Romanov dynasty, in 1913, fueled a boom in tourism to related sites, part of a surge in patriotic and nationalist feeling across Europe, and a corresponding interest in national culture, history, and landscapes.<sup>99</sup> Over time, literary and cultural tourism became closely linked to Russian national identity.

Russian tourism was boosted by the Russian excursion movement, which emerged in the early twentieth century in the context of pedagogical reform, as progressive educators began taking students on trips connected to humanities and science curricula. Educational excursions were considered distinct from ordinary tourism. Publications and organizations sprang up to assist the many people newly interested in excursions, whether for school groups or for adults interested in self-improvement.<sup>100</sup> Excursion culture helped give rise to the new discipline of *kraevedenie*, the effort—almost always led by locals—to study and preserve the unique aspects of a specific locale, based in part on the principle that place exerted a formative influence on human culture. An early alternative name for this practice was *rodinovedenie*, or homeland studies: a 1914 article in the periodical *The Russian Excursionist* explained that the aims of *rodinovedenie* included “opening the eyes of rising generations to this wondrous picture of our motherland, letting them feel all the charm of Russian nature, drawing

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<sup>99</sup> Emily D. Johnson, *How St. Petersburg Learned to Study Itself: The Russian Idea of Kraevedenie* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 107.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 98, 109.

them toward the endlessly interesting sides of the daily lives of her many tribes.”<sup>101</sup> As its name suggests, *rodinovedenie* aimed explicitly to foment national pride.

There were few accounts of excursions to writers’ homes and other literary sites in pre-revolutionary excursion journals, and those that were published focused on biography and history rather than literary texts in themselves. The incorporation of literature into excursions seemed to pose a basic contradiction, since excursions were intended to bring students into direct contact with the object of their studies, removing books from their intermediary position.<sup>102</sup> Historian and *kraevedenie* pioneer Nikolai Antsiferov helped resolve this conundrum. In his 1926 *Theory and Practice of Literary Excursions* [*Teoriia i praktika literaturnykh ekskursii*], Antsiferov proposed that guides could offer illustrations, commentary, and interpretations to literary texts, giving the text new life for the reader through a form of spectacle. He described the kind of literary excursion that he would make into an art form, a highly theatrical trip that linked texts and places, seeking to provide new insight into both through skillful juxtaposition. He offered examples of this last method in his classic 1924 excursion primer *Petersburg in Reality and Myth* [*Byl’ i mif Peterburga*], whose fourth and final chapter examines Pushkin’s *Bronze Horseman*, and in his 1921 primer *Dostoevsky’s Petersburg* [*Peterburg Dostoevskogo*]. These groundbreaking books were crucial in the development of Russian literary tours, and Antsiferov’s methods are still evident in such tours today. His writing

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<sup>101</sup> Quoted in Johnson, 118.

<sup>102</sup> Johnson, 129, 103-106.

evinces a firm belief in the genius loci, the spirit of a place, and in the idea that literature is a crucial tool in discovering this spirit.<sup>103</sup>

For Antsiferov, St. Petersburg cannot be understood without Pushkin, whom he describes, in *The Soul of Petersburg [Dusha Peterburga]*, as “the creator of the image of Petersburg to the same extent that Peter the Great is the builder of the city itself”; Pushkin gave the image of St. Petersburg “the force of independent existence.”<sup>104</sup> Antsiferov’s method of intertwining literature and the spirit of a place is clearly in evidence in the treatment of the Pushkin Sanctuary by guides and guidebooks in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras.<sup>105</sup>

As early as 1918, the Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros) took an interest in supporting excursion work, which fit relatively neatly into revolutionary ideas about mass education that took a hands-on approach, integrating pedagogy and labor. The “excursion method” was endorsed by factions within Narkompros after the October Revolution, and was institutionalized in the 1920s via research organizations, study programs, and a new genre of guidebook, *ekskursii*, or excursion primers. But Soviet excursion organizers soon encountered many difficulties in planning excursions for groups of adults who were not self-selected for curiosity or enthusiasm. Participants were often poorly educated, illiterate, and unenthusiastic about the prospect of spending their free time on educational activities. This meant that excursions were often superficial and sensationalistic entertainments with a large dose of political propaganda, and with guides

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<sup>103</sup> Johnson, 129-133, 196-198.

<sup>104</sup> Quoted in Johnson, 200.

<sup>105</sup> Johnson, 201.

who had memorized huge blocks of text that they recited in a dreary monotone.

Excursions were, however, important sources of income for museum employees, writers, and teachers. By the late 1920s, the distinction between pedagogical excursions and leisure tourism had blurred, partly because of the increasingly recreational character of excursions and partly because of the new enthusiasm for the idea of the productive use of leisure time, as evidenced by the 1930 founding of the Society of Proletarian Tourism and Excursions.<sup>106</sup>

During the Soviet period, internal tourism gained unprecedented prominence, for both practical and ideological reasons. Most citizens could no longer leave the Soviet Union and had to look for travel destinations within their own borders. Meanwhile, Soviet authorities reconceived tourism as a tool for the personal development of citizens and as a way of integrating the diverse regions of the USSR. The state made many types of tourism accessible to the masses, including cultural tourism.<sup>107</sup> In the mid- to late-1930s, as Soviet authorities began once again to see monuments as useful tools for political mobilization, they restored such sites as the battlefields at Poltava and Borodino, and monuments to the heroes of 1812. Trinity-Sergius Monastery, a major religious shrine, and Tolstoy's estate at Iasnaia Poliana were reopened to tourists. The state sponsored pilgrimages to these sites, as Stalinist policy emphasized the special status of Russians as "first among equals" and once again promoted Russian national pride, religious identity, and cultural classics like Tolstoy and Pushkin.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Johnson, 148.

<sup>107</sup> Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker, "Introduction," *Turizm*, 1-16.

<sup>108</sup> Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*, 92.

The religious overtones of literary tourism in the Soviet Union were especially pronounced. The need to create a pantheon of new heroes for a new culture led to the cooptation of Russian Orthodox practices—such as pilgrimages to shrines and the worship of relics—by the Soviet state.<sup>109</sup> In the early years of the Soviet Union, official atheism left an empty space where religious pilgrimages had once been. To some extent, this gap was filled by literary pilgrimages to places like Pushkin’s estate at Mikhailovskoe, despite the fact that it had been burnt to the ground, apparently intentionally, during the revolution.<sup>110</sup>

Death masks offer a striking example of the Soviet use of quasi-religious practices in secular cults. Death masks of European monarchs and important cultural figures had been taken since the fourteenth century; the practice originated in the ancient Egyptian funerary masks that were intended to help returning spirits locate their old bodies. While this practice was declining in Western Europe, it experienced a boom in the Soviet Union. The most important Soviet death mask was Lenin’s, with plaster copies treated as objects of veneration in Lenin Museums across the USSR. But writers were never far from the scene; sculptor Sergei Merkurov was asked to cast Lenin’s mask because of his great success in casting Tolstoy’s in 1910. In Orthodox tradition, the intact body is the most holy relic, followed by body parts like bones and hair. Next come items that the deceased has touched. Original death masks often contained hair, but even without it,

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<sup>109</sup> Joy Neumeyer, “‘The Final Struggle’: The Art of the Soviet Death Mask” (Summer 2015), 17. Online at [http://iseees.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/u4/2015\\_8-neumeyer.pdf](http://iseees.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/u4/2015_8-neumeyer.pdf). Accessed on April 12, 2018.

<sup>110</sup> Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin*, 49. On the spaces left by Soviet atheism, see Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).



they had a special status as the last objects to come into contact with the body, and the final likeness based directly upon it. As Joy Neumeyer puts it, “the death mask was thought to embody the person’s essence, giving it magical powers to engage with the living.”<sup>111</sup> Death masks of important cultural and political figures had been popular even before the revolution; Pushkin’s death mask was always considered an important relic. But particularities of Soviet culture gave literary shrines and relics an exceptional cultural status.

Perhaps the most exotic form of literary tourism is the summoning of a writer’s spirit. Anthropologist S.B. Adon’eva points out that Pushkin is the most familiar and the most approachable dead person known to all Russians. His tragic death is one of the first things people learn about him: as Marina Tsvetaeva said in her 1937 essay “My Pushkin,” “The first thing I found out about Pushkin was that he had been killed.” It is, therefore, not surprising that Pushkin is one of the first people who comes to mind when Russians make forays into the spirit world.<sup>112</sup> One Russian New Year’s fortune-telling

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<sup>111</sup> Neumeyer, “The Final Struggle,” 2, 4-5, 10, 18.

<sup>112</sup> S.B. Adon’eva, “Dukh Pushkina,” in S.B. Adon’eva, *Kategoriia nenastoiashchego vremeni (antropologicheskie ocherki)* (Saint Petersburg: Peterburgskoe Vostokovedenie, 2001), 63. Ilya Vinitsky discusses Pushkin séances in the second half of the nineteenth century; these asked the poet about his posthumous fate and for his views on current literature and events, so that he could continue to play an active role in the life of his country even from the afterlife—a highly literal iteration of the Pushkin cult. Vinitsky argues that the 1880 celebrations transferred “ownership” of Pushkin’s shade from his friends and family, authors of early accounts of his life, to the Russian intelligentsia as a whole, and that in 1899, ownership was passed in turn from the Russian intelligentsia to the Russian people as a whole. In the twentieth century, there was a story of female radio operators who received signals from Pushkin from the cosmos; in 1926, criminal charges were brought against cult members who claimed that they had seen Pushkin’s bleeding ghost, and during the Second World War Red Army soldiers claimed to have seen Pushkin at Perekop. Ilya Vinitsky, “Dead poets’ society: Pushkin’s shade in Russian cultural mythology of the second half of the nineteenth century,” in *Ghostly Paradoxes: Modern Spiritualism and Russian Culture in the Age of Realism* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2009), 57-86.

ritual, documented in the 1990s, involved choosing pages at random from the Bible and then from the one-volume collected works of Pushkin. One of Adon'eva's informants reported summoning Pushkin's spirit in 1997, when the poet's specter swore extensively and caused a helium balloon to sink to the ground. Another said that when a neighbor summoned spirits, she usually chose Pushkin or Lenin—they were the first people to spring to mind. A third described calling Pushkin's spirit with her parents, in a Ouija-board-like candlelight ritual. When asked why they had chosen Pushkin, she explained, "I was still young, and my parents thought that Pushkin was the most famous poet for a kid. Beloved, dear."<sup>113</sup> Here, Pushkin serves as an intermediary not only between lovers of literature, members of a national community, or between the present and the past, but as a literal intermediary between the worlds of the living and the dead.

### *Chapter overview*

In Part I, "Jubilation," I examine the tradition of the Pushkin jubilee in relation to the end of the Soviet Union, a critical moment of rupture on many levels. Chapter 1 begins with a brief discussion of the last Soviet Pushkin jubilee, the 1987 commemoration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Pushkin's death, and then moves to a more detailed analysis of the 1999 Pushkin bicentenary, a lavish celebration that has already been almost entirely forgotten. These two jubilees have a deep symbolic value, especially when paired. The 1987 commemoration was the Soviet Union's last Pushkin celebration, which made it appropriate that the anniversary was of the poet's death rather than birth. Among the jubilee publications were old texts that had been written for the sad,

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<sup>113</sup> S.B. Adon'eva, "Dukh Pushkina," 68-69.

pessimistic Pushkin commemoration held by writers in private in Petrograd in 1921. The mood during this 1987 jubilee was one of mourning, which may also have reflected the feeling that the Soviet era was coming to an end, and that the future—including the future of Russian literature—was entirely uncertain. The 1999 celebration was the first post-Soviet Pushkin jubilee. It attempted to project both a reassuring sense of continuity with the old order and an inspiring new version of the Russian “national idea,” but many observers felt that the celebrations only reinforced a sense that Russian literature had entered its twilight years. It provoked condemnation from Russian writers of many political persuasions.

While this chapter includes a measure of literary analysis, notably a discussion of Andrei Bitov’s eerily prescient 1985 short story “Pushkin’s Photograph (1799-2099),” it is devoted primarily to discussing the events of the jubilee and the reaction from the press and the intelligentsia. To my knowledge (and I have searched extensively in both Russian and English), the 1999 celebrations have never been described and analyzed in detail in a scholarly way. My project in Chapter 1, therefore, is largely historical. I reviewed hundreds of articles and essays about the celebration from newspapers and magazines of the period and sorted them into thematic categories (criticism of privatization, concern about the death of literature, connections to the presidential election, and so on), in order to determine the central concerns in responses. Though the unpopular and for the most part unsuccessful 1999 jubilee has already faded from memory, it was a huge expenditure of money and human effort at a crucial moment for Russia, and provoked responses from many of Russia’s most important journalists and cultural critics. Twenty years on, the 1999 celebration offers a window into the politics of literary commemoration—and of

literary life more generally—in turn-of-the-millennium Russia, which was about to elect Vladimir Putin as president.

Like the 1899 Pushkin jubilee, the bicentenary offered an opportunity for a shaky government to try to present the illusion of consensus and shared cultural pride, and for Moscow mayor Iurii Luzhkov to continue his efforts to concentrate material, political, and historical clout in his city. Like the centenary, the bicentenary was widely judged a failure, criticized for its materialistic focus on kitschy souvenirs and gimmicky events and for its distance from the essence of Pushkin's achievement. Criticism of jubilee materialism and opportunism in 1999 was colored by wider anxieties about post-Soviet privatization, with some critics arguing that Russia's cultural and literary heritage was being privatized, sold off to the highest bidders. (As in the real-life privatization process, the offered prices were far below the asset's real worth.) Meanwhile, the 1999 jubilee occurred at a time when Russia was struggling to define its "national idea" after its loss of the other post-Soviet republics and former imperial territories. Celebrating Pushkin was a way of coping with a "national inferiority complex," attempting to assert Russia's continued importance in world literature, culture, and politics. Ultimately, the Pushkin jubilee did succeed in uniting Russians of many different political and cultural persuasions in disgust and mockery of the official celebrations, and of the electoral field. Soon Russia's presidential elections would come to resemble jubilees: regularly scheduled government-sponsored spectacles, performances of false consensus rather than occasions for actual political choice.

In Chapter 2, I shift my methodology to a more traditional literary approach. Drawing on my portrait of the 1999 Pushkin jubilee in Chapter 1, I look closely at one of

the literary volumes produced for the occasion of the 1999 jubilee: *Pushkin's Overcoat*, which collects Pushkin-related writing, some from the late Soviet period and some more recent, by writers associated with Russian postmodernism and Moscow Conceptualism.<sup>114</sup> *Pushkin's Overcoat* asks how to write about Pushkin, how to write after Pushkin, and how to write at all after the end of the Soviet Union. Is it possible to write anything new about Pushkin? Is it possible to write something that is *not* about Pushkin, given his overwhelming influence on Russian literature and language? Can the intense intertextuality of Russian literature be inspiring rather than stifling? How can a Russian writer claim a position in the international literary tradition rather than being sequestered in a canon defined by national borders? How should writers cope with the end of the Soviet Union, which so diminished the potential impact of iconoclasm and uncensored speech? How do you say something important in a country where you can say anything you please? *Pushkin's Overcoat* crystallizes widespread concerns, circa 1999, about whether Russian literature had a future, while exploring Pushkin's legacy and the burden of his cult on contemporary writers and readers.

In Part II, "Home Sweet Museum," I turn my attention to the house and estate museums devoted to Pushkin and to Dovlatov, and then to the Dovlatov cult more

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<sup>114</sup> Mikhail Epstein defines Russian Conceptualism as "a system of linguistic gestures, drawing on the material of Soviet ideology and the mass consciousness of socialist society. Official slogans and clichés are reduced or augmented *ad absurdum*, revealing the split between the signifier and the signified. The sign is whittled down to a naked concept, which is separated from its real content—the signified." He identifies Prigov and Rubinshtein, along with Vilen Barsky, as its chief exponents. Epstein, "A Catalogue of New Poems," in Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis, and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, trans. and ed. Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 146. For another definition of Conceptualism, see Gerald Janecek, *Everything Has Already Been Written: Moscow Conceptualist Poetry and Performance* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2019), 3-14.

broadly. These two chapters mix cultural history, literary and cultural analysis, and “close reading” of several house museums and the landscapes in which they are set. My central inspiration in adopting this approach was Stephanie Sandler’s 2004 study *Commemorating Pushkin: Russia’s Myth of a National Poet*, which includes a chapter on Pushkin museums. Sandler discusses how to “read” these museums, and writes about her own trips to several of them. She describes not only the exhibits and the physical appearance of the museum and its setting, but also the voyage to the museum, the hotels, her interactions with guides and fellow visitors, and her own emotional reaction—for example, her disappointment at Mikhailovskoe.<sup>115</sup> Sandler visited in the last years of the Soviet Union, and I wanted to see how these “Pushkin places” had changed in the ensuing two decades, a time of immense change for Russia as a whole. The literary house museum almost demands to be “read” like a text; to a significant extent, it is an attempt to render the author’s biography visible through the house, the objects that fill it, and, in some cases, the landscape in which it is set. This institution also has a highly theatrical aspect, relying heavily on the emotional effect it creates in the visitor. An analysis of the house museum therefore demands description of the house, its setting, its presentation, guides, and other visitors.

I begin Chapter 3 by offering an account of my recent visit to Moika 12, in St. Petersburg, Pushkin’s last residence and the site of his death. This apartment museum maintains the xenophobic, paranoid, but triumphant tone of the Soviet Pushkin cult: it is organized entirely around the idea of Pushkin’s tragic death at the hands of a conniving Frenchman, but also Pushkin’s successful achievement of immortality through his poetry.

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<sup>115</sup> Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin*, 55, 82.

In the grand tradition of house museums, Moika 12 uses Pushkin's biography to stand for the national myth of attacks on Russia followed by a glorious "resurrection." This museum, therefore, shows the consistency of the myth of Pushkin's death from the Soviet into the post-Soviet period.

I move next to a history of the Pushkin estate in Pskov oblast. This "Sanctuary" barely escaped oblivion, and only became a museum in the early Soviet period. Having been neglected for so many decades and exposed to the destruction of the Civil War and then World War II, Pushkin's house had to be reconstructed. This reconstruction was framed by museum staff as a quasi-mystical "feat" linked to the "resurrection" of Russia after the Second World War. Semen Geichenko, the Sanctuary's longtime director, promoted his eccentric idea of "*veshchevedenie*"—the study of objects—which had a clear connection to the discipline of "*kraevedenie*," the study of places, which emphasized the power of place to shape human ideas and character. "Animate objects" were witnesses to Pushkin's life; meanwhile, the landscape became a repository of ancient texts that inspired Pushkin. In a 2003 celebration of Geichenko's career, one Sanctuary staff member wrote that it was much harder to restore than to create, in marked contrast to the writers I discuss in Chapter 2, who wondered whether it was still possible to create anything new—whether "everything has already been written," in the words of Moscow Conceptualist Lev Rubinshtein.<sup>116</sup> This emphasis on restoration as a sacred, all-important task connects to the post-Soviet preoccupation with "restorative nostalgia." Svetlana Boym defines this genre of nostalgia as one that stresses *nóstos* (home) rather

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<sup>116</sup> Lev Rubinshtein, "Poeziia posle poezii," *Kontr Kul't UR'a 2*, 1990. Quoted in Janecek, *Everything Has Already Been Written*, 88.

than *álgos* (pain or longing), while attempting a “transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home”—an apt description of the work of the house museum.<sup>117</sup> The pairing of a desire to restore the lost home with a fear that there is nothing new to say expresses a central tension of contemporary Russian culture.

The locus of authenticity at the Sanctuary is Pushkin’s grave in Sviatogorskii Monastery. Pushkin’s body plays an important role in late Soviet attacks on the Pushkin cult, including Dovlatov’s *Pushkin Hills*, which I analyze in Chapter 3. Dovlatov is intensely critical of the Soviet tendency to obsess over the possessions and former homes of dead writers, identifying it as evidence of an unhealthy preference for dead over living writers. However, his Pushkin tour-guide protagonist is offended by the disrespectful behavior of tourists at Pushkin’s grave, and he views the images of Pushkin’s corpse as among the most authentic depictions of Pushkin available at the Sanctuary. While Dovlatov heaps contempt on the Sanctuary and its staff, he does not question the fundamental elements of the Pushkin cult. His protagonist simply wishes to be able to write, and to retrieve a private, personal, sincere version of Pushkin. Dovlatov’s reverence for Pushkin is an important component in the post-Soviet Dovlatov cult, which emphasizes reconciliation.

In Chapter 4, I describe my own visit to the Pushkin Sanctuary, which remains a meticulously maintained, government-funded tourist site, though it sees far fewer visitors than it once did. With the diminished interest in literature in post-Soviet culture and worldwide, the Sanctuary presents itself not only as a literary museum, but as a museum

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<sup>117</sup> Svetlana Boym, “Nostalgia,” *Atlas of Transformation*, <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/n/nostalgia/nostalgia-svetlana-boym.html>. Accessed on March 28, 2019.



of Russia's Golden Age. The visitor is invited to meditate on the beauty of the Russian landscape and Russian folk culture as well as on Pushkin's life and art, with the Sanctuary offering a carefully curated vision of idyllic happiness of aristocrats and serfs alike. Though the Sanctuary is a product of the Soviet period, its current iteration hardly acknowledges that the Soviet Union existed. Instead, the visitor is invited to imagine herself into the "home" of the early nineteenth century. The reader of Dovlatov's *Pushkin Hills* will find the current incarnation of the Sanctuary almost unrecognizable, reinvented for post-Soviet purposes.

The recently established Dovlatov House museum, on the outskirts of the Sanctuary, offers an ironic counterpoint to the grand Sanctuary. Dovlatov House occupies the shack where Dovlatov lived during his days as a Sanctuary tour guide in the late 1970s. At first glance, the museum seems to mock all the conventions of the literary house museum, in keeping with Dovlatov's mockery of the Sanctuary in *Pushkin Hills*. Dovlatov House emphasizes the authenticity of its squalor. Rather than transporting the visitor with a vision of the lost elegance and tranquility that helped fuel the writer's inspiration, Dovlatov House forces contemplation of the miserable circumstances in which Dovlatov lived. Nevertheless, Dovlatov House's very existence vouches for the enduring appeal of the literary house museum, accomplishing, in its humorous way, many of the institution's traditional goals. Dovlatov House's management present the project as a testimonial to the Soviet everyday life that inspired Dovlatov's writing; they aspire to create a larger museum to late Soviet literature and culture, uniting writers of diverse political views and aesthetic philosophies. In this sense, Dovlatov House commemorates not only Dovlatov, but late Soviet literature and culture in general.

The situation of an ironic, quasi-postmodern Dovlatov house museum on the outskirts of the Pushkin estate museum offers an embodied example of the growth of post-Soviet literary cults on the territory of Soviet and imperial ones. The Dovlatov museum also illustrates the ways in which the Dovlatov cult, like the Pushkin cult, seeks to create a sense of continuity and reconciliation between political factions and historical periods. Dovlatov has proved a useful post-Soviet culture hero in part because he can easily be taken to embody ambivalent nostalgia for the late Soviet period—even if such nostalgia strips him of his signature irony. He is suitably reverential towards cultural heroes like Pushkin, but funny and unassuming enough to charm ordinary readers. I end with Dovlatov because I see the Dovlatov cult as a kind of archetypal post-Soviet literary cult: ironic yet acquiescent in authoritarianism, a little bit anti-Soviet but not too much, free of intelligentsia-dissident elitism, and suffused with the language of Russia's seedy underbelly.

**Part I:**  
**JUBILATION**

**Chapter 1**  
**Pushkin, the Embattled Intelligentsia, and the Search for a National Idea:**  
**The Jubilees of 1987 and 1999**

The last decade of the twentieth century was a momentous and exceptionally painful one for Russia. It began with an ending, the disappearance of a state and a civilization: the collapse of the Soviet Union. Then the decade, the century, and the millennium ended with the presidential campaign of Vladimir Putin, which ushered in a new epoch in Russian politics, one that endures to the present. It is difficult to imagine anyone less poetic than Putin, but the end of Russia's twentieth century was also marked by a major poetry-related event: the 1999 celebration of the bicentenary of Pushkin's birth. In this chapter, I will examine the 1999 Pushkin jubilee and its reception by the Russian press and Russian cultural critics.

This state-sponsored commemorative extravaganza took place at a moment when there was substantial doubt about whether the Russian language that Pushkin helped to establish, his literary creations, his identity as a hero of Russian culture, and, more broadly, the Russian literary tradition and Russian national pride would survive the change of century, or whether they would join the Soviet Union in belonging only to the past. The celebration aimed to restore Russia's national self-esteem, to repackaging national identity in a way appropriate to Russia's new circumstances, and to smooth over the immense rupture caused by the end of the Soviet Union. As I will show, the jubilee instead became a lens through which Russian journalists and essayists viewed their country's diminished geopolitical status and economic difficulties, the plummeting status of high literature, soaring crime rates, the transition to democracy, and more. But first, I

will look briefly at the 1987 Pushkin jubilee, the last Soviet Pushkin celebration, in order to highlight the changes in Pushkin commemoration from the twilight of the Soviet Union to the early post-Soviet period. To what extent was the 1999 celebration a continuation of Soviet-era and pre-Soviet practices, and to what extent was it a break with tradition?

*Untimely death and the hope of immortality: 1987*

The 1987 Pushkin jubilee commemorated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Pushkin's death, in February 1837. In keeping with the fact that it remembered a death rather than a birth, and with the ideological deflation of the perestroika period, this jubilee's tone was far less bombastic than those of the Stalin-era. Many well-established Soviet interpretations of Pushkin were in evidence, but the tone was strikingly morbid and gloomy, far more than previous jubilees. *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* focused on the cruelty and injustice of Pushkin's untimely death, of his treatment by the authorities, and of the tsarist system in general, before discussing the Russian people's undying love for Pushkin and the poet's achievement in capturing Russia's reality and essence. In the age of looming nuclear catastrophe, *Pravda* opined, Pushkin offered a light of hope and wisdom.<sup>118</sup> Although *Pravda* did not mention it, readers would have remembered the actual nuclear catastrophe that had occurred just a few months earlier at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant—a gruesomely mismanaged disaster that severely discredited Soviet leadership. Press attention focused largely on the site where Pushkin received his fatal wound, on his

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<sup>118</sup> "Nash Pushkin: Slovo geniia Rossii—bessmertno," *Pravda*, Feb. 10, 1987, 1.

newly renovated final home, Moika 12, and the snow-covered westward path his body had taken after his death, from St. Petersburg to Pskov.<sup>119</sup> Pushkin places (which I discuss in Part II) played a prominent part in jubilee coverage, reinforcing their status as sacred sites of Russian culture.

At the same time, Pushkin embodied the hope that Russian culture could survive the ravages of history and politics. Jubilee coverage emphasized the beauty, purity, and harmony of the literary world Pushkin created, along with his high ideals and the immortality he had achieved through his writing.<sup>120</sup> *Izvestiia* featured a report from Mikhailovskoe, which was portrayed as an inspiring place of order and beauty.<sup>121</sup> There was a palpable desire to use Pushkin as a source of reassurance about the enduring nature of Russian culture. As long as Pushkin was remembered, things could not truly fall apart.

The 1987 commemoration, which was so much less stiflingly authoritarian than the Stalin-era jubilees, seems to have met with a largely positive public reception. On the anniversary of Pushkin's fatal duel, people left flowers and wreaths at the monument marking the site. When, on Moscow's Pushkin Square, a voice on a loudspeaker announced, "On this day, at this hour and at this minute, the heart of Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin ceased to beat," "a sea of fur hats" lifted in Pushkin's memory, despite the severe cold; there were some 2,500 people present. In Leningrad, some of the hundreds of people outside Pushkin's apartment wept. Sergei Fomichev, a Pushkinist at Pushkin House, told the *New York Times* that Pushkin was "a discoverer, he gave things

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<sup>119</sup> "Poslednei Pushkinskoi dorogoi," *Pravda*, Feb. 10, 1987, 2.

<sup>120</sup> "Nash sovremennik—Pushkin," *Pravda*, February 11, 1987, 1.

<sup>121</sup> "Zima, Pushkinogor'e," *Izvestiia*, February 10, 1987, 2.

their own names.”<sup>122</sup> Writer Gleb Gorbovsky said that he had been afraid of a campaign in the classic Soviet mold, but that “the saving thought occurred to me: love for Pushkin is no campaign!...It is Love for the one who expresses national feelings, for a spiritual Father, upon whom one can depend as on the Truth of earthly virtues. One may profess Pushkin, relying on him as on a Faith. Pushkin is a spiritual category and at the same time absolutely down to earth, that is, one’s own, accessible, tangible, in idea and body.”<sup>123</sup> Soviet coercion was on its way out, but Pushkin still functioned as a secular religion and as the voice of Russian national identity. Some observers clearly felt that the new freedom of the Gorbachev years permitted celebration of a different version of Pushkin, the one held dear by the intelligentsia.

The jubilee was well represented in the “thick journals” that had rapidly expanded with the liberties of perestroika, as new texts emerged alongside material censored over the previous decades. Leningrad’s Pushkin House hosted a conference with an opening speech by the famous medievalist Dmitrii Likhachev, who was, in Stephanie Sandler’s words, “a kind of Andrei Sakharov to the Leningrad intelligentsia.” As if retrieving the voices of Pushkin celebrators who had been silenced by the Bolsheviks, the weekly magazine *Ogonek*—then the most liberal and the most widely read Soviet journal—republished two texts written for the 1921 Petrograd commemoration: Mikhail Kuzmin’s poem “Pushkin” and (excerpts of) Vladislav Khodasevich’s essay “The Swaying Tripod”

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<sup>122</sup> Felicity Barringer, “Soviet Vigils Held Widely for Pushkin,” *New York Times*, February 15, 1987, p. 1001007. Accessed online on August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/02/15/world/soviet-vigils-held-widely-for-pushkin.html>

<sup>123</sup> “Dukhovnaia opora,” *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, no. 4 (January 21, 1987), 5. Quoted in Levitt, *Russian Literary Politics*, 172.

[*Koleblemyi trenochnik*], as well as Anna Akhmatova's remarks on Pushkin from the 1920s.<sup>124</sup> Pushkin counter-commemoration was resurrected, as the thick journals returned to an alternative lineage of Pushkin celebrations, turning away from the pompous Soviet style.

The 1921 commemoration in Petrograd, however, had been deeply mournful and pessimistic (with good reason), and this morbid tone was evident in the illustrations to *Ogonek*. Inside the issue, a full-page color reproduction of a grim, vaguely Cubist painting showed a pallid Pushkin being carried in his valet's arms after his duel. (It was loosely based on P.F. Borel's 1885 watercolor of the scene.) *Ogonek's* back cover showed the site of Pushkin's final duel, a snow-covered forest scene in the purple light of a setting sun that had just reached the tip of the obelisk marking the spot.

Bitov's story, written in 1985, is of particular interest as a late Soviet commentary on the phenomenon of Pushkin jubilees and commemoration in a society founded on utopian principles. With artfulness and subtlety, Bitov highlights the impossible nature of the search for authenticity in commemoration. Read today, the story also seems not only an accurate satire of past jubilees but also an eerie premonition of the 1999 Pushkin jubilee, almost as if Bitov had foreseen that event and satirized it in advance. This quality in "Pushkin's Photograph" points to the consistency of state-sponsored Pushkin jubilees across the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. It also foreshadows the way in which post-Soviet Russian postmodernism and Conceptualism came to bear an odd resemblance to

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<sup>124</sup> Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin*, 355, nn 177. There is also a brief discussion of the 1987 jubilee, including mention of some of these people and texts, in Hughes, "Pushkin in Petrograd," 212.



Russian state-sponsored reality, resulting in a 1999 jubilee that often seemed like an inadvertent work of Conceptualist jest.



*Figure 4: Evsei Evseevich Moiseenko, "Memory of the Poet," Ogenok, Feb. 6, 1987.*

Bitov's narrator tells the story of a young man named Igor in the year 2099, the tricentennial of Pushkin's birth.<sup>125</sup> As in real-life jubilees, the radio counts down the days until the anniversary of Pushkin's birth, bombastically proclaiming the value of "Pushkin's whole life, his activity, his titanic labor" to people around the world (18-19). The jubilee emphasizes the participation of many different ethnic groups, as did the 1949 and 1987 jubilees. The "multicolored faces" in the crowd, however, are so similar that it is almost impossible to single one out (21). The jubilee is meant to be a celebration of a unique individual, but society emphasizes the dissolution of the individual into the collective.

Humankind has relocated to the "Sputnik of United Nations" [*Sputnik Ob'edinennykh Natsii*, SON—in Russian, "dream"], but is holding the meeting of its Pushkin jubilee council on "ancient Earth, where Pushkin lived": the whole planet has become a "Pushkin place." All of Petrograd is enclosed in a "silver sky," a "gigantic dome that reflects certain hard and sharp rays" (19). The city has gone from being a city full of museums to an actual museum exhibit; Earth itself has undergone the same process. This period is heralded as "the epoch of the successful preservation of nature and monuments" (20), the museumification—and, in a sense, the death, if not the destruction—of the planet. At Pushkin's apartment museum there is also a dome over the writing table and a smaller one over the inkstand (22), suggesting that literature has become a dead object of commemoration as well.

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<sup>125</sup> Andrei Bitov, "Fotografiia Pushkina (1799-2099)", *Znamia* no. 1 (January 1987), 98-120. All translations are from Andrei Bitov, "Pushkin's Photograph (1799-2099)," trans. Priscilla Meyer, *The New Soviet Fiction: Sixteen Short Stories*, compiled by Sergei Zalygin, ed. Jacqueline Decter (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1989), 15-59. For the remainder of the discussion of the story I will cite the translation in the body of the text.

Jubilee organizers lament the lack of any photographs of Pushkin or recordings of his voice. This need to see Pushkin's photograph is typical of real-life literary commemorations, which can never be satisfied with a writer's literary work but search relentlessly for "authentic" biographical material. The jubilee organizers resolve to send an emissary back in time to obtain a photograph of Pushkin and a recording of his voice. As their emissary they choose a certain Igor (descendent of the protagonist of Bitov's novel *Pushkin House*). The "subjugation of time," a radio announcer claims, "has taken us to the distant future, instantly leaving the rest of the history of the Earth in the distant past" (22). The irony, of course, is that the future perceives its defining achievement as a successful *return* to the past.

Having traveled to 1836 St. Petersburg, Igor faces the task of ingratiating himself with the poet in order to get enough access to take his photograph and record his voice. In the course of his efforts, Igor confronts the limits of his ability to attain historical authenticity or even to truly understand the past. At first he assumes that his temporal advantage means simply that he knows more than nineteenth-century Russians do, but he soon finds that his knowledge—which is curated by his own time's ideas about what is valuable and significant about the past—acts as a limitation on the scope of his vision, because it has eliminated so much of what gives the present its character and texture:

He expected a visual, auditory shock from meeting the past, and there was nothing of the kind. He saw only quotations from what he knew; the rest (everything!) merged in a continuous and dangerous delirium of a completely different and inaccessible reality, as if he were visiting not the past but another planet. (37)

The familiar is too familiar, while the unfamiliar is unintelligible and undifferentiated. (This observation raises many of the questions about loss of meaning through

overfamiliarization and overquotation that would be raised by authors like Dmitrii Prigov, a phenomenon I will examine in depth in Chapter 2.) Igor eventually realizes that he is unconvincing because he is too perfectly in period; he needs more lapses to seem authentic. He searches for the negative spaces of the Pushkin cult, looking for “NON-Pushkin places, where he HADN’T walked, HADN’T spent time, where they would build something else AFTER his death,” (38). To understand Pushkin’s time, Igor needs to see the parts that have *not* been memorialized.

Pushkin remains out of reach. Igor becomes “an expert on Pushkin’s back and bald spot,” observing his worn frock coat with its loose button, which he eventually manages to steal as a trophy (34). As often happens in commemoration of writers, whether in jubilees or house museums, the great poet is unattainable, visible only in tantalizing glimpses. Banal items and facts become mediums of contact with the writer, so that biography and the trappings of everyday life come to the fore while literature recedes. Meanwhile, in his attempt to aid commemoration efforts, Igor becomes complicit in the kind of surveillance and harassment that is remembered as a factor in the premature death of Pushkin and other Russian writers. The commemorator is no innocent literary enthusiast, but an active participant in the processes that kill writers. This indictment appears frequently in criticisms of literary commemoration and cults, and I will return to it throughout this dissertation.

Igor gets himself into trouble, and his handlers organize an expensive rescue mission. He is brought back to his own time and sent to an insane asylum, where he clings desperately to Pushkin’s coat button; not knowing that it is the real thing, not recognizing its value as a literary artifact, his caretakers allow him to keep it. Igor’s

mission failed. His slides do not contain Pushkin's image, "only a shadow, like the wing of a bird flying up before the lens," and his tapes contain only "rustling, crackling, the entreaties of the time traveler himself" (59).

At the end of "Pushkin's Photograph," Igor reflects on the need for living in the present, with Bitov implying criticism of both commemoration and utopian projects:

The cow is mooing now, the grass is growing now, the rain is pouring now, and something has to be done right now. Not yesterday and not tomorrow. If you put a dam on time in an effort to store the past or accumulate the future, you will be flooded through the tiny little hole called "now," and you will choke in the flood of the present. (56)

Bitov finally affirms the appropriate kind of love for Pushkin, one that honors the truth that as a man, the poet is unreachable: "And here we place our final period, like a monument, a monument to an utterly selfless and unreciprocated love." The story's final sentence affirms the importance and even the joy of living in the present: "And we find ourselves, thank the Lord, in our own personal time. OUR time (mine and yours): dawn, August 25, 1985" (59). Bitov's conclusion is far more optimistic than that reached by many commentators on the 1999 Pushkin jubilee: as of 1985, at least, he still believes in the literary possibilities of the present and in the viability of new literary creation.

Love for Pushkin survived the end of the Soviet-sponsored Pushkin cult. In the 1990s, Pushkin's birthday remained an occasion for small-scale commemoration at the key Pushkin places: the Pushkin family's estate at Mikhailovskoe; Moika 12; Tsarskoe Selo, where Pushkin attended school; the Pushkin family's former estate at Boldino; and the Moscow apartment where Pushkin spent a brief period of time in 1831. School trips to these sites served as a way to initiate children into the rites of the Pushkin cult;

Pushkin's statue in St. Petersburg was a stop on the tour of photo-ops, which also included the monument to Peter the Great and the eternal flame in the Field of Mars park, undertaken by newlyweds. Sociologist S.B. Adon'eva writes that for her Pushkin-commemorating interviewees, the connection with Pushkin was profoundly emotional, with strong religious overtones. In the 1990s, then, at least some portion of the Russian population still valued Pushkin commemoration.<sup>126</sup> The tone of the 1987 commemorations had focused on literature's ability to transcend death, censorship, and political oppression, suggesting that Pushkin symbolized the potential for Russian culture and identity to transcend political and social changes. This symbolic power once again came to the fore, albeit to very different ends, in the 1999 bicentenary of Pushkin's birth.

*Fin de siècle Russia: In search of a national idea*

By the mid-1990s, Russia found itself in bad need of a unifying "national idea." The dissolution of the Soviet Union was an end, not a beginning, and the economic and political instability of the first half of the decade suggested that capitalist democracy in Russia would not be as triumphant as some had hoped. After the 1996 elections, the increasingly unpopular president Boris Yeltsin asked his aides to work on identifying Russia's most important "national idea."<sup>127</sup> It had become clear that in order to remain in power, leaders would need to present a positive idea of a new Russia, or rather of a Russia that had managed to integrate the diverse and often contradictory elements of its

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<sup>126</sup> Adon'eva, "Dukh Pushkina," 66-67.

<sup>127</sup> Arkady Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia: The Journey from Gorbachev's Freedom to Putin's War* (New York: Viking, 2015), 217.

own history, politics, and culture—of its “personality.” The canner players on the Russian political scene vied to promote a “national idea” that might be personally advantageous to them. This process often involved the use of commemoration, the building of monuments, and other activities related to public memory and invented tradition.

One of the most prominent politicians during this period was Moscow mayor Iurii Luzhkov, who made himself into an almost feudal despot, establishing Moscow as the most powerful fiefdom in Russia. He presided over intense corruption and violence, accruing enormous wealth for himself and his family. He revived the Soviet practice of residency permits, though these had repeatedly been ruled unconstitutional. Moscow residency permits became hugely expensive, another channel for official corruption and a way of asserting Moscow’s special status. Meanwhile, Luzhkov changed Moscow place names to their pre-Soviet versions and required signs in Russian on every store in the city, a sign of national pride and refusal to give in to English.

Luzhkov also became notorious for his own “statue mania.” He erected many new monuments related to Russian history, including one in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of victory in World War II.<sup>128</sup> He also had a passion for jubilees. In September 1997, he celebrated one of post-Soviet Russia’s most notorious and grandiose jubilees, the ostensible 850<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the capital city. A hodgepodge of historical moments and figures were paraded as evidence of Russia’s glory.<sup>129</sup> New buildings and monuments

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<sup>128</sup> Donald N. Jensen, “The Boss: How Yuri Luzhkov Runs Moscow,” *Demokratizatsiya* 8, no. 1 (Jan. 2000), 85.

<sup>129</sup> Ostrovsky, *Invention of Russia*, 222.

shot up, landmarks were renovated or reconstructed, and there were parades, concerts, fireworks, and magic shows. A “peasant everyman Ivan” slayed a flame-spitting mechanical dragon and “St. George” rode in on a white horse.<sup>130</sup> The celebrations climaxed with an image of the Virgin Mary projected in the sky, and with the sight of Luzhkov himself in an enormous champagne glass.<sup>131</sup> The celebration served inadvertently to highlight the chasm between the glittering new Moscow and the impoverished provinces, and between the Moscow elite and the masses: many of the celebratory events were accessible only to VIPs, and the estimated \$60 million cost of the celebration was shocking at a time when Russia was seeing widespread protests over unpaid wages and pensions.<sup>132</sup>

An important aspect of the 850<sup>th</sup> Moscow anniversary celebrations was the relocation of key historical elements to Moscow, a concentration of historical power. Luzhkov erected a monument to Peter the Great, who famously hated Moscow and who moved the Russian capital to St. Petersburg.<sup>133</sup> The 300-foot monstrosity on the banks of the Moskva River cost an estimated \$17 million; its creator, Zurab Tsereteli, was both the most successful and the most widely ridiculed sculptor in Russia.<sup>134</sup> The effort to

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<sup>130</sup> Michael R. Gordon, “This City Won’t Need Another Party for 850 Years,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 8, 1997.

<sup>131</sup> Helena Goscilo, “Zurab Tsereteli’s exegi monumentum, Luzhkov’s largesse, and the collateral rewards of animosity,” in *Celebrity and Glamour in Contemporary Russia: Shocking Chic*, ed. Helena Goscilo and Vlad Strukov (New York: Routledge, 2011), 231.

<sup>132</sup> Gordon, “This City,” Katrina vanden Heuvel and Stephen F. Cohen, “The Other Russia,” *The Nation*, August 11/18, 1997, 24-26.

<sup>133</sup> Ostrovsky, *Invention of Russia*, 222.

<sup>134</sup> Goscilo, “Zurab Tsereteli,” 236.



establish Moscow's primacy over St. Petersburg by "moving" Russian history there would also be evident in the 1999 Pushkin Jubilee, which was celebrated primarily in Moscow rather than in St. Petersburg, the city with which Pushkin identified most strongly and where he spent the largest portion of his life. (It is worth remembering, however, that the very first Pushkin celebration, in 1880, was also based primarily in Moscow, the home of the Lovers of the Russian Word, the group that organized the festivities.)

The Pushkin jubilee had been planned long in advance, despite the disorder that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. On February 15, 1993 the Russian government released a decree on events related to the 1999 Pushkin jubilee. A Jubilee Commission was established to develop a federal program of activities.<sup>135</sup> A May 1997 decree made June 6, Pushkin's birthday, an annual "Pushkin day of Russia" and ordered the formation of a government committee to prepare and conduct the celebrations. Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin—infamous for his malapropisms and bad syntax—served as chairman of the committee until he was replaced by Evgeny Primakov, as both Prime Minister and chairman, in 1998. The committee's tasks included supervision of the renovation and restoration of Pushkin monuments and places connected with Pushkin's life and work; the development of new educational programs connected with Pushkin's work; the organization of international, Russian, and regional conferences, Pushkin readings, poetry holidays, festivals, contests, exhibits and other mass cultural events; new

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<sup>135</sup> E.P. Chelyshev, "Pushkinovedenie. Itogi i perspektivy. K 200-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia poeta," in *Pushkin i sovremennaia kul'tura* (Moscow: Nauka, 1996), 3.

publications of Pushkin's work; and media attention to Pushkin's life and work and his role in the development of Russian and world culture. In Moscow, the Pushkin Literary Museum on Prechistenka Street would be restored and reconstructed, with new exhibits; the Pushkin apartment museum on Arbat Street would be renovated; a new branch of the Pushkin museum would be opened at the house of Vasily Lvovich Pushkin, the poet's uncle and himself a minor poet, on Staraiia Basmannaia Street; Moscow's Pushkin monument would be restored; and the place of Pushkin's birth, a long-vanished building in Moscow's Basmannyi district, would be marked. Similar renovations were planned for the Pushkin museums and Pushkin places in St. Petersburg, Mikhailovskoe, Boldino, and elsewhere. Activities also included the creation and realization of a program of tourist excursions around Pushkin places in Russia, and the creation and release of Pushkin medals, currency, stamps, souvenirs, and gift items.<sup>136</sup>

Many observers would note the "Pushkin overload" caused by the jubilee, with Moscow residents in particular soon growing sick of the ubiquitous posters, events, television programs, and publications related to Pushkin, many of them inaccurate or of otherwise low quality.<sup>137</sup> The commercial aspects of the jubilee were seen as cynical efforts to "privatize Pushkin," to make him into a consumer brand rather than a public good, in the same way that national resources and industries had been privatized, making a few people enormously wealthy while leaving the majority of Russians in poverty.

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<sup>136</sup> Ukas Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 21.05.1997 g. No. 506: O 200-letii so dnia rozhdeniia A.S. Pushkina i ustanovlenii Pushkinskogo dnia Rossii. Sobranie zakonodatel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 1997 f., No. 21, st. 2466. Accessed online at <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&firstDoc=1&lastDoc=1&nd=102047281>, Jan. 9, 2018.

<sup>137</sup> Stephanie Sandler's *Commemorating Pushkin* includes a brief section on the 1999 jubilee; she focuses mostly on artistic works, particularly films. Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin*, 119-135.

Much of Russia's cultural elite—whether conservative, liberal, or avant-garde—would greet the state-sponsored Pushkin extravaganza with irony and sarcasm, and at times with open anger. Writer Mikhail Novikov, whose jubilee essay I will discuss in depth in Chapter 2, commented bitterly that Pushkin acted on “official brains” [*chinovnich'i mozgi*] like Viagra, exciting them even more than the 850<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Moscow. The title of Novikov's article, “I'll weep over the plans” [*Nad zamyslom slezami obol'ius*], plays on a line from Pushkin's 1830 “Elegy” [*Elegiia*] for his lost youth, “I'll weep over my visions” [*Nad vymyslom slezami obol'ius*].<sup>138</sup> These kinds of plays on Pushkin's own words were highly characteristic of criticism from many different cultural and political factions. They ironically imitated the misquotations that ran rampant during the jubilee, thereby mocking the ignorance of organizers, and projected the idea that Pushkin himself would have been disgusted by the jubilee proceedings. In this way, such jokes served to deride the celebration without denigrating the memory of the poet himself. They intended to protect Pushkin from those who were not good enough to appreciate or celebrate him. In keeping with this goal, such protests had a strong elitist tinge—intelligentsia disdain at popular stupidity and vulgarity being a recurrent theme in the history of literary jubilees, in Russia and elsewhere. Fear of the consequences of the commercialization of culture for Russian intellectual life, however, gave these negative reactions the 1999 jubilee an additional charge.

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<sup>138</sup> Mikhail Novikov, “Nad zamyslom slezami obol'ius’,” *Kommersant*, June 5, 1999. (Here and in subsequent citations, the lack of a page number indicates that this article was found on the Universal Database of Russian Central Newspapers, which does not provide page numbers.)

This unified front against the commemoration was the most important aspect of the jubilee. The jubilee failed to affirm the government's ability to present a persuasive and unifying national idea, but it confirmed Pushkin's enduring power as a symbol of Russian literary integrity. Jokes about Pushkin as the most popular presidential candidate pointed to the disgust and disdain that the chattering class felt towards the current crop of Russian politicians, and to their enduring respect for the Golden Age of Russian culture. Journalists and writers of many political persuasions could agree that they hated commercialized mass culture and the ignorant, unlettered political class. While a small subsection of the intelligentsia—particularly those inclined towards postmodernism and Conceptualism—were prepared to question the very idea of literary idols, most commentators in 1999 rallied round to protect Pushkin from his birthday party.



Figure 5: A sign on a shop window: “Forty-four days until Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin’s birthday.”<sup>139</sup>

### *Everything is Pushkin*

During the lead-up to the jubilee, television and radio announcers constantly intoned the number of days remaining until Aleksandr Sergeevich’s birthday, just as they had done in Soviet jubilees. Conceptualist poet and essayist Lev Rubinshtein<sup>140</sup> repeated

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<sup>139</sup> “1937, 1949, 1999...khronika” (*Seans* no. 17/18, 1999). Online at <https://seance.ru/n/17-18/yubiley/1937-1949-1999-hronika/>. Accessed Oct. 3, 2018.

<sup>140</sup> For an overview of Rubinshtein’s biography and literary career, see Gerald Janecek, “Lev Rubinshtein,” in Janecek, *Everything Has Already Been Written*, 53-99. Janecek’s introduction provides an excellent discussion of Moscow Conceptualism as a literary movement.

an *anekdot* then in circulation: “Nadezhda Osipovna [Pushkin’s mother] walks into Sergei Lvovich’s [Pushkin’s father’s] office and announces: “Nine months left till Aleksandr Sergeevich’s birthday!” Rubinshtein himself joked that he was reminded of the countdown to an explosion. What horrors, he asked, would the government announce next? “A monument taller than the Alexandrine Column, executed by you-know-who [Rubinshtein presumably meant Tsereteli] out of who-knows-what? A torchlight march of citizens dressed as Pushkin’s heroes?” He continued with an increasingly ridiculous, but nonetheless conceivable, list of possibilities.<sup>141</sup> The Conceptualist or postmodernist imagination could hardly match the absurdity of reality. As the fateful day approached, descriptions of the planned activities alone required many pages of newsprint.

A ball on Moscow's Tverskaia Street bore the optimistic and overheated title “Love! Russia! Sun! Pushkin!” Luzhkov held a reception in the Kremlin, with a buffet for 1200 people; *Moskovskii Komsomolets* joked that it was not clear whether the menu would follow Pushkin’s tastes or Luzhkov’s.<sup>142</sup> On Moscow’s Poklonnaia Gora there was a “people’s holiday” [*narodnyi prazdnik*] called “In all of great Rus” (*Po vsei Rusi velikoi*, a reference to Pushkin’s “I have built myself a monument”) and Manezh Square hosted a Pushkin theatrical performance called “Miraculous Moments” (a reference to his poem “I remember the miraculous moment...” [*Ia pomniu chudnoe mgnoven'e*]). On June 6, actors dressed up as Pushkin’s heroes marched from Tverskaia Street to Manezh

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<sup>141</sup> Lev Rubinshtein, “Operatsiia ‘Iubilei’,” *Itogi*, May 25, 1999. “Taller than the Alexandrine Column” is a reference to Pushkin’s poem “I built myself a monument”—his metaphorical monument is described as taller than the Alexandrine Column.

<sup>142</sup> “Shuru raskrutili po polnoi programme,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, June 5, 1999. The article’s title refers to Pushkin as “Shura,” an extremely familiar diminutive of “Aleksandr.” In association with Pushkin, the name sounds vulgar, and is no doubt meant to highlight what the newspaper sees as a kind of desecration of Pushkin’s memory by the authorities.

Square.<sup>143</sup> At “Natalie’s Salon,” famous Russian women confessed their love for the poet. There was an elaborate ball, with historical costumes, in the Hermitage garden. A Chinese tea ceremony, magic tricks, and astrological readings were thrown in for good measure.<sup>144</sup> The central site of the children’s events was Lubyanka Square, in front of the former KGB headquarters, where the giant head from Pushkin’s poem *Ruslan and Liudmila* sat at roughly the same spot where a statue of Feliks Dzerzhinsky, founding father of the Soviet secret police, had stood until its removal in 1991.<sup>145</sup> A highly exclusive concert on Red Square was called “Golden Voices of Russia for Pushkin” [*Zolotyie golosa Rossii—Pushkinu*], though one of the voices, as many observers noted, was not a Russian one, but that of famous tenor Placido Domingo.<sup>146</sup>

An American visitor, Columbia Slavic Department professor Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, wrote a particularly detailed and perceptive description of the jubilee events. On June 6<sup>t</sup> she attended the gala celebration at Moscow’s Bolshoi Theater, which included a speech on Pushkin by the venerable medievalist Dmitrii Likhachev (who had also participated in the 1987 celebrations), followed by performances of musical pieces based on Pushkin’s work, recitations of Pushkin’s poems, and readings from memoirs written about Pushkin. The stage backdrop was blue, varying from number to number like the sky through the day and night. Pushkin quotations spread like rays from the

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<sup>143</sup> Roman Kostikov and Sergei Topol’, “V chest’ Pushkina zakroiut tsentr Moskvy,” *Kommersant*, June 5, 1999.

<sup>144</sup> Inna Obraztsova and Irina Romancheva, “Domashnii spravochnik. Dvukhdnevnyi Pushkin,” *Argumenty i fakty*, June 2, 1999.

<sup>145</sup> Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, “Pushkin at 200” (*The Harriman Review* 12, Nos. 2-3, Winter 1999/2000), 4.

<sup>146</sup> “Shuru raskrutili.”

empty center, which was filled with a “spectrally white” profile of a young Pushkin only at the end of the performance, when a boy dressed as young Pushkin came out reciting “To Chaadaev” [*K Chaadaevu*], Pushkin’s 1818 lyric summoning the youth of Russia to serve their country. (This poem had also been featured prominently during the 1937 and 1949 celebrations.) Nepomnyashchy observed that “Perhaps no image could better have captured what the observance of the Pushkin bicentennial had to tell us about Russia—that it is a culture trapped in the texts of its own past and yet, in a strangely nostalgic fashion, yearning for rebirth, for a new center to anchor signification.”<sup>147</sup>

Nepomnyashchy also described St. Petersburg’s attempts to reclaim Pushkin, who had been kidnapped by Luzhkov and hustled off to Moscow. Large, freestanding Pushkin posters stood in prominent locations like Nevsky Prospect and Senate Square, with Pushkin’s self-caricature, a sketch of the Bronze Horseman statue, and Pushkin’s words in his own handwriting: “I love you, creation of Peter” [i.e., St. Petersburg], from *The Bronze Horseman*. A banner over Nevsky Prospect quoted the same poem: “Be beautiful, city of Peter.” The two quotations, along with images of Pushkin and the Bronze Horseman, were also displayed on a digital board over Vosstaniia Square. But Moscow, Nepomnyashchy wrote, “would easily seem to have outdone the ‘second capital’ in whimsy, messianism, and kitschy juxtapositions.” Posters and digital billboards in prominent locations offered Pushkin quotations such as “Moscow! How much that sound conveys,” from *Evgenii Onegin*, and “Moscow! How I loved you, my sacred homeland...” from a rough draft of *Onegin*. A *Bronze Horseman*-inspired billboard showed a soaked Evgenii, protagonist of that poem, who looked much like Pushkin,

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<sup>147</sup> Nepomnyashchy, “Pushkin at 200,” 2.



sitting on a dripping lion, with the first line, “On the bank by deserted waves...”

Nepomnyashchy read this as a joke suggesting that Petersburg had not been kind to Pushkin. Irony had even penetrated the official proceedings, another of the strangely postmodern aspects of the jubilee.

One of the most peculiar, quasi-postmodern jubilee activities was the search for Pushkin-related namesakes. In Moscow, thirty-three Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkins gathered; one of them was even said to be married to Natal’ia Nikolaevna Goncharova.<sup>148</sup> (This multiplicity of Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkins, this use of names voided of content, is reminiscent of Dovlatov’s vision of a landscape teeming with pseudo-Pushkins in his novella *Pushkin Hills*, which I discuss in Chapter 3.) The St. Petersburg radio station “Baltika” organized a meeting of six Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkins with one Natal’ia Nikolaevna Goncharova. The Pushkins included two students, one stevedore, one locksmith from a secret factory, one tax inspector, and one real estate agent. Natal’ia Goncharova was planning to go to medical school.

The search for namesakes was not confined to the classic Pushkin places. In Bashkiria, the Ministry of Internal Affairs searched for people who shared Pushkin’s full name (there were two) and the names of Pushkin’s family members and literary characters. There was only one Tat’iana Dmitrievna Larina (the name of the heroine in *Evgenii Onegin*), and not a single Evgenii Onegin to be found for her in Bashkiria. As *Kommersant* observed sardonically, at least one of the four Vladimir Lenskiis was less romantically inclined than Pushkin’s character (a poet friend of Onegin): he was currently

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<sup>148</sup> Obratsova and Romancheva, “Domashnii spravochnik.”

wanted for a crime.<sup>149</sup> The next best thing to having a Pushkin name was having a Pushkin outfit. In response to the query, “What have you done for Pushkin?”, the governor of Nizhny Novgorod oblast told *Kommersant* that in addition to the renovation of the Boldino estate, his administration had been giving Pushkin outfits to the “best people” from industry, agriculture, and culture: a black cape, a white scarf, a top hat, and a cane.<sup>150</sup> The laughing search for namesakes and the Pushkin cos-play seemed to point to the extreme conceptual slipperiness of the jubilee Pushkin, who could be anyone, anywhere, anything. As a signifier, 1999 Pushkin was as empty and flexible as the 1937 version.

There were bountiful souvenirs, most of them extremely kitschy. As in previous jubilees, notably the 1899 Pushkin centenary, the souvenirs provoked anger at the thought that Pushkin had been reduced to the status of a banal consumer good. Commentators expressed fear and disgust at the thought that he could be eaten up by the *hoi polloi*, by people too vulgar to know better. The items that provoked the greatest outrage were Pushkin vodka, which had a top-hat stopper, and chili-flavored Pushkin ketchup. Journalists established that these two products were unauthorized, the results not of any top-down decree but of the free market.<sup>151</sup> At first glance, journalistic effort to confirm this distinction may seem simply ridiculous. But as we remember resistance to past

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<sup>149</sup> “Na chto podniali ruku,” *Kommersant*, June 5, 1999. The title of the article is a joke suggesting that these jubilee activities are a crime against Pushkin: it refers to Lermontov’s 1837 poem “Na smert’ poeta,” about the death of Pushkin. In it, d’Anthès “Could not have mercy on our glory,/Could not understand at this bloody moment,/What he had raised his hand against!” [“Не мог щадить он нашей славы, /Не мог понять в сей миг кровавый, /На что он руку поднимал!]

<sup>150</sup> “A chto ty sdelał dlia Pushkina?” *Kommersant*, June 5, 1999.

<sup>151</sup> “Na chto podniali ruku.”

jubilees, we can see that critics of the 1999 celebration were pointing to the fact that literary consumer kitsch had been produced by the free market, which was a recent innovation in Russia. Soviet jubilees had produced their own commemorative kitsch, but not for financial gain. Those authoritarian celebrations might have been repugnant, but capitalism hardly meant an end to literary debasement. Journalists went to the trouble of investigating Pushkin vodka and ketchup because they wanted to know who was to blame: they discovered that it was not the government, which was, of course, duly pilloried for its other commemorative offenses, but commemorative entrepreneurs.

Literary commemoration can be profitable for places, too, whether by attracting tourists or by bringing government funding; perhaps this helps to explain the fact that nearly every place in Russia seemed to be searching for some connection to Pushkin. His exile and frequent travels made it possible for many places to claim him. In Kaluga oblast, the Pushkin place was the Polotnianyi works—the estate of the Goncharovs, Pushkin’s wife’s family, which Pushkin visited when he came to court Natal’ia.

*Moskovskii Komsomolets* reported sardonically on the Kaluga Pushkin celebration, where Pushkin-shaped whistles were for sale. At the newly restored Goncharov house, museum workers worried about guests scuffing the new parquet floors while the local political elite dined at a restaurant, serenaded by a hoarse singer of songs about criminal life and an accordionist who recited satirical verses [*chastushki*] with political content. Such was the Kaluga “Pushkin ball.”<sup>152</sup> Though *Moskovskii Komsomolets* was hardly a highbrow publication, it expressed disgust at the vulgar tastes of the Kaluga political elite, which

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<sup>152</sup> Elena Korotkova, “Kak na Pushkina imeniny,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, June 8, 1999. This article takes its title from the first line of a children’s birthday song.

degraded the memory of Pushkin, the literary and intellectual *crème de la crème*. As would often happen during the Pushkin jubilee, political power was cast as the enemy of appropriately respectful political commemoration.<sup>153</sup>

In an act of mass participation that hearkened back to Soviet celebrations, the television station ORT went around Russia asking ordinary people to recite a verse from *Evgenii Onegin*, thus creating a collective reading of the work. This amateur performance competed with the well-honed skill of veteran actor Sergei Iurskii, who recited *Onegin* in its entirety on another station. Prominent journalist and TV presenter Irina Petrovskaiia (born 1960) approved of Iurskii's reading and looked unfavorably on the collective version, which she termed, rather snobbishly, a recitation by "construction workers, high-rise workmen [*vysotniki*], firemen, renovators." (Her focus on construction suggests a preoccupation with the new Russia that was rising up during the 1990s through massive building projects.) "*Onegin* disappeared in the collective unconscious read-through--," she wrote, "not only the meaning of the novel in verse was lost, but also the rhythm of the verses. Like tourists who arrive at Pushkin places on cheap tours, the people-masses galloped through Europe on *Onegin*."<sup>154</sup> Here, again, popular participation provoked anxiety among the cultural elite about Pushkin being cheapened and vulgarized. The unwashed masses were trampling the manicured lawns of the Pushkin place—here, a metaphorical one—cherished by the old-school intelligentsia. Petrovskaiia's criticism demonstrates a particular aversion to the idea of collective—i.e. Soviet—Pushkin, preferring a more individualist Pushkin. At the same time, she cherished the

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<sup>153</sup> "Na chto podniali ruku."

<sup>154</sup> Irina Petrovskaiia, "Iurskii chitaet 'Onegina'," *Izvestiia*, June 5, 1999.

interpretation of an actor who had risen to fame during the Soviet period. This mixture of dislike and nostalgia for the Soviet period was characteristic of many older, middlebrow intellectual commentators' reactions to the jubilee. Of course the Soviet period abounded in vulgarity, but, especially in the late Soviet period, it offered a safe home for a limited segment of high culture. Perhaps what was coming after would be worse.

*A national inferiority complex*

State-sponsored events presented a humorless, saintly Pushkin who was important primarily as an ostensible source of national unity, pride, and redemption. As it had been during previous Pushkin celebrations, a ceremony at the Moscow Pushkin monument was central to the 1999 commemoration. During the ceremony, Solnechnogorsk Archbishop Sergii made a speech that drew on Dostoevsky's 1880 Pushkin speech, portraying Pushkin as a great reconciler of the peoples of the fatherland. A minor poet named Vladimir Kostrov, president of the International Pushkin Committee, read a poem of his own imagining Pushkin leading Russia safely along the edge of a perilous ravine. The poem ended with the lines, "With you will we never vanish./With Pushkin we will emerge victorious." An academician commented, "It is probably a great symbol that in these years of material ruin and spiritual degradation we have been granted almost simultaneously two great holidays: the bicentenary of the birth of Pushkin and the bimillenary of the birth of Christ."<sup>155</sup> These two calendar events were taken to offer the possibility of transformation, almost transfiguration, and redemption of the suffering

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<sup>155</sup> Nepomnyashchy, "Pushkin at 200," 1-5. (Does not provide originals of passages translated from speeches.)

experienced by Russians over previous years. Cultural commemoration was again bound up with religious commemoration, which it had replaced in the Soviet Union.

This pompous ceremony was so over-the-top that it made an easy—almost too easy—target for jokes, as if it had been pre-treated for satire. In an article called, after Pushkin’s famous poem, “God forbid that I lose my mind,” (“Ne dai mne Bog soiti s uma”), Katerina Krongauz offered a dispiriting picture of the ceremony at the Opekushin monument. Middle-aged poetasters chased cameramen, hoping to have their Pushkin-related doggerel aired on television, while young people could not answer even the simplest questions about Pushkin and his work. The untelegenic old people who knew the answers were of no interest to the journalists. People jostled to sign a Pushkin album that no one would ever read, and a mother had dressed her baby in a rubber Pushkin costume. Anti-abortion activists gave out fliers; nearby, on Revolution Square, there was a “Miss Moscow” beauty contest—a free event—with girls dancing in bathing suits. (Were any of them named Natal’ia Goncharova?) By the end of the day Krongauz was moved to quote not Pushkin but Tiutchev: “The day is over, and thank God” [*Den’ perezhit, i slava Bogu*].<sup>156</sup> Like so many journalist responses to the jubilee, Krongauz’s essay paints a portrait of an ignorant, exhibitionist new generation pushing out the old one, which is unglamorous but well versed in literature.

Irina Surat, an established literary critic and Pushkinist who was then forty years old, described the ceremony at Opekushin’s monument with similar disapproval and pessimism, citing the inadvertently parodic nature of the proceedings:

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<sup>156</sup> Katerina Krongauz, “Ne dai mne Bog soiti s uma,” *Moskovskie Novosti*, June 8, 1999. See also “Shuru raskrutili.”

What happened in Moscow on June 5, 1999, during the crashing events at the Opekushin monument, came across like a sad parody of the events of 1880. “Esteemed Muscovites!” announced the mayor, from the stand for respected guests. It was unclear to whom he was addressing himself, since the streets leading to the monument were closed and therefore empty, and the “people’s path” was represented by a carpet across Tverskaia, along which the mayor and Prime Minister walked... The orchestra thundered and a choir sang, and nevertheless everything was strongly reminiscent of the laying of wreaths at the [Lenin] Mausoleum or at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and certainly had nothing to do with Pushkin (it was not an accident that the announcer also gave the wrong date of his birth to the entire country).<sup>157</sup>

Surat imagined that this was what the closing of the Opekushin monument would be like, its “final transformation into a dead bronze monument, under which they gave an honorable burial to all that was once associated with the name Pushkin.” The voices of Pushkin scholars were excluded from the official festivities, and she deems there to be little substantive interest in Pushkin among the general population, which was losing interest in literature in general, or among the new wave of authors. She mentions postmodern fiction writer Vladimir Sorokin and Conceptualist poet Dmitrii Prigov, the latter being a striking choice as he often engaged with Pushkin, albeit in a less than worshipful way, as I will show in Chapter 2. Her inclusion of him here suggests that she has a clear idea of the appropriate way to be interested in Pushkin: with reverence. On the whole, Surat deems the jubilee proceedings to be hollow and unconvincing. The 1999 version of Pushkin was not, for Surat, a new incarnation of a venerable myth; it was more like a new coat of make-up applied to a corpse. In her judgment, even higher-quality jubilee materials only served to fetishize Pushkin’s biography while leaving his writing in the background. Surat’s analysis is a more extreme version of Krongauz’s: she envisions

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<sup>157</sup> Irina Surat, “Pushkinskii iubilei kak zaklinanie istorii,” *Novyi Mir* no. 6, 2000.

a Russia in which politicians remain to celebrate empty rituals, but readers of classic literature have gone extinct.

If there was so little interest in Pushkin today, Surat asked, then why hold the jubilee? She found the answer in Russia's "national inferiority complex" [*obshchenatsional'nyi kompleks nepolnotsennosti*] at a moment when many Russians felt that their once-great country was becoming a "third world country," no longer master of its own destiny. "We all see how unsuccessful the fumbling search for the national idea has been, over recent years," she noted. The national inferiority complex had become acute, she argued, in the spring of 1999, during the NATO bombing of the former Yugoslavia, which was intended in part, she said, to "push Russia out of the European political scene." She was not surprised, therefore, to see the frequent juxtaposition of Pushkin and the Balkans in jubilee-related articles. Part of Russia's national anxiety, she explained, was the fear of being torn from its own glorious past, of which Pushkin was one of the most potent symbols. Pushkin's usefulness for the Russian government lay in his ability to help assert that Russia was still alive and still great. This shift from Pushkin to NATO may seem shocking, but in the course of my research I found that it was commonplace in discussions of Pushkin during his bicentenary year. Russians were long accustomed to repurposing Pushkin for contemporary political needs, and his status as the national bard made him easily interchangeable with national pride and vulnerability.

Surat quoted Boris Paramonov's comment in another 1999 article: "Pushkin is the only hard currency left to Russia after the [1998] default." But Surat concluded that Pushkin was much less valuable currency internationally than many Russians would like to believe; the poet was "a purely national phenomenon" [*iavlenie chisto natsional'noe*].



In other words, he could not be exchanged for dollars. It was as if he were “taboo for other peoples, as national or religious relics are taboo.” Appreciation of his work depended on familiarity with Russian language and culture, and thus Pushkin “will live only as long as Russia and the understanding of what it means to be Russian.” His declining popularity was a direct, inevitable sign of the decline of Russia’s fortunes:

Pushkin is so closely linked with Russia’s historical fate that Russia’s current decline inevitably affects him. Pushkin was born of a young empire that had just defeated Napoleon, fighting for the Black Sea ports and for power in the Balkans—a vigorous country that had not only opened a window but thrown open a door to Europe, a country bubbling with the energy of internal transformation. Today Russian history has run its course—and it seems that we are losing Pushkin, and with him the fundamental basis of our national existence.

While not everyone agreed with Surat’s pessimistic assessment of Russia’s global standing, Pushkin’s bicentennial was suffused with anxiety about how the world viewed Russia and its greatest poet. Jubilee proceedings and coverage were full of assertions of Pushkin’s international significance, rarely backed up by evidence. Newspapers seized on any event indicating Pushkin’s claim to global fame. *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* reported on the ground-breaking ceremony for a statue of Pushkin in central Washington D.C., part of a cultural exchange between the U.S. and Russia. (A statue of Walt Whitman went up in Moscow in 2009.) It noted that the monument, the first to a Russian cultural figure in America, would be close to the White House. Pushkin’s global authority had been set in stone, so to speak. Russia had a national poet worthy of export even to the world’s leading superpower, and a worthy representative in Washington.<sup>158</sup> Pushkin was also depicted as still exerting a magnetic power that helped prove Russia’s continued pull in

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<sup>158</sup> Liubov’ Braknis, “Pamiatnik Pushkinu ustanoviat v Vashingtone,” *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, June 4, 1999.

its old sphere of influence. The director of the Mikhailovskoe estate museum told *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* that he expected President Yeltsin, the Patriarch, and representatives from Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Ukraine, and Moldova, as well as governors of several oblasts, to attend the jubilee celebrations at Mikhailovskoe.<sup>159</sup> Pushkin still commanded the fealty of these former Soviet vassals.

In the cultural sphere, international attention to Pushkin was seen as a reassuring sign of Russia's continued cultural capital. While some viewed it with derision, other reviewers looked positively on the new British film adaptation of *Eugene Onegin*, starring the acclaimed English actor Ralph Fiennes as Onegin and American ingénue Liv Tyler as Tatiana. One article described the film, with its attractive stars and refreshing lack of stereotypes about Russia, as much truer to the spirit of the poem than the Russian opera versions—after all, what opera singer was slender enough to pass for a young Tatiana? “Paradoxically,” the reviewer wrote, “real Russian film has been given to us by Englishmen.”<sup>160</sup> (Would future jubilees include quotations from the Ralph Fiennes movie passed off as Pushkin?) An interviewer found a comforting sense of validation of the worth of Russian literary culture in Liv Tyler's excited discovery of Tatiana, *Onegin*, and Pushkin, of whom she had lived in “blissful ignorance” for the first nineteen years of her life.<sup>161</sup> One could sense another Russian interviewer's satisfaction at hearing Fiennes say

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<sup>159</sup> Andrei Riskin, “Blagodaria skandalam u nas stalo bol'she turistov,” *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, June 5, 1999.

<sup>160</sup> Natal'ia Rtishcheva, “Liubiat—otvet'. Ne bud' durakom,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, June 4, 1999.

<sup>161</sup> “Itak, ona zvalas' Liv Tailer,” *Moskovskie Novosti*, June 1, 1999. The title plays on Pushkin's line from *Onegin*, “And so, her name was Tatiana” [*Itak, ona zvalas' Tat'ianoi*].

intelligent, admiring things about *Onegin*.<sup>162</sup> If English actors could make Pushkin their passion, Russia clearly had some continued place in the international literary canon.

In a happy coincidence, on the weekend of the Pushkin jubilee Russia won a soccer match against the French team—then world champions—in Paris. Rather as Pushkin had once moved from writing in French to writing in Russian, now Russia could dominate France on its home territory. Newspapers went to great lengths to find connections between Pushkin and Russia's winning performance in the game.<sup>163</sup> Cultural power, it was implied, generated other types of victory as well.

### *The crisis of Russian literature*

Such claims to Russian cultural authority were shaky, however, and they were outnumbered by anxious complaints about the waning prestige of literature in the post-Soviet era. In the nineteenth century, hero-writers had become an essential part of national identity, in Russia and throughout Europe. In the Soviet system, literature was ascribed a profound social and political significance, officially approved writers received extensive support from the state, and dissident writers could become political martyrs and heroes abroad. With the advent of capitalism, the end of political censorship, and the disintegration of Soviet institutions, Russian writers and critics scrambled to adapt to the frightening new world of a free literary marketplace. Throughout the 1990s, there had been extensive discussion of literature's fall from grace, the vulgarity of popular works,

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<sup>162</sup> Dmitrii Savel'ev, "Reif Fains, dobryi nash priiatel'," *Moskovskie Novosti*, June 1, 1999. The title is a play on an epithet for Evgenii in *Onegin*: "our good acquaintance."

<sup>163</sup> See, for example, Igor' Poroshin, "Pushkin i futbol," *Izvestiia*, June 5, 1999.

obscenity, and the loss of the Russian writer's status as conscience of the nation.<sup>164</sup> This anxiety came to the fore during the Pushkin jubilee, as the celebration of the poet's supposed immortality provoked questions about whether any Russian writer could be immortal in the current climate, and whether Russian literature would survive the transition to capitalism, as well as the growing popularity of television and film.

In *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, a journalist imagined an interview with Pushkin from beyond the grave. (This séance-like approach was not an unusual device in Pushkin jubilee coverage.) The "interview" reflected the widespread belief at this time that the Russian literary market had been hopelessly corrupted by the advent of capitalism. To the question "What do you think about contemporary literature?" Pushkin answered, "There was a time when literature was a noble, aristocratic field. Now it's just a fleamarket." Of course, a fleamarket sells used goods; in this observation, literature is not even a shiny new product, but something displayed on a sidewalk and sold for a song. Later, Pushkin recited part of the bookseller's speech from his poem "A conversation between a bookseller and a poet" ("*Razgovor knigoprodavtsa s poetom*," 1824), to the effect that only money mattered. It was notable that the interview presented these verses as Pushkin's own thoughts, following them with the lines "Money is nothing to joke

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<sup>164</sup> The post-Soviet crisis of Russian literature has been discussed extensively. See, for example, Bradley Gorski, "Authors of Success: Cultural Capitalism and Literary Evolution in Contemporary Russia" (Dissertation, Columbia University, 2017); Lev Gudkov, "The Institutional Framework of Reading: Preserving Cultural Discontinuity," trans. Liv Bliss, *Russian Social Science Review* 45.5 (2004), 44-65; Birgit Menzel, "Writing, Reading and Selling Literature in Russia, 1986-2004," *Reading for Entertainment in Contemporary Russia: Post-Soviet Popular Literature in Historical Perspective*, Stephen Lovell and Birgit Menzel, eds. (Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner, 2005); Andrew Wachtel (ed.), *Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); and Victor Yerofeyev, "Soviet Literature: In Memoriam" in *Glas: New Russian Writing* 1 (1991), 225-234.

about—money is a serious thing” [*Den’gami nechego shutit’; den’gi—veshch’ vazhnaia*], giving the impression that Pushkin held only the opinions of the money-minded bookseller, without the counterbalance of the romantic ideas of literature presented by the poet-speaker in the poem.<sup>165</sup> Depending on how much Pushkin literacy one expects of the readers of *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, this decontextualized quotation could be read as either a clever joke or as a somewhat clumsy attempt to use Pushkin’s words to back up the journalist’s own ideas about the post-Soviet literary scene. Given that *Moskovskii Komsomolets* was a popular publication not aimed at the cultural elite, and that “A conversation between a bookseller and a poet” is not among Pushkin’s universally memorized greatest hits, the latter interpretation seems more likely. Still, this ambiguity is typical of 1999 jubilee coverage, when the boundary between irony and sincerity often seemed to disappear.

At times, not only the jubilee celebrations but Pushkin himself became the target of jokes. In the past, according to critic V.A. Gusev, Pushkin *anekdoty* had been aimed more at politics than at Pushkin, but at the time of the jubilee they began to question the poet-prophet’s own legitimacy, as in an *anekdot* set at the draft committee office:

“Family name, name, patronymic.”  
“Pushkin Aleksandr Sergeevich.”  
“There’s something terribly familiar about that name...”  
“I should hope so: my dad is a big-time official!”<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Natal’ia Dardykina, “Aleksandr Pushkin: “Uzhasen grekh Soblazna,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, June 5, 1999.

<sup>166</sup> V.A. Gusev, “Pushkinskii iubilei 1999 goda: Mezhdy mifom i anekdotom.” In *Pushkin i mirovaia kul’tura: Materialy shestoi Mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii* (Saint Petersburg, Simferopol’: Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Russian Literature [Pushkin House], 2003), 168-69.

In this *anekdot*, even Pushkin's name has lost its value and significance, and literature is not a source of prestige. What counts is a position of power in the government. Gusev argued that the 1999 jubilee tried to continue the tradition of mythologizing Pushkin, but that sociocultural changes meant there was no longer any room for a poet-prophet in Russian society. Contemporary culture no longer aspired to immortality, geniuses or heroes. The old Pushkin myth was being eroded by irony; the 1999 jubilee seemed like a parody. I would argue that this was Gusev's wishful thinking: the defensive response to what were perceived as degrading elements of the Pushkin jubilee show that many people still cherished their cultural heroes, and the continued power of Pushkin as a symbol (leaving aside the question of substantive engagement with his work) in Russia since 1999 shows that society still values the role of the national bard.

*Argumenty i fakty*, a middlebrow newspaper, published a fake transcript of a "literary trial" of the Conceptualist poet and artist Dmitrii Prigov (1940-2007), who was accused of the misappropriation [*prisvoenie*] of Pushkin's name. The key offending text was his version of *Evgenii Onegin*, which replaced all adjectives with the words "insane" [*bezumnyi*] or "unearthly" [*nezemnoi*].<sup>167</sup> (It is not clear whether Prigov participated in the article, but the comments attributed to him are very similar to statements he made elsewhere, and are written in his own unmistakable style.<sup>168</sup>) A clear parody of the infamous Soviet literary trials of Joseph Brodsky, Andrei Siniavskii, and Yulii Daniel, with comments on Prigov's distance from the people and calls for psychiatric evaluation

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<sup>167</sup> I discuss Prigov's *Onegin* in detail in Chapter 2; the idea of being accused of misappropriation appears in Prigov's own introduction to that work.

<sup>168</sup> I am grateful to Mark Lipovetsky for helping me assess the "authenticity" of this article.

of the writer-criminal, the article played on the word “*protsess*,” which can mean “development” as well as “trial.” The article ultimately suggested, in a semi-ironic manner, that perhaps literary development was not possible without literary trials.

In the article, Prigov offered a substantive, thoughtful, literary-political defense in the tradition of Siniavskii, explaining,

The Russian cultural community is very sick. We still don't live in real historical time, when the past is really the past, and not the present. We still exist in a mythological space, where schoolchildren at history lessons can sincerely<sup>169</sup> shed tears about the Tatar invasion of Rus'. Even though we ourselves here are already half Tatar. And that's why we sincerely believe that Pushkin will last forever...

Prigov deftly linked the Pushkin cult to Russia's worship of a highly redacted version of the past, pointing out the absurd effects of ethno-nationalist mythmaking on the study of history. He may also have been making an implicit reference to the absurdity of Russian ethno-nationalists using Pushkin, a person of mixed race, as their mascot.<sup>170</sup> His frustration at the elision of the present also echoes Andrei Bitov's comments in “Pushkin's Photograph (1799-2099),” as I discussed in Chapter 1; Russia's temporal imbalance had not ended with the Soviet Union.

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<sup>169</sup> As I will discuss in detail in Chapter 2, Prigov was one of the first to raise the idea of a “new sincerity” in Russian literature, in 1985. In this “trial,” his use of the word “sincerely” shows that there is little connection between the truthfulness of a claim and the sincerity with which people can respond to it. Sincere delusions, including belief in Pushkin's immortality, are linked to an improper understanding of time and history—that death and oblivion can be avoided forever, that the Tatar invasion left no mark on the Russian genome. On Prigov and sincerity, and on sincerity in the USSR and post-Soviet Russia more generally, see Ellen Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

<sup>170</sup> On the treatment of Pushkin's race, see Nepomnyashchy and Trigos, “Introduction,” in Nepomnyashchy, Catharine Theimer, Nicole Svobodny, and Ludmilla A. Trigos, eds., *Under the Sky of My Africa: Alexander Pushkin and Blackness* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006). On the use of Pushkin by nationalists, see Wendy Slater, “The Patriots' Pushkin,” *Slavic Review* 58, no. 2 (1999), 407-427, and Stephanie Sandler, “Sex, Death and Nation in the *Strolls with Pushkin* Controversy,” *Slavic Review* 51, no. 2 (1992), 294-308.

The article's imagined "prosecution," as in real Soviet show trials, did not seem to absorb Prigov's observation, instead leaping on the fact that Prigov had confirmed that he believed that Pushkin was only temporary—blasphemy, in their eyes—and changing the topic to Prigov's famous "Obituary" for Pushkin, in which the Soviet Central Committee announced the death of Comrade Pushkin. (I discuss this work in depth in Chapter 2.)

Prigov remarked on the position of the contemporary writer, expressing anxieties that were widespread among the Russian intelligentsia at the time:

I truly believe that in today's literary situation a direct, honest, individually heroic utterance is impossible. The status of the writer has undergone a fundamental change. It used to be that when social institutions were undeveloped, literature was the only powerful intermediary between the people and the authorities—like priests in ancient Egypt. Today the hottest information comes from journalism, the deepest issues are discussed in the realm of developing philosophy, heroic mass behavior is the domain of rock and pop, prophetic functions are taken on by religion... In this way, literature today has become a special investigator of linguistic behavior.

As if echoing Prigov's conclusion about the loss of literature's social authority, the article ended after this statement, remarking that at this point the transcript broke off, that the author's sentence was unknown to the publication, and that therefore the reader had the right to come to his own verdict.<sup>171</sup> With the end of the Soviet Union and of Russian literature's exalted status, there would be no more definitive verdicts in literary trials; there would very likely be no literary development at all.

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<sup>171</sup> Polina Polianko, "Literaturnyi protsess. D.A. Prigov. Delo o novom Pushkine," *Argumenty i fakty*, June 2, 1999.



### *Privatizing Pushkin*

In April 1999, as part of the run-up to the jubilee, the Bank of Russia released a series of one-, three-, 25-, and 100-ruble coins with images of Pushkin on one side and the two-headed eagle on the other.<sup>172</sup> Pushkin was now stamped on the currency of the new Russia. While Pushkin's cultural currency had been relatively stable over the last century, the Russian ruble had experienced a near-ruinous collapse just one year earlier. Perhaps Pushkin's magic would bless the ruble with strength and stability over the coming century. Or perhaps this was only a symbolic version of something many observers would criticize about this jubilee and about the post-Soviet period in general: the commodification of Russian literary culture, and of Russian literature's most important "saint."

On his popular television program "Namedni" (the name is an obsolescent form of "recently"), Leonid Parfenov repeated the "*anekdot* of the season," with its mockery of the solemn countdown to the festivities and implied criticism of the expense of the jubilee: "There are five rubles left until Pushkin's birthday." The jubilee was being carried out "according to the rules of an advertising campaign... In 1999, Pushkin is 'our everything' more than ever before" [*V 1999, Pushkin kak nikogda nashe vse*], Parfenov said, as viewers saw a montage of Pushkin-themed objects. "A poster, a monument, a fountain, a medal, a ship, a song, a ballet, candy, vodka, sports competitions... Aleksandr

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<sup>172</sup> Tsentral'nyi Bank Rossiskoi Federatsii, *Banknoty i monety: Baza dannykh po pamiatnym i investitsionnym monetam*. [http://cbr.ru/Bank-notes\\_coins/coins\\_base/ShowCoins/?cat\\_num=5009-0012](http://cbr.ru/Bank-notes_coins/coins_base/ShowCoins/?cat_num=5009-0012), [http://cbr.ru/Bank-notes\\_coins/coins\\_base/ShowCoins/?cat\\_num=5111-0068](http://cbr.ru/Bank-notes_coins/coins_base/ShowCoins/?cat_num=5111-0068). Accessed November 18, 2017.

Sergeevich, forgive us for our everything” [*Prostite nas za nashe vse*].<sup>173</sup> In his light, pithy way, Parfenov was pointing out that the cultural icon had been made into an object of consumerist excess and government profligacy, even as many Russians faced severe economic hardship. The debasement of Pushkin’s image through commercialization was inextricably linked to post-Soviet economic inequality.

In *Izvestiia*, Maksim Sokolov condemned the jubilee as the work of a Russian political elite that, without popular support, grasped at any anniversary in its attempt to privatize even the nation’s history. In the new Russia, both space and time were up for grabs. Patriots used Pushkin for their xenophobic ends, while Moscow’s jubilee advertising campaign made Pushkin look like a minor local poet whose claim to fame was his association with the great Luzhkov. For Sokolov, this post-Soviet jubilee was much more offensive than the Communist versions. Here the political opportunism and instrumental use of Pushkin were naked, while Communist jubilees at least conferred an aura of saintliness on their honorees. In Sokolov’s acerbic account, the 1999 celebrations were a manifestation of pure self-promotion by the authorities, with none of the serious contemplation—of the honoree, of the current state of affairs, of contemporary Russia’s worthiness—that ought to accompany anniversaries of historic events.<sup>174</sup>

Parfenov later wrote that during the Pushkin jubilee, Luzhkov tried as usual to make sure that the Moscow celebrations outdid the federal ones. Since the house where Pushkin was born no longer existed, the center of the Moscow celebrations was the

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<sup>173</sup> “Namedni—99. 200 let so dnia rozhdenniia Pushkina,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQvIfORfpx0>. Accessed November 18, 2017.

<sup>174</sup> Maksim Sokolov, “Ikh Pushkin,” *Izvestiia*, June 5, 1999. The title, “Their Pushkin,” is a play on the trope of “My Pushkin.”

Church of the Ascension at the Nikitinskii Gate, where the poet was married. A monument and a fountain were placed in front of the church, but statues of Pushkin and his bride were hardly visible through the fat columns of the raised pavilion in which they stood.<sup>175</sup> The jubilee's ostensible honoree was made almost invisible by Luzhkov's monumental arrogance. Moscow storeowners were offered a choice of two official Pushkin posters for display; any store that did not display a Pushkin poster was liable for a fine,<sup>176</sup> a practice that provided another kind of "bridge" to the Soviet era.

Art historian and critic Grigorii Revzin penned an acerbic account of a Ministry of Culture awards ceremony held at the newly renovated Pushkin Literary Museum on Prechistenka, for those who had distinguished themselves in the celebration of the Pushkin jubilee. As he emphasized, these awards were significant only to the winners: Primakov, Chernomyrdin, and Luzhkov; the Ministries of Internal Affairs, Economics, and Culture; the Malyi and Bolshoi Theaters; the academies of science and art; people from the sciences and cultural sphere; and the Pushkin Literary Museum itself. In fact, none of the winners seemed quite sure about what they had done to deserve their prizes, and some appeared embarrassed. Bella Akhmadulina spoke about how she'd felt that year: "My duty [*dolg*] is to protect Pushkin from jubilee ceremonies." But a look around Moscow, Revzin observed, was enough to show that this duty had not been fulfilled.

The jubilee had made it clear, wrote Revzin, that "Pushkin" was a powerful brand, like Lipton's tea or Coca Cola, privatized by the Ministry of Culture. The problem was that it wasn't clear who owned the rights to this brand. "Is our everything federal or

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<sup>175</sup> Leonid Parfenov, *Namedni: Nasha Era. 1991-2000* (Moscow: Kolibri, 2010), 260.

<sup>176</sup> Jensen, "The Boss," 84.

Muscovite?” Revzin asked. “After the jubilee some had the feeling that when we say ‘Pushkin’ we also mean ‘Luzhkov.’<sup>177</sup> Iurii Mikhailovich plastered Moscow with posters. He opened the ‘Pushkin and Natalie’ fountain and was first to drink the water that flowed from the couple.” As Revzin described it, Luzhkov was symbolically drinking up Pushkin’s authority, making Moscow the city of Pushkin, trying to consolidate Pushkin’s historical and cultural currency just as he was trying to consolidate political and economic power around Moscow, and around himself.

“But Pushkin, although our everything, is not a long-running brand,” Revzin continued. “The Ministry of Culture leapt onto a departing train at the last minute and managed to shout: ‘Pushkin—is me!’ But the jubilee year is over, and everything has gone down the drain—Pushkin once again withdraws to the realm of schoolteachers and Pushkinists.”<sup>178</sup> In Revzin’s interpretation, the Pushkin Jubilee was the cynical exploitation of a national resource that would soon be exhausted.

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<sup>177</sup> This was a reference to Mayakovsky’s long poem “V. I. Lenin”, which includes the lines “We say Lenin/we mean--/the party./we say/the party/we mean--/Lenin.”

<sup>178</sup> Grigorii Revzin, “Pushkin na shee,” *Kommersant-Vlast*’ no. 42 (343), Oct. 26, 1999. The title of the essay is a reference to Chekhov’s story “Anna na shee,” or “Anna on the Neck.” Chekhov’s title is a pun referring to the fact that Anna has become a burden to her husband as well as a possible reason for his receiving an order of St. Anna, worn on a ribbon around his neck. Revzin’s title thus suggests that jubilee Pushkin is a burden for some and a reward for others.



*Figure 6: Pushkin matches.<sup>179</sup> Will they be used to burn down the Pushkin House?*

In *Izvestiia*, Sokolov offered a more conceptual explanation for Luzhkov's monopolization of the Pushkin jubilee. Sokolov noted that Pushkin, who is so strongly associated with the idea of a fully European Russia, could never have existed if not for the "Petersburg period" of eighteenth-century Russian history. The 1937 jubilee occurred as Stalin was busy exterminating Pushkin's worthiest heirs, the whole line of European Russians. In 1999, Sokolov concluded, "the most passionate exploiters" of the jubilee are those whose political principles center on the rejection of the return to this "Petersburg line of Russian history," which started again in 1991, and wish instead to return to the Moscow line, which could never have produced Pushkin and will never understand him. This commemoration was actually a means of forgetting rather than remembering.<sup>180</sup> Part

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<sup>179</sup> Viktor Toporov, "Zvezda Geroia (posmertno)" (*Seans* no. 17/18, 1999). <http://seance.ru/n/17-18/yubiley/zveschda-geroya-posmertno/>. Accessed Oct. 3, 2018.

<sup>180</sup> Sokolov, "Ikh Pushkin."

of what would be forgotten in the erasure of the St. Petersburg line was the development of Russian literature and Russia's cultural elite: as the authentic Pushkin was erased, the intelligentsia clearly felt that they were being erased, too.

*Let them eat Pushkin*

A desire to defend the old cultural elite was not the only reason to protest the Pushkin jubilee: there were also populist grounds for criticism. In this genre of jubilee criticism, Pushkin is associated with the Russian people rather than with the Russian elite. Anxiety over the position of literature was a niche concern in Russia in the 1990s, when many people worried about putting food on the table, or about skyrocketing crime rates. Jubilee-related articles often expressed resentment over the economic situation, and in particular over the failings of the government to provide for its citizens. *Moskovskii Komsomolets* noted sardonically that the Pushkin jubilee was the only federal program that had been fully funded by the recently replaced Prime Minister Evgenii Primakov, to the tune of 205 million rubles.<sup>181</sup> Many articles used Pushkin as a jumping-off point from which to discuss the disorder, violence, and poverty in contemporary Russia. One particularly panicked dispatch described teenage boys who recited Pushkin before brutally beating a pensioner who happened to pass by, and murderers who recited Pushkin in court in hope of a lighter sentence. The writer drew attention to the sad state of Russian hospitals and the poverty of the police, who were paid so poorly that some of

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<sup>181</sup> "Shuru raskrutili."

them resorted to stealing food.<sup>182</sup> As in the 1899 jubilee, which took place during a famine, the juxtaposition of lavish official celebration and popular suffering highlighted social inequities and dissension, and were taken as evidence of elite callousness.

A long article in *Moskovskie Novosti* chronicled a poetry contest in honor of Pushkin, held in an Odessa prison. Classical Pushkin merged with the criminal underworld of Russian thieves' songs, and with the seedy, ironic sphere of Odessa's literary myth, immortalized by Isaak Babel'. The journalist noted that the contest and the press it had attracted had done nothing to ease the living conditions of the inmates, except perhaps those who won the prizes. First prize consisted of tinned meat, "chicken in its own juices," sprats with tomato, eggplant dip (known as "caviar" in Russian), halvah, jam, fruit juice, cigarettes, tea, and matches. The writer seemed taken with this clash of civilizations, and also, perhaps, with the intensely metaphorical quality of a poetry-writing competition among hungry prisoners, with food as the prize.<sup>183</sup>

Two million rubles—partly from the government and partly from private sponsors—were spent to memorialize the home, in the Khoroshevo-Mnevniki neighborhood of Moscow, of Pushkin's last direct descendant bearing his name, Grigorii Grigor'evich Pushkin (1913-1997).<sup>184</sup> But Pushkin's living descendants were not so fortunate. The renowned investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaia—who would be assassinated on Putin's birthday in 2006—used the jubilee as a hook for news about the suffering of provincial Russians too poor to get medical care. She found a descendent of

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<sup>182</sup> Stanislav Skoblo, "Pushkin i bandit," *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, June 5, 1999.

<sup>183</sup> Mikhail Pievskii, "Zona poezii," *Moskovskie Novosti*, June 8, 1999.

<sup>184</sup> "Kazhdomu dvoriku—svoi Pushkin," *Kommersant*, June 5, 1999.

Pushkin, a young boy named Denis who lived in a village in Khabarovsk Krai, in the Russian Far East. This boy had the “tsar’s illness,” hemophilia,<sup>185</sup> but he was living in miserable circumstances, often without access to medicine or even food. Though he spoke rarely, when he did he expressed himself in “correct Russian speech” sprinkled with rhetorical turns, though he had not been to school. Politkovskaia wondered whether his philosophical mindset was not another “gift of ancient birth, like hemophilia.”

Not long ago, Denis had traveled to Moscow for an operation. While there, he snuck out of the hospital during the night to see Opekushin’s Pushkin monument. “He saw it, he touched it, he sat on the steps,” Politkovskaia wrote. “And he was so filled with grief, as, probably, only Aleksandr Sergeevich knew how to be sad—bursting, collapsing! He sobbed on his way back to his hospital room in the early morning. ‘Pushkin wasn’t like that,’ Denis concluded. ‘More precisely, he couldn’t have been so haughty and calm.’”

Politkovskaia’s tear-jerking article bore a certain resemblance to Mayakovsky’s 1924 poem “Jubilee,” in which he challenged the Pushkin monument to come down for a chat with him. The monumental Pushkin is rejected as dead, a poor resemblance, incapable of capturing the poet’s genius. Pushkin’s noble lineage—his linguistic purity, his generous, philosophical turn of mind—are present in his descendant, who has the proper reverence for his ancestor; but his lineage, in the form of a hereditary disease associated with the tsars, is also threatening his life. His noble blood is liable to flood out at any moment, killing him. Meanwhile, the Russian government is doing wrong by him,

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<sup>185</sup> Hemophilia, which is caused by a genetic mutation, was known as the “tsar’s illness” or “the royal disease” because it afflicted members of many European royal families, including the last tsarevich, Aleksei Nikolaevich. It seems to have originated with Queen Victoria.



as they did wrong by Pushkin. His doctors tried to get jubilee-related aid for him, Politkovskaia reported, but none arrived. There were millions of rubles at play for the festivities, but nothing for a poor, sick descendant of Pushkin. The press comes to photograph and film Denis, but his family is not even sure they will be able to afford a celebratory dinner in honor of Pushkin's birthday. The whole story is such a perfect illustration of the jubilee's hypocrisy and the state's simultaneous worship of the dead and indifference to the suffering of the living that, were Politkovskaia not such an outstanding investigative journalist, one might be tempted to think that she made it up.<sup>186</sup>

In *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, V. Radzisevskii and A. Karzanov offered a snapshot of Boldino, the village where the Pushkin family had an estate—now a museum—where Pushkin experienced his two extraordinarily productive “Boldino autumns.” It is a hot day, and the journalists go into a shop in search of something to drink. “Have a Pushkin” [*Pushkina berite*], the shopkeeper says, pointing to a bottle of 40-proof “Boldino Autumn” with the poet on the label. (This remarkable exchange would have fit seamlessly into literary satire.) Pushkin and his poetic autumn have been turned into cheap liquor, and Boldino has been turned into a construction site, with the stench of tar, the knocking of hammers, the screech of saws, and swarms of workers scurrying around the Boldino museum, which is under renovation. Ten years ago—before the fall of the Soviet Union—there had been about 50,000 visitors per year, but now that number has been cut in half. Kistenevo, the village next to the estate that Pushkin was given as a wedding gift from his father (Pushkin called it Kistenevka), is now home to just seventy

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<sup>186</sup> Anna Politkovskaia, “Dalekoe-blizkoe. Potomok Pushkina milostyniu prosit’ ne nameren,” *Argumenty i fakty*, June 2, 1999.

people, as compared in a thousand in Pushkin's day. L'vovka, the secondary estate built by Pushkin's grandfather and inherited by Pushkin's oldest son, is virtually abandoned; the Boldino museum director says it is now home to only three or four people, all of whom drink incessantly. Karzanov predicts that Boldino will wake up on June 6, the day of the jubilee, but will then fall into lethargy again for another two hundred years.<sup>187</sup>

Literary commemoration is not enough to keep Boldino alive.

The correspondents interview Valentina Frolova Tiul'neva, whose grandfather, Ivan Vasil'evich Kireev, helped save Boldino's historic buildings, including Pushkin's estate, from destruction. Kireev's own grandfather was Pushkin's servant. Tiul'neva recounts a recent dream about Pushkin:

I saw him dying. He was lying on a sofa, his face puffy and his eyes closed. People came in and out, but I watched him and thought, now he's dying and I'll never find out what color his eyes are. And suddenly he says to me: "Lift up my eyelids and look." But I can't make up my mind to do it, I'm afraid it will hurt him. And he says, "Don't be scared, it won't hurt me." And I lift his lids and look him in the eyes...they were a deep gray, with a greenish tint.

In the context of this journalistic portrait of a desolate, depopulated provincial Russia that is drinking itself to death, the vision of a dying Pushkin suggests a dying Russia, with a face puffy, perhaps, from too much "Boldino Autumn." Still, it seems to me, this dream-Pushkin is a sympathetic mind reader, someone whose gaze, even on the brink of death, is beautiful and profound. Pushkin's death is Russia's death, but Pushkin is also a reminder of what has been most beautiful and most admirable in Russia's long life.

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<sup>187</sup> B. Radzichevskii and A. Karzanov, "V Bol'shom Boldine—v kanun bol'shogo iubileia," *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, June 2, 1999.

### *Pushkin for President*

Leonid Parfenov expressed a broadly held sentiment when he remarked that it sometimes seemed like Pushkin was running for president.<sup>188</sup> In early June 1999, the political opposition was still expected to win the presidency in the 2000 election. Yeltsin was intensely unpopular after the economic crisis of 1998 and the long-running war in Chechnya. When he made Putin prime minister in August, declaring the obscure ex-KGB officer his political heir, the anointment was widely viewed as a kiss of death for Putin, who at that point had only 2% support in the presidential race. The favorite for president was former prime minister Evgenii Primakov, who had shepherded Russia through the 1998 financial crisis, and who had formed a coalition with Luzhkov, then one of Russia's most popular politicians. Putin's fortunes would change dramatically in September 1999, when bombings of several Moscow apartment buildings offered a pretext for his gruesomely triumphant attack on Chechnya. He was polling at 50% by December.<sup>189</sup>

In *Moskovskie Novosti*, Mikhail Shevelev imagined including Pushkin in a presidential poll in which he gets 50%, trouncing Grigorii Yavlinskii of the liberal Yabloko Party, Luzhkov, and Gennadiy Zyuganov, the Communist candidate. "Pushkin's high rating refutes the predictions of those who believed that the jubilee celebrations would have a negative effect on his popularity," Shevelev wrote. "Evidently the absence in the Russian Constitution of a notion of a "posthumous presidency" does not trouble his

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<sup>188</sup> "Namedni—99. 200 let so dnia rozhdeniia Pushkina," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQvlfORfpx0>, accessed November 18, 2017.

<sup>189</sup> Henry E. Hale, "How Nationalism and Machine Politics Mix in Russia," in *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism, 2000-15*, ed. Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 230-31.

supporters, as this does not indicate a direct prohibition.”<sup>190</sup> In his response to a Pushkin jubilee questionnaire addressed to various public figures, Vladimir Ryzhkov, leader of the “Our home is Russia” political faction, told *Kommersant*:

“I go around Moscow and look at this orgy of banners, panels, signs with Pushkin’s profile and a grab-bag of lines, and a foolish thought comes to me: this is the very peak of the presidential campaign, and the enlightened oligarchs are persuading society to elect Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin as the country’s president. Lord, if only that were possible!”<sup>191</sup>

In a satirical piece in *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, German Drobiz (who had already been writing satirical *feuilletons* for decades<sup>192</sup>) imagined several presidential candidates and Duma members debating a resolution related to the Pushkin jubilee: should the slogan be the classic “Pushkin is our everything” [*Pushkin—nashe vse*], or “Pushkin is our something” [*Pushkin—nashe koe-chno*], or perhaps “Pushkin is really something!” [*Pushkin—eto chto-to!*]? Every politician has his own favorite Pushkin poem. Drobiz has Zyuganov argue that Pushkin is above all a patriot and a statist [*derzhavnik*], quoting “To the Slanderers of Russia” [*Klevetnikam Rossii*, 1831, an angry tirade directed at French people who sympathized with the Polish uprising against Russia]. The nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskii, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, counters that Pushkin was a liberal and a democrat as well as a patriot, citing “Song of the Western Slavs” to establish Pushkin’s love of Serbia and show that Pushkin himself is urging

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<sup>190</sup> Mikhail Shevelev, “Vsem iubileiam vopreki,” *Moskovskie Novosti*, June 8, 1999.

<sup>191</sup> “S Dumoi o poete,” *Kommersant*, June 5, 1999.

<sup>192</sup> See, for example, Herman [sic] Drobiz, “A Lamppost and the Tower,” trans. Michael Biggins and Anatoly Vishevsky, in Anatoly Vishevsky, *Soviet Literary Culture in the 1970s: The Politics of Irony* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), 174-178.

Russia to unite with Slobodan Milošević.<sup>193</sup> Yavlinsky uses the mention of Adam Smith in *Onegin* to present Pushkin as an advocate of the free market; nationalist-communist Al'bert Makashov paints Pushkin as a nationalist anti-Semite. Viktor Iliukhin, a Communist who tried to impeach Yeltsin, brings up Iurii Skuratov, Prosecutor General who investigated Yeltsin for corruption only to be brought down by then-FSB chief Vladimir Putin with the help of *kompromat* (compromising material collected without his knowledge). If Pushkin had lived in a time of more advanced recording technology, Iliukhin wonders, would the poet have also become a victim of *kompromat*, of secret videos of his trysts with disreputable ladies of Petersburg or Odessa, or Pskov village tarts? Gennadiy Seleznev, Duma Chairman, concludes the imagined meeting by presenting a resolution to give Pushkin a permanent place in the Duma and make him a member of all parties; to recommend that Yeltsin make Pushkin deputy prime minister for economic affairs and symbolic representative on the Balkan conflict; and to award Pushkin a medal for services to the Fatherland of the second rank, "not lower than Alla Borisovna's" [pop star Alla Pugacheva]. The resolution passes unanimously.<sup>194</sup> Drobiz uses Pushkin to demonstrate the naked opportunism of Russian politicians and the shameless manipulation of Pushkin's image, while pointing indirectly to Pushkin's superiority to these political hacks.

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<sup>193</sup> Zhirinovskii hardly needs to be satirized; he does all the work himself. Mark Lipovetsky remarks that Zhirinovskii "managed to combine scandalous Postmodernist self-presentation with ultra-nationalist slogans, while pleasing both the government and the electorate." Mark Lipovetsky, "Post-Sots: Transformations of Socialist Realism in the Popular Culture of the Recent Period," *Slavic and East European Journal* 48, no. 3 (2004), 376 nn 15.

<sup>194</sup> German Drobiz, "Nashe vse," *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, June 2, 1999.

Irina Petrovskaiia noted the disgust and apathy Russians felt towards both the jubilee and the elections, with their cynical public relations. She cited one of the jokes that Russians were using to relieve the jubilee pathos. The police bring a homeless man into the station. They ask for his name; he doesn't remember. They ask where he's from; he doesn't remember. They ask if he has family or friends; he doesn't remember. "Do you remember anything?" they ask at last. "I remember that there are seven days until the birthday of Aleksandr Sergeevich," he answers.<sup>195</sup> The joke is a perfect encapsulation of the tensions of private and public memory and identity in the days of the Pushkin jubilee. The individual is torn from all moorings, without even the memory of a home, a family, or a name. The only thing left in his memory is Pushkin and the publicly imposed jubilee. But what is public memory without private memory? What does it mean to love Pushkin when you don't even know who you are?

Petrovskaiia's comparison of the election and the jubilee also raises the question, which would become much more pertinent over the next two decades, of Russian elections as public rituals. Soviet elections had been pure ritual; they had nothing to do with selecting representatives, and were instead intended as performances of collective political engagement. In principle, the 2000 election was supposed to be an authentic democratic event, though the 1998 election had already been marred by corruption. Over the next decades, however, Russian elections would be constantly rigged—not quite as much as Soviet elections, but enough to make the final result inevitable. This meant that elections returned to their Soviet status as public ritual. Not unlike many state-sponsored

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<sup>195</sup> Petrovskaiia, "Iurskii chitaet 'Onegina'."

commemorations, they were attempts to confirm a false public consensus and unity, but they also gave rise to expressions of dissent, notably in the 2011-12 wave of protests against rigged elections. (That exceptional moment of protest was disproportionately focused on mockery of the authorities, as opposed to the earnest assertion of political alternatives.<sup>196</sup>)

For literary critic M.V. Zagidullina, the 1999 jubilee confirmed the enduring significance of the “Pushkin myth.” But despite the potential for the “magical zero” of the year 2000 to act “like a window into an unknown, alien world,” sociological research found that most Russians had a neutral or indifferent attitude to the end of the millennium, apparently due to a sense of despondency in the Russian population, related to the socio-economic situation (especially the 1998 financial collapse), changes in the government, and a lack of hope and confidence about the future. Unlike other major moments of rupture or transformation in Russian history (the Christianization of Rus’, the Petrine reforms, the Russian Revolution), de-Sovietization was not led by a single, powerful leader, a “*vozhd*”:<sup>196</sup> there was no strong hand pointing to a new future. This left a glaring vacancy, Zagidullina suggested, in the “space of authority” that needed to be filled in order to restore the nation’s confidence in its own identity. During the jubilee, that space was filled by Pushkin. (Not long after, it would be filled by Putin.) The public’s apathy about the new millennium matched its feelings of indifference or annoyance at the upcoming elections. Because the political field offered so little hope,

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<sup>196</sup> See Alexander Etkind, “Introduction: Genres and genders of protest in Russia’s petrostate,” in Birgit Beumers, Alexander Etkind, Olga Gurova, and Sanna Turoma (eds.), *Cultural Forms of Protest in Russia* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 2.

value, or meaning, because the government was perceived as having deceived and betrayed the populace, Zagidullina argued, people turned to cultural institutions—and to Pushkin in particular—for a sense of inspiration. Pushkin functioned as a kind of counterculture, a source of support, hope, optimism. Zagidullina did not believe that the excitement around the jubilee was merely the work of bureaucrats, and argued that there was sincere enthusiasm among Russians and genuine love for Pushkin.<sup>197</sup> Not everyone was tired of Pushkin: he retained significant symbolic potency and the affection of many readers. Zagidullina saw the potential for the Pushkin jubilee to serve a genuinely productive, unifying, and reassuring function in Russian society, perhaps a result of her own hopeful nostalgia for the traditional Russian reverence for literature.

Literary historian and critic Andrei Zorin argued in a post-jubilee essay that Pushkin had already endured two demythologization campaigns: by radicals in the 1860s and by the avant-garde in the 1920s. In each case, the poet had been remade in a different image, often with the help of other idols, such as Dostoevsky or Stalin. The most important episode of Soviet demythologization, the de-Stalinization of the 1950s, had swapped Stalin for an older idol, Lenin. But the postmodern approach that emerged after the end of the Soviet Union did not offer any new hero or idol, because the whole idea was of a world *without* idols.<sup>198</sup> While Zagidullina was concerned about the empty space where an authoritative idol should have been, and was happy that Pushkin could still occupy that space, Zorin depicted a postmodern condition in which that kind of idolatry

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<sup>197</sup> M.V. Zagidullina, *Pushkinskij mif v kontse XX veka* (Chelyabinsk: Chelyabinsk State University, 2001), 50-59.

<sup>198</sup> Andrei Zorin, “Bezopasnyi seks,” in *Shinel’ Pushkina: Sbornik k 200-letnomu iubileiu A.S. Pushkina* (Moscow: Pentagraphic, 2000), 6-9.



had disappeared. Zagidullina spoke more generally about society and government, while Zorin spoke mainly about the literary field. But taken together, the two observations shed light on some of the dilemmas of post-Soviet society: is it possible to live entirely without heroes and idols? What happens when postmodern modes collide with authoritarianism? Can idolization and irony coexist? What happens when sincerity and sarcasm become almost indistinguishable?

*In search of national consensus*

Despite his view that literary idols were a thing of the past, Zorin, like Zagidullina, noted a unifying function in the jubilee, albeit an inadvertent one. The festivities united Russians in distaste and dislike. In his view, the celebration displeased people from all walks of life. Its participants were embarrassed at their involvement, Zorin said, and those who loved Pushkin were pained to see him co-opted by the government, made into a consumer good. While Zagidullina saw love of Pushkin as a counterculture that offered hope at a dispiriting time, Zorin saw rejection and mockery of the jubilee as a society-wide bonding experience.

Zorin found humor, inventiveness, and playfulness in many of the activities related to the celebration. For him, this was the first Pushkin jubilee that had presented a truly “adorable” Pushkin. If Pushkin was dragged down to the level of ordinary Russians, if average people got their “dirty hands” on the great poet, Zorin argued, this meant at least that he was remembered, still part of everyday life. Zorin ended on an optimistic note:

It seems that today there is a necessity for a historical figure around whom a national consensus can form, and there are no other candidates... The jubilee celebrations of 1999 gave us the Pushkin of the end of the second millennium. He turned out to be cheerful, homey, lively, well dressed, exuberant, importunate, a little vulgar. Perhaps this is an idealized self-portrait of today's Russian democracy. Of all the Pushkins that Russia has seen, this is not at all the worst. If we want the next one to be better, we have to work. Above all—on ourselves. Pushkin won't do this for us.<sup>199</sup>

Here, vulgarity and a populist bent were not bad things: Zorin did not share the desire of some other members of the intellectual elite to keep Pushkin out of the fray. He was happy to have the *hoi polloi* manhandle the bard, as this kept him in circulation and assisted in the formation of national unity. Unlike many commentators, Zorin is willing to embrace the idea of a genuinely democratic Pushkin. Disgust at government proceedings, in this context, take on a disgust at the anti-democratic potential of Russian politicians, which had already become obvious.

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<sup>199</sup> Andrei Zorin, "Den' rozhdeniia Aleksandra Sergeevicha," *Neprikosnovennyi Zapas* 5(7), 1999, 59-61. Zorin's last sentence is a reference to a popular saying used when someone does not want to take responsibility for something: "And who will do it? Pushkin?"



*Figure 7: A Pushkin jigsaw puzzle from 1999.<sup>200</sup>*

While Zorin emphasized the jubilee’s somewhat inadvertent unifying effect, Lev Rubinshtein observed the ways in which the jubilee, with its incessant discussion of a supposedly unifying cultural figure, served to underscore the divisions in Russian society now that the Soviet Union’s homogenized, state-driven culture had disappeared. The jubilee also revealed a certain cultural or intellectual exhaustion. “It is practically impossible to say anything about [Pushkin] that has not already been said,” Rubinshtein wrote.<sup>201</sup> The only new things that one could say were those that were patently false—that Pushkin had been a woman, for instance. (Some such proposals were indeed made,

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<sup>200</sup> Toporov, “Zvezda Geroia (posmertno).”

<sup>201</sup> Lev Rubinshtein, “Ch’e vse?” *Itogi*, May 25, 1999.

showing once again that Rubinshtein's joke could barely keep up with ridiculous reality: people wrote about Pushkin's supposed homosexuality and Satanism, for instance.<sup>202</sup>)

And yet, Rubinshtein goes on, one still wants to talk about Pushkin, it is “always fun” to think about him, and love of Pushkin continues to be a uniquely unifying force for Russians: “Today this is nearly the only point of the notorious national consensus. Everyone loves [Pushkin] (or at least respects him, even if they don't dip into his works), finding in him diverse and at times contradictory meanings.”<sup>203</sup> Dissidents could admire his dissidence, patriots could admire his statism and his poem “To the Slanderers of Russia,” cosmopolitans could admire his European qualities, and so on. And governments always liked Pushkin, Rubinshtein argues, because like them, Pushkin was “the most important” [*samyi glavnyi*]. Though Rubinshtein's list is humorous in tone, continuing to graphomaniacs and alcoholics, it offers an apt summary of the wildly diverse groups that did indeed find something to admire in Pushkin.

According to Rubinshtein, the springing forth of alternative Pushkiniana is a healthy response to the stifling official aspects of the jubilee, just as it was in the 1930s. There are many Pushkins, and that is a good thing:

Pushkin is being torn into pieces. And he tears easily, without any trauma and, most importantly, without losing any of his own wholeness. Because he isn't a monolith. He is—contrary to the classic formula—not the sun of Russian poetry, but rather its air, its atmosphere.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Irina Surat, “Pushkinskii iubilei.”

<sup>203</sup> Lev Rubinshtein, “Ch'e vse?”

<sup>204</sup> Lev Rubinshtein, “Ch'e vse?” Writer Vladimir Odoevsky called Pushkin “the sun of Russian poetry” in his obituary; Uvarov, Minister of Education under Nicholas I and the architect of the “official nationalities” policy, was furious and had Andrei Kraevskii, in whose journal the words appeared, reprimanded.

While Rubinshtein does not mention the USSR explicitly, his description of Pushkin being painlessly torn into pieces “without losing any of his own wholeness” seems to contrast with the dissolution of the Soviet Union just a few years earlier. Pushkin can break up without trauma—unlike the USSR—and without losing any of the essence of himself. Pushkin offers a model of simultaneous multiplicity and unity. His ability to be all things to all Russians suggests that post-Soviet Russians may be able to find a way to function as a unified polity while accepting their political and cultural diversity.

In his introduction to the 1996 essay collection “Pushkin and Contemporary Culture,” which was released by the Russian Academy of Sciences in honor of the upcoming jubilee, philologist E.P. Chelyshev offers a similar ideal of Pushkin as a figure capable of producing a sense of unity in heterogeneity. Chelyshev, a long-time Academy of Sciences bureaucrat and World War II veteran with clearly conservative and perhaps somewhat nationalistic views, opens with standard-issue assertions about Pushkin’s value for patriotism: he is “always contemporary” and he stimulates love for Russia, pride in the country’s great past, and faith in its future. Pushkin is needed more than ever at a moment when “in a situation of intense spiritual quests, of a drawn-out socioeconomic crisis, of the decay of society’s moral principles, the fate of the country, of national [*otechestvennoi*] culture is being decided.”<sup>205</sup>

But Chelyshev also argues that Pushkin is important for his attention to the life of multiethnic [*raznoplemennoi*] Russia, and that he can deepen contemporary understanding of the unique “multinational complex of Russian culture” even today.

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<sup>205</sup> E.P. Chelyshev, “Pushkinovedenie,” 3.

Though Chelyshev recognizes some of the negative effects of Pushkin jubilees, he points out that such events create a “zone of consensus” that allows a break from heated critical debates, which often use Pushkin to back up one ideological viewpoint or another, despite the fact that it is impossible to reduce his work to simple partisan positions.<sup>206</sup> On one hand, Chelyshev is more or less explicitly rejecting the nakedly ideological, instrumental use of Pushkin that was typical of Soviet Pushkin jubilees. On the other hand, his vision of Pushkin as someone who is both uniquely Russian and capable of uniting different ethnicities has obvious roots in the history of the Soviet Pushkin cult: recall the jubilees of 1937 and 1949, for instance.

For Chelyshev, Pushkin is not only a figure of Russian culture, but one of world culture: he is both a patriot and a cosmopolitan. Pushkin shows that it is possible to be both a proud Russian and a citizen of the world: “A deeply national poet, he is panhuman.”<sup>207</sup> This version of Pushkin, with its clear references to Dostoevsky’s assertion, in his famous Pushkin speech, that Pushkin is both utterly Russian and capable of encompassing all of world culture, also has its roots in the long tradition of Pushkin celebrations, and in broader tendencies of European literary commemoration, as we have seen. But Chelyshev’s claims also mirror Russia’s political aspirations in the 1990s, as the country sought to become a respected player on the world stage and to develop a sense of national pride compatible with an ethnically and religiously diverse population. Chelyshev’s vision of Pushkin, which takes bits and pieces from the history of the

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 4.

Pushkin cult and updates them for a post-Soviet reality, corresponds to the one that would become dominant in the Putin years.

*Irony and anxiety in the time of jubilation*

Despite intelligentsia anxiety in the 1990s about the diminished status of literature and of writers, the Yeltsin government put its faith in the power of a Pushkin jubilee. The bicentenary had much in common with the centenary, two *fin-de-siècle* extravaganzas that coincided with a period of political uncertainty and severe economic inequality. Late imperial Russia used jubilees as part of an effort to reassure the public that the regime was strong and enduring, with deep roots in history, focusing on Moscow and eliding the results of the Petrine and subsequent reforms. In a similar way, the Yeltsin government and, especially, Moscow mayor Iurii Luzhkov used the Pushkin jubilee, as well as the 1997 Moscow jubilee and a rash of new historical monuments, to paper over the rupture of 1991; to establish Moscow as the seat of Russian culture and power; and to assert Russia's continued right to a place as one of the world's most important cultures. Like the Stalinist jubilees of 1937 and 1949, the 1999 jubilee sought to establish Russia's continued geopolitical potency through a display of literary prowess.

But on the whole, like the 1899 jubilee, the Pushkin bicentenary was a failure. Immense sums were spent in an effort to create the illusion of consensus and national unity, but the effect was to underline political and economic divisions and dissatisfaction. The celebration provoked intense criticism, with most commentators finding it wasteful, offensive, distasteful, or simply ridiculous. My analysis of responses to the jubilee reveals the extent to which this criticism was bound up with larger concerns about the

position of literature and high culture in post-Soviet society. Apart from the Pushkin jubilee, Luzhkov's approach to commemoration devoted little attention to cultural heroes, as witnessed by the oeuvre of Luzhkov's favorite sculptor, Tsereteli, whose monuments are overwhelmingly historical figures from the distant past or abstract concepts. Writers played only a small part in this episode of post-Soviet statue mania, in contrast to the Soviet and imperial periods. Literary types had good reason to be alarmed at the Luzhkovian approach to commemoration and its return to the "Moscow line," which left almost all the literature out of the new myth of Russian history and identity. Luzhkov recognized the Pushkin bicentenary as an unmissable opportunity for self-aggrandizement. Love of literature, or even respect for the power of literature, had nothing to do with it, as many observers angrily pointed out.

The contemptuous, even snobbish tone of many criticisms of the 1999 jubilee reflected anxiety about the commercialization of literature. This contempt, like the anxiety that triggered it, evidenced an ambivalent attitude to the Soviet era. On one hand, people like Irina Petrovskaja scorned "mass" commemorative activities, which she considered ignorant and insensible to poetic nuance and which were strongly associated with Soviet commemorative practices. On the other hand, many commentators felt that the Soviet jubilees, authoritarian and ideologically manipulative though they were, had been more respectful of Pushkin and his achievements than the post-Soviet commemoration had been. The Soviet approach had been bad, but perhaps the post-Soviet one was even worse. Rueful jokes about electing Pushkin as president expressed disgust with the political field, but also nostalgia for the lost prominence of high literature in Russian society.



The intense commercialization, the kitschification, of the jubilee was taken, as it had been in 1899, as an alarming sign of the debasement of high literature by mass culture. In both cases, kitschification provoked intense criticism from members of the intelligentsia, who considered commercialism and respectable literary commemoration to be incompatible. In 1999, these criticisms were given additional force by concern about the post-Soviet privatization process, which was understood to extend even to Russia's historical and cultural heritage. Would Pushkin be among the public goods sold off at bargain prices? In 1999, as in 1899, the intelligentsia's desire to "protect" Pushkin's image, works, and legacy from vulgarization provoked a stream of what might be called defensive commemoration: writers and critics attacked the official and commercial commemorative activities while offering their own reasons for loving Pushkin. This was the old opposition of public and private versions of Pushkin, but in 1999 it was complicated by the dual relationship to the Soviet past among many members of the intelligentsia. The public Pushkin of 1999, nearly all commentators agreed, was insulting, but many also felt a certain nostalgia for the knowledge of Pushkin inculcated by the Soviet education system, and for the greater integrity of the Soviet public Pushkin compared to the current version. Meanwhile, the botched and predatory privatization of industry and culture had given a negative sheen to the concept of the private, which during the Soviet period had been a cherished, if embattled, refuge for much of the intelligentsia, as for many Soviet people more generally.

One of the most striking features of the 1999 jubilee was the tidal wave of irony that it provoked. Commemoration aims to produce a single, consistent, homogenous idea of the past and often, by extension, of national identity. Laughter and irony would appear

to have very little place in such a solemn ritual of celebration or mourning. Statues in city squares should be impressive, not amusing; public memory focuses on weighty issues, not lighthearted humor or double-edged irony. Perhaps because commemoration works so hard to exclude irony, humor, and ambiguity, it inadvertently invites them, especially in an age when postmodernism has reached the mainstream. Even official proceedings during the 1999 jubilee sometimes seemed tinged with irony, or looked like self-parody to commentators like Pushkinist Surat. As I have shown, this parodic quality infuriated many observers, especially those from the serious-minded liberal intelligentsia.

Other observers found the urge to make Pushkin jokes irresistible. This had no relation to a lack of respect for Pushkin. In fact, people with the deepest love for and knowledge of Pushkin were among those most willing to play with his image and poetry, and were best equipped to do so. There is a long history in Russia of counter-commemorations; the 1987 Pushkin jubilee, as I have shown, retrieved the 1921 counter-commemoration of Pushkin in Petrograd, as long-repressed strains of Russian literature and culture returned to the surface thanks to Gorbachev's reforms. In that case, counter-commemoration was extremely serious, mournful, focused on death and loss. In 1999, by contrast, the counterpoint to the official commemoration was an unofficial festival of mockery (for the more light-hearted) and derision (for the serious-minded). As several of the jubilee's most sophisticated observers noted, the celebration served to unite Russians through disgust at the official celebrations; it also united them in laughter and irony. Then again, in Russia "there is tradition in the very mockery of tradition," as Marijeta Bozovic

puts it in her study of the poet Timur Kibirov (of whom I will write at length in my next chapter).<sup>208</sup>

Soviet-era satire, which included satirical treatment of jubilees,<sup>209</sup> had fallen into two basic categories: didactic satire in the service of Soviet ideology and satire that criticized or mocked elements of the Soviet system. The 1999 jubilee was suffused with a kind of irony that was much less binary and harder to parse. Soviet-era satirists such as German Drobiz had no difficulty retraining their honed wit on the absurdities of the post-Soviet scene. There was much more freedom to joke, of course, with Soviet censorship a thing of the past. Meanwhile, formerly unpublishable movements such as postmodernism and Conceptualism were folded into mainstream discourse in surprising ways, as in *Argumenty i fakty*'s "trial" of Dmitrii Prigov. A number of jubilee-related events had a bizarrely postmodern flavor—notably the search for Pushkinian namesakes, a parade of simulacra. And yet one would hardly consider a St. Petersburg radio station (organizer of one of the Pushkin namesake events) to be an agent of postmodern performance art. Such events bear some resemblance to postmodern practices, with an easy separation of

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<sup>208</sup> Marijeta Bozovic, "Timur Kibirov: Stretching the Russian Poetic Canon" (MA Thesis: Columbia University, 2005), 20.

<sup>209</sup> The most famous of these is Mikhail Zoshchenko's "During the Pushkin Days" [*V pushkinskie dni*]. Absurdist poet Daniil Kharms's "Anecdotes from the Life of Pushkin" [*Anekdoty iz zhizni Pushkina*] in another important early Pushkin cult satire, a sequence of seven short "anecdotes" that was part of a larger work, "Incidents" [*Sluchai*]. Kharms worked in 1936 on an essay about Pushkin for children, presumably for the jubilee; he abandoned the project, but drew on it for "Anecdotes." Another obvious inspiration for Kharms' "Anecdotes" is the *anekdot*. In one 1937 *anekdot*, a proposed design for a jubilee monument has Pushkin reading Byron: Stalin says this is historically but not politically correct. The second has Pushkin reading Stalin: Stalin says this is politically but not historically correct. The third is both historically and politically correct: Stalin is reading Pushkin. But when the statue is unveiled, everyone sees that Stalin is reading Stalin. Pushkin is erased, in his own commemoration, by Stalin. See Misha Mel'nichenko, *Sovetskii Anekdot: Ukazatel' Siuzhetov* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2014), 757-58.

signifier from signified and form from content, a casual acceptance of the instability of identity. But these features exist rather comfortably within an existing system of authoritative discourse. An ironic parade of Pushkin namesakes does not challenge the essence of the Pushkin cult, Pushkin's status as Russia's ultimate cultural hero, or the validity of the concept of cultural heroes. A subsection of the literary elite deemed the very concept of idols outdated—recall Zorin—and some jokes began to question Pushkin's status as a hero, as noted by Gusev. But my review of reactions to the jubilee showed that most Russian commentators remained convinced, respectful, and protective of Pushkin's heroic status, even if they were bored or irritated by the jubilee itself: recall, for instance, Revzin's article mentioning Akhmadulina's remark that she felt obliged to protect Pushkin. Where they saw a void of authority left by post-Soviet politics, they imagined Pushkin filling it, as witnessed by the frequent jokes about "Pushkin for President." Connections made by commentators like Surat between Pushkin and NATO showed the continued power of Pushkin as a symbolic stand-in for Russian authority and identity. While this made Pushkin fertile ground for jokes, as in the Soviet period, some people clearly continued to take this relationship seriously. How could irony and sincerity coexist?

In a discussion of another of Leonid Parfenov's 1990s television projects, *Old Songs about the Main Things*, in which contemporary pop and rock stars performed affectionate but lightly ironic covers of Soviet hits, Lipovetsky writes that such cultural products offer a "soft and inviting" irony.<sup>210</sup> Ironic nostalgia was a central cultural mode

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<sup>210</sup> Lipovetsky, "Post-Sots," 357-58.

in the Russian 1990s,<sup>211</sup> allowing a wistful, affectionate reflection on lost time—youth, utopian aspirations, universal employment—that also acknowledged the suffering and repression of the Soviet period. Khrushchev’s Thaw and Brezhnev’s Stagnation had combined to produce an exceptional outpouring of ironic and satirical literature and film in the 1970s, a time of lost illusions and lowered stakes for dissidence. While some of this was unpublishable, much of it was gentle enough to pass the censors.<sup>212</sup> This age of irony bubbled back to the surface in the 1990s; many cultural products of the 1970s (Dovlatov, for example, and the classic New Year’s film *The Irony of Fate*) have retained their popularity into the present, infused with a new layer of nostalgia. Though Putin has worked intensively to foster the cult of victory in World War II, the 1970s are a much more relevant cultural touchstone in today’s Russia.

But society cannot live on irony alone. It is not a coincidence that the heyday of Soviet irony was the Era of Stagnation. Irony and humor offer comfort and relief, but rousing political speeches are rarely sarcastic or ironic, and social movements need charismatic leaders, not parodists. (That said, it is a telling sign of global disillusionment that comedians have recently found political success in countries such as Iceland, Italy, and Ukraine.<sup>213</sup>) The widespread irony that greeted the Pushkin bicentenary, and that has characterized much of post-Soviet Russian life, is a symptom of cynicism about the

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<sup>211</sup> Ironic nostalgia—notably “Titostalgia”—has also been an important feature of culture in the former Yugoslavia, as shown by Mitja Velikonja, among others.

<sup>212</sup> See Vishevsky and Biggins, *Soviet Literary Culture in the 1970s*.

<sup>213</sup> See Dominic Boyer, “Simply the Best: Parody and Political Sincerity in Iceland,” *American Ethnologist* 40, no. 2, 276-87. Comedian Volodymyr Zelensky, who made his career on mockery of politicians, is now Ukraine’s president-elect.

present, and a lack of hope for the future. The 1899 jubilee elicited a strong negative reaction, but it was one of sincere indignation, not ironic mockery. Those who objected to the government had access to a revolutionary project that would soon defeat the imperial order with its utopian scheme. In 1999, by contrast, there was no clear positive alternative available. In the Soviet Union, the alternative had been capitalist democracy, but by 1999 this already seemed to many people to be a disappointment and a failure. All that remained was irony, nostalgia, or some mixture of the two. In my next chapter, I will explore the implications of this cultural landscape for literary writers.

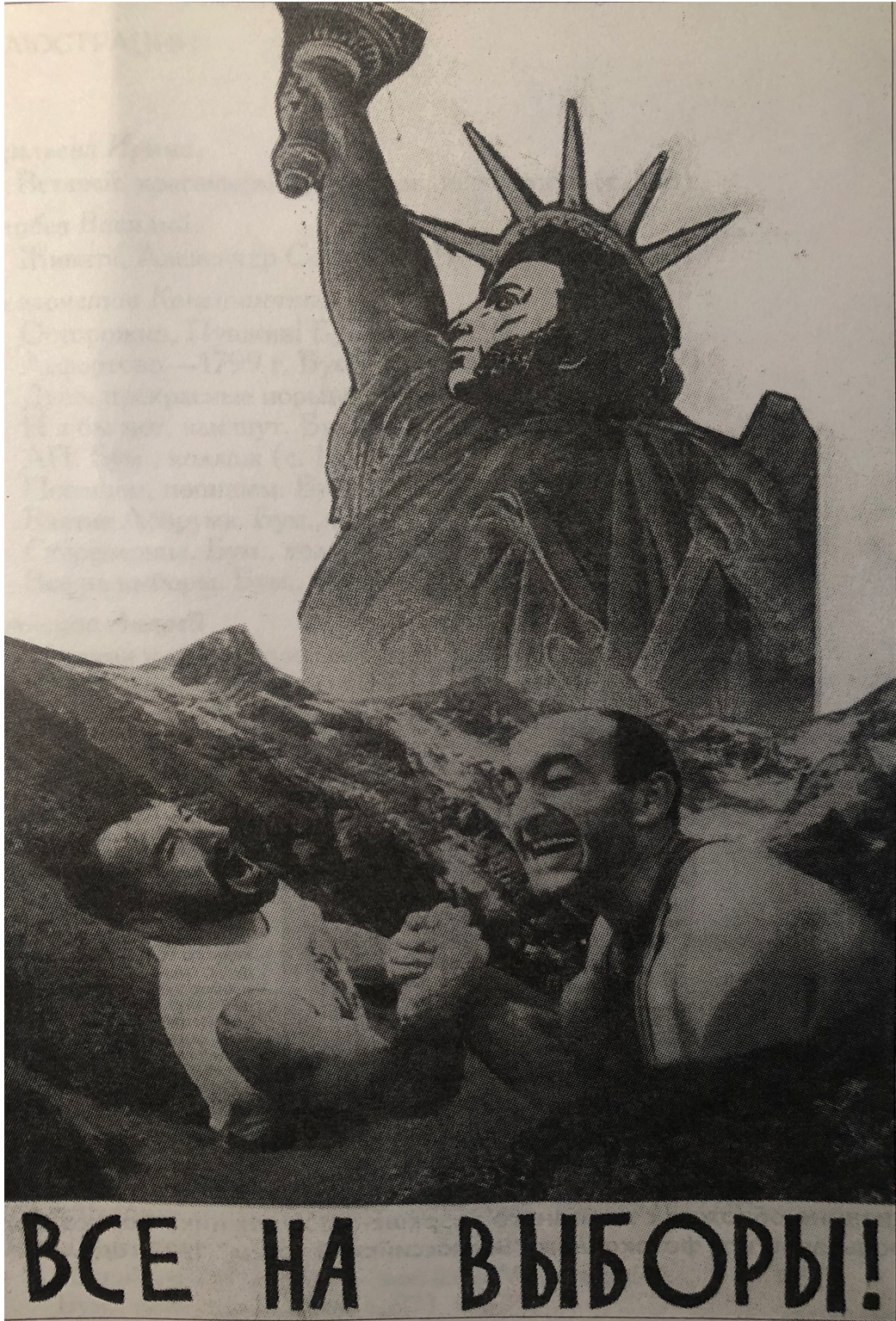


Figure 8: Konstantin Zvezdochetov, "Everyone to the Elections!" from Pushkin's Overcoat

## Chapter 2 Pushkin's Overcoat, Pushkin's Scribes

The strangely postmodern quality of the 1999 Pushkin jubilee did not escape the attention of Conceptualist writers, who had long been engaged in ironic challenges to the literary canon, and who now found that their playing field had been dramatically—perhaps perilously—expanded. Newspaper articles about the jubilee often bore a close resemblance to Conceptualist parodies, and the joking article about Prigov's "literary trial" fit rather seamlessly into real coverage of current events. At the same time, the inadvertent absurdity, the abyss of meaning, of the jubilee threatened to render Conceptualist mockery toothless. It did not require much wit or erudition to mock the official celebrations, with their misquotations, commercialization, and vulgarity. As an apotheosis of the Russian state's approach to high literature in the 1990s, the first post-Soviet decade, the 1999 jubilee crystallized the anxiety and even the despair of many Russian writers, who had watched their cultural stock plummet and who wondered out loud whether there would be any place for them—or for a Pushkin who was more than a cardboard cutout—in the twenty-first century.

So what did Russia's Conceptualists have to offer in Pushkin's jubilee year? One of the most interesting of the vast number of publications issued on the occasion of the jubilee was *Pushkin's Overcoat* [*Shinel' Pushkina*], published in 2000 with the support of George Soros' Open Society Institute, then very active in Russia. The collection includes essays, stories, poems, and drawings by Dmitrii Prigov, Timur Kibirov, Mikhail Berg, Viktor Erofeev, Andrei Zorin, Vladlen Gavril'chik, and Mikhail Novikov. With the exception of Zorin, an academic, all of the contributors had been underground writers



during the Soviet Union, unable to publish their work. Several of them—notably Prigov, Kibirov, and Erofeev—achieved remarkable success as post-Soviet writers, influencing a new generation (Prigov was a kind of godfather to Pussy Riot<sup>214</sup>, as well as an important influence on countless younger writers and performance artists), winning awards, and, especially in the case of Erofeev, accruing large amounts of capital in Russia’s new cultural ecosystem. *Pushkin’s Overcoat* uses Conceptualist techniques to explore the new dilemma of post-Soviet writers engaging with Pushkin as a cultural symbol: iconoclasm had lost much of its thrill, and yet the Pushkin cult and the mindless state-sponsored worship of the Russian canon still exerted a stultifying influence on Russian culture. In this chapter, I will examine contributions to *Pushkin’s Overcoat* by Kibirov, Prigov, and Novikov, analyzing their ambivalent attitudes towards questions of intertextuality, influence, and cultural authority in the context of the 1999 Pushkin jubilee.

The collection’s title embodies the contributors’ playful, allusive approach to their subject, or supposed subject. The phrase “Pushkin’s Overcoat” evokes Gogol’s classic short story “The Overcoat” (*Shinel’*, 1842), about a poor government clerk whose quest for a new overcoat ends in his own death, due in no small part to the callousness and absurdity of the Russian bureaucracy. “The Overcoat” has been extremely influential, and the oft-quoted phrase “We all come out of Gogol’s overcoat” is sometimes attributed to Dostoevsky. While Gogol was never made into the hero of a politicized cult, as Pushkin was, he approaches Pushkin in his influence on Russian literature. The two writers are

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<sup>214</sup> See Masha Gessen, *Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2014), 36-38; Ivan Nechepurenko and Melissa Gomez, “Pussy Riot Members Detained After Running Onto Field at World Cup Final, Police Say,” *New York Times*, July 15, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/15/sports/soccer/pussy-riot-world-cup-final.html>. Accessed on Feb. 1, 2019.

sometimes viewed as the progenitors of two diverging lines in Russian literature.<sup>215</sup> The phrase “Pushkin’s Overcoat” thus evokes the “Pushkinian line” as well as the kind of ludicrous misattribution that delighted the Conceptualists, and that characterized the 1999 Pushkin jubilee, during which one might not have been surprised to hear references to “Pushkin’s famous story, ‘The Overcoat.’” In fact, during the jubilee a television reporter did announce, “As is well known, Pushkin said that ‘we have all come out from under Gogol’s overcoat.’”<sup>216</sup> On a much subtler level, the title evokes the phrase “overcoat poet” [*shinel’nyi poet*], which the poet Petr Viazemskii used teasingly in an 1831 letter to Pushkin about Pushkin’s financial anxieties; this expression referred to hapless people who composed solemn odes and presented them to their superiors in hope of acquiring a patron.<sup>217</sup> The derisive phrase brings to mind the literary hackwork generated by financial desperation, and is in keeping, as we will see, with the often self-deprecating and cynical attitude to literary production taken by the contributors to *Pushkin’s Overcoat*. The collection’s title, then, combines the concepts of the all-encompassing influence of literary forefathers (“we all come from Pushkin’s overcoat”) and the financial and social vulnerability of the writer, who is easily reduced to groveling. Finally, the collection’s title might be a reference to the overcoat onto which Pushkin fell after he was fatally

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<sup>215</sup> On Gogol’s influence and his relationship with and to Pushkin, see Andrew Kahn, Mark Lipovetsky, Irina Reyfman, and Stephanie Sandler, “Case Study: Nikolai Gogol,” in *A History of Russian Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 378-382, and Edyta Bojanowska, “Equivocal Praise and National-Imperial Conundrums: Gogol’s ‘A Few Words About Pushkin,’” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 51, nos. 2-3 (2009), 177-201.

<sup>216</sup> Valentin Nepomniashchii, “Iubileinye obryvki,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 1 (2000), 59.

<sup>217</sup> *Perepiska A.S. Pushkina*, vol. 1. Edited by T.Iu. Lovetskaia (Moscow, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1982)  
[http://az.lib.ru/p/pushkin\\_a\\_s/text\\_1836\\_perepiska\\_s\\_vyazemskim\\_olderfo.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/p/pushkin_a_s/text_1836_perepiska_s_vyazemskim_olderfo.shtml). Accessed on Feb. 1, 2019.

wounded in his duel with d'Anthès.<sup>218</sup> The idea of killing Pushkin appears repeatedly in the collection, which is preoccupied with the idea of literary iconoclasm. At the same time, the collection deals with the idea of the death of the writer on a more abstract level, as in Prigov's "sacred" rewritings, discussed below.

Many of the works included in *Pushkin's Overcoat* had been written and/or published years earlier, but their selection and inclusion indicate that their authors considered them of particular relevance at the time of the Pushkin jubilee. The vintage of the early works becomes a subject of discussion in essays by Zorin and Novikov (which were written specially for *Pushkin's Overcoat*), where they are used to underscore the crisis of the writer in the post-Soviet context, and the much greater ease of writing (if not publishing) about Pushkin and his cult before the end of the Soviet Union. The "recycling" of the texts, meanwhile, resonates in interesting ways with questions raised within the texts about literary "recycling" and the ways in which the meaning of a text can be transformed with the passing of time. Finally, the older texts highlight the dramatic difference in the status of their authors by the time of republication, when underground writers had come out into the light.

Timur Kibirov (born 1955) began his literary career as an underground poet at the end of the 1980s, when he was associated with Prigov, Lev Rubinshtein, and other Conceptualist and postmodern writers. In the 1990s, Kibirov emerged as one of Russia's

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<sup>218</sup> According to a key early account of the duel by Auguste d'Archiac, d'Anthès's second in the duel, "Mr. Pushkin was wounded, which he declared himself as he fell on the overcoat that marked the barrier; he remained still, his face to the ground." Translated from the French by Irina Reyfman in her article "Death and Mutilation at the Dueling Site: Pushkin's Death as a National Spectacle," *Russian Review* 60 (2001), 77.

most famous and popular poets. His work often relies on surprising combinations of high style and laughably mundane detail; it belongs not only to Conceptualism but also to the sentimental variety of neo-Romanticism, which values compassion, tenderness, and humor in the face of dehumanizing conditions.<sup>219</sup> Kibirov's poetry is distinguished by good-natured but insistent irony, parody and pastiche, and a dense interplay of allusions to a wide range of literary works, songs, slogans, and other cultural phenomena. At the same time, he often imagines a world free of endless self-referentiality, in which one could write unselfconsciously about a cherry tree or a full moon and trust that the reader would embrace these words and images as fresh ones.<sup>220</sup> Pushkin has been an essential point of reference throughout his career—as the ultimate symbol of the Russian poetic canon, but also as a source of inspiration.<sup>221</sup>

Kibirov's contribution to *Pushkin's Overcoat* opens with "Russian Song: Prologue," which was originally published in his 1989 collection *Santimenty* (131). (The title is an ironic, mangled word that indicates an embarrassing sentimentality.) The poem's acute intertextuality, typical of Kibirov's work, acquires additional significance in the context of the intensely, though often inadvertently, intertextual Pushkin jubilee. (Recall the PR agency claim that Pushkin posters with Nekrasov and Lermontov quotes aimed to create the "atmosphere of the time when the great poet lived" through a "chain

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<sup>219</sup> Kahn et al, "Neo-Romanticism," in *A History of Russian Literature*, 599-605.

<sup>220</sup> See, for example, his 1999 poem "Postmodernistskoe," in *Stikhi o liubvi* (Moscow: Vremia, 2009), 386-87.

<sup>221</sup> On Kibirov and Pushkin, see Claudia Scandura, "Pushkinskie motivy v tvorchestve Timura Kibirova," in O.B. Lebedeva (ed.), *Pushkin i vremia* (Tomsk: Izdatel'stvo Tomskogo universiteta, 2010), 267-286.

of associations.”<sup>222</sup>) The same is true of the poem’s take on the fatherland, a subject of much attention in all Pushkin jubilees and a particularly contentious one, as I have shown, in 1999. “Russian Song: Prologue” demands to be read alongside the many texts to which it refers; the reader who misses the allusions will find much of the poem’s meaning unavailable. “Writing between the lines” was a technique refined under censorship,<sup>223</sup> and in principle, it would no longer have been necessary in 1989, when the Soviet censorship apparatus had collapsed. But for Kibirov, it serves a dual function. On one hand, it suggests that at the end of the twentieth century, new Russian writing can never achieve any meaningful innovation: whether intentionally or inadvertently, it is always entangled in a complex system of literary and cultural influences and references that keep it from moving forward. (Not all of these references are Russian; Kibirov also reminds us of the influence of foreign writers on Russian literature.) On the other hand, Kibirov’s allusions are witty, tender, and often funny, evidence of his own deep affection for the poetry of the past. They offer the reader the chance to take a delightful stroll through literary history.

“Russian Song: Prologue” begins with a direct quotation from an 1817 poem, “The Shade of a Friend” (*Ten’ druga*) by Pushkin’s older contemporary Konstantin Batiushkov (1787-1855): “I was leaving the foggy shore of Albion” [*Ia bereg pokidal tumannyi Al’biona*]. By opening with a quotation from a great poet of Pushkin’s period who never achieved cult status, Kibirov perhaps tries to draw attention to the many

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<sup>222</sup> “Na chto podniali ruku,” *Kommersant*, June 5, 1999.

<sup>223</sup> On “writing between the lines,” see Lev Loseff, *On the Beneficence of Censorship* (München: Sagner, 1984).

writers who are never transformed into cultural heroes. And yet, as if to show us that Pushkin is indeed inescapable, the poem soon moves to a much less obvious reference to Pushkin's 1830 lyric "You quit foreign lands/For the shores of your distant fatherland" [*Dlia beregov otchizny dal'noi/Ty pokidala krai chuzhoi*], which itself echoes Batiushkov's poem. Kibirov's line "Like some Childe Harold in illegal sadness" [*Kak nekii Chail'd-Garol'd v pechali bezzakonnoi*] seems a nod to the third line of Pushkin's poem, "In an unforgettable moment, in a sad moment" [*V chas nezabvennyi, v chas pechal'nyi*], because of the *pechal' /pechal'nyi*, the Childe Harold reference (reminding us of Pushkin's obsession with Byron, the king of Romanticism), and the resonance of "bezzakonnyi" and "nezabvennyi." Of course, the idea of "illegal sadness" is ridiculous, unlike Pushkin's straightforward words. It suggests Soviet attempts to regulate human feelings—a central preoccupation of neo-Romanticism.

Batiushkov's lyric was written in memory of a friend killed in battle in Leipzig; Pushkin's was written in memory of one of his Odessa lovers, Amalia Riznich, who died after returning to her native Italy. Both poems, then, are concerned with departure and with the death of a loved one. Pushkin's refers to a woman's return to her fatherland; Batiushkov describes standing on the ship's deck, consumed by memories (presumably happy ones involving his friend) of time spent "beneath the sweet skies of the fatherland" [*Pod nebom sladostnym otecheskoi zemli*], and by dreams about his friend's "shade," which he calls "unforgettable" [*nezabvennyi*], going to the "heavenly fatherland" [*nebesnaia otchizna*].

Like Pushkin and Batiushkov, Kibirov is concerned with a process of travel and transition, a liminal state. But Kibirov's positioning of his fatherland and lost loved one is

sharply ironic, especially in relation to these two intertexts. Kibirov's first stanza reads, in full:

Я берег покидал туманный Альбиона.  
Я проходил уже таможенный досмотр.  
Как некий Чайльд-Гарольд в печали беззаконной  
Я озираю аэропорт.

I was leaving the foggy shore of Albion.  
I was already going through customs.  
Like some kind of Childe Harold, in a state of illegal sadness  
I looked around the airport. (131)

The grand opening of the Batiushkov quote is deflated by the banal, plain sentence that follows it. The romance of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron's 1812-1818 narrative poem about a melancholy young man traveling the world, would be lost in an era of easy air travel; how could Childe Harold pass through an airport customs line and emerge with his brooding, petulant heroism intact? Kibirov's use of a poetic, obsolescent word, *oziral*, for "looked around" is absurd and comical when used in reference to an airport.

The next stanza makes it clear that Kibirov is not happy to be returning to his fatherland, Russia, and also that he sees little space in modern Russia for the Romanticism that suffused the poetry of Batiushkov and Pushkin:

Покуда рыжий клерк, сражаясь с терроризмом,  
Денискин «Шар» шмонал, я бросил взгляд назад  
Я бросил взгляд вперед, я встретил взгляд Отчизны,  
И взгляд заволокла невольная слеза.

While the ginger clerk, battling terrorism,  
Shook out Deniska's "Balloon" [a Soviet children's book], I gazed back  
I gazed ahead, I met the gaze of the Fatherland,  
And the gaze was clouded by an unwilling tear. (131)

The heroic battles of Batiushkov and Pushkin's days have been replaced by routine searches conducted by clerks under fluorescent lights. (It is ambiguous whether the

“ginger clerk” is a British customs officer or a Russian one—the search might be a security check, or a Soviet-style full-on search. I suspect that the ambiguity is intentional, meant to underscore the poem’s focus on the speaker’s liminal state.) There is no joy in the speaker’s return to his native land: the absence of a possessive pronoun before the final “gaze” makes it amusingly ambiguous whether the tear is clouding the eye of the speaker or of his Fatherland, which is less than happy to see him—or perhaps displeased to see him leaving England so regretfully.

In the subsequent stanzas, we discover the identity of the “beloved” when the speaker bids a dramatic farewell to his “love”—“Britannia,” whom he implores to remember him. He also “bows” to the Hills of Annesley, topic of a brooding 1805 lyric by Byron,<sup>224</sup> thereby expressing his affection for the English literary canon as well as for the British lands. Such an unpatriotic statement was anathema to Soviet ideology, of course, but it took on an additional irony at the time of the Pushkin jubilee, which was intended to celebrate Russian devotion to Pushkin and to immortal, uniquely Russian culture and identity.

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<sup>224</sup> Byron’s “Fragment written shortly after the Marriage of Miss Chaworth” resonates in obvious ways with Batiushkov and Pushkin’s poems:

1. Hills of Annesley, Bleak and Barren,  
Where my thoughtless Childhood stray'd,  
How the northern Tempests, warring,  
Howl above thy tufted Shade!
2. Now no more, the Hours beguiling,  
Former favourite Haunts I see;  
Now no more my Mary smiling,  
Makes ye seem a Heaven to Me.



But Kibirov complicates this irony with two more literary quotations in quick succession. “Hills of Annesley” begins a new stanza of which the subsequent line, “My soul is dark” [*Dusha moia mrachna*] is a quotation from Lermontov’s 1836 poem “Hebrew Melody: From Byron” [*Evreiskaia Melodiia: Iz Bairona*]<sup>225</sup>—itself a loose translation of Byron’s 1815 poem “My soul is dark,” which was inspired by Ossian, the Scottish Gaelic bard popularized by eighteenth-century Scottish poet James MacPherson.<sup>225</sup> MacPherson’s translations of Ossian’s ancient epic poems became wildly popular throughout Europe, were widely translated, and became an important inspiration for the Romantic search for national bards and folkloric traditions. Disputes from the time of first publication about the authenticity of Ossian’s epics did not detract from their popularity; it is now generally agreed that MacPherson wrote the poems based on authentic folklore he had collected.<sup>226</sup> Embedded in Kibirov’s intertext, then, are the origins of the Romantic tradition of the national bard; this Romantic tradition was often rooted in heavily manipulated or simply “fakelore.” Kibirov’s point is subtle but clear: national poetic traditions are invented ones. (The Ossian hoax holds obvious appeal for Conceptualists, who are very much interested in the idea of authenticity.) Pushkin was among those inspired by the romantic folklore movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. His 1835 “Songs of the Western Slavs” is a translation of “The Guzla or Selected Illyrian Poetry Collected in Dalmatia, Bosnia, Croatia, and Herzegovina,” an anonymous collection published in French in 1827. When he made his translation,

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<sup>225</sup> Ossian’s influence on Byron is noted in George Gordon Byron, *Poetical Works of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1904). vol. III, 389 nn 2.

<sup>226</sup> See Dafydd Moore (ed.), *The International Companion to James MacPherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2017).

Pushkin believed that he was translating a French translation of authentic Slavic folklore. In fact, he was translating “fakelore” composed by French writer Prosper Mérimée. When Mérimée confessed to the hoax in a letter to one of Pushkin’s friends, Pushkin, a postmodernist *avant la lettre*, did not discard his translation; instead, he published Mérimée’s letter along with his own poem cycle.<sup>227</sup>

Kibirov next offers the English original of the phrase “My soul is dark.” This second line of the stanza is completed with the Russian line “Now, singer, faster!” [*Skorei, pevets, skoree!*], another direct quotation from Lermontov’s loose translation of Byron. Byron’s original is sandwiched in Lermontov’s translation; the original kernel grows outward as it is absorbed and transformed. Kibirov’s mixture of quotation and allusion, along with his insistence on linking great Russian poets to their English inspirations, is a playful way of pointing to the transnational nature of poetic tradition. As we have seen, national canons and writer cults tend to form around an idealized image of national identity, meaning that the focus must always lie on the uniquely Russian (or French, or English) nature and roots of the hero-writer. The national poet is expected to find inspiration in his own land, his native language, his own people and their folk traditions. While canons like to feel that they exert some influence abroad, they spend most of their time at home. Kibirov’s intertextual methods, by contrast, force the reader to examine the webs of influence, inspiration, and reference that connect writers of many countries. His method implicitly rejects the jingoistic aspects of writer cults that were so painfully evident during the 1999 Pushkin jubilee.

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<sup>227</sup> See Michael Wachtel, *A Commentary to Pushkin’s Lyric Poetry, 1826-1836* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 279.

The final lines of the poem take a different tack, complicating Kibirov's earlier depiction of an unhappy return to Russia.

Опять ты с Ковалем напился допьяна.  
Я должен жить, дыша и большевея.  
Мне не нужна

Страна газонов стриженных и банков,  
Каминов и сантехники чудной,  
Британия моя, зеленая загранка,  
Мой гиннес дорогой!

Again you and Koval<sup>228</sup> have gotten drunk.  
I must live, breathing and bolshevizing,  
I don't need

A country of trimmed lawns and banks,  
Fireplaces and bizarre plumbing,  
My Britannia, green trip abroad,  
My dear Guinness! (131)

Byron's poem "My soul is dark" concerns the power of music and poetry to relieve sadness: at the sound of the bard's harp, Byron writes, "If in these eyes there lurk a tear, / 'Twill flow, and cease to burn my brain." Lermontov's call to the bard seems to provoke the speaker's thoughts of getting drunk with his Russian poet friend (an occasion which would likely include both music and tears). The friendship that features so prominently in Batiushkov's "The Shade of a Friend" has finally appeared in Kibirov's own poem—friendship with an actual person rather than a love for "Britannia." Intense poetic friendships were an important part of life and work for Byron, Pushkin, and Kibirov alike; we glimpse a thread of shared practice that crosses the boundaries of country, language, and time.

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<sup>228</sup> Koval' is presumably Viktor Stanislavovich Koval', a writer who was a member of the "Al'manakh" group of poets, which also included Kibirov, Prigov, and Rubinshtein.

“Breathing and bolshevizing” is yet another direct quotation, this time from Mandelstam’s 1935 poem “Stanzas” (*Stansy*, beginning, “I do not want, among pampered youths,” “*Ia ne khochu sred’ iunoshei teplichnykh*”) written during his exile in Voronezh. As he struggles to reconcile himself to exile and remembers his time in Cherdyn,<sup>229</sup> Mandelstam’s speaker thinks of Moscow, his “sister,” imagining the city “greeting her brother at the airport.” Kibirov’s airport has new resonance. Mandelstam imagines returning to Moscow, and then expresses a highly ambivalent attitude to his country and to his poetic vocation: “My country spoke with me,/Indulged me, scolded me, didn’t read me through” [*Moia strana so mnoiu govorila,/Mirvolila, zhurila, ne prochla*]. After a few more lines, Mandelstam proclaims,

Я должен жить, дыша и большевея,  
 Работать речь, не слушаясь — сам-друг, —  
 Я слышу в Арктике машин советских стук,  
 Я помню все  
 [...]
 И не ограблен я, и не надломлен,  
 Но только что всего переогромлен...  
 Как Слово о Полку, струна моя туга,  
 И в голосе моем после удушья  
 Звучит земля — последнее оружие —  
 Сухая влажность черноземных га!

I must live, breathing and bolshevizing,  
 To work at speech, not listening—together with someone,  
 In the Arctic I hear the knocking of Soviet machines,  
 I remember everything  
 [...]
 And I am not robbed, and not broken,  
 Only huger than huge...  
 Like Igor’s Lay, my string is taut,  
 And in my asthmatic voice

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<sup>229</sup> Cherdyn is the town in the Perm region to which Mandel’shtam was sent during his first exile; he attempted suicide there.

You can hear the earth—the last weapon—  
Dry moisture of hectares of black earth!<sup>230</sup>

This last intertext is the most interesting of all in relation to the concept of the literary canon and writer cults. Although Mandelstam narrates the abuses visited on him by the Soviet state, he also makes it clear that his work as a poet cannot be separated from his native land. His country spoke with him as he grew up, and ignited a fire—presumably one of poetic inspiration—in him. In the last stanza, he likens his bard’s “string” to the *Lay of Igor’s Campaign*, one of the earliest Slavic epic poems, establishing a direct line from the origins of Russian literature to his own poetry. He has nearly been suffocated, but he insists that he will continue to live and breathe—breath being strongly associated with poetic inspiration and expression. The sound of the fertile, though also menacing, black earth is still present in his nearly extinguished voice; the earth is “the last weapon.” Mandelstam was certainly no nationalist or Russian literary chauvinist; allusions to classical literature, for example, permeate his work. His attitude to soil and land in his Voronezh poems is deeply ambivalent, associated with exile and Gulag brutality.<sup>231</sup> But this last stanza does affirm a belief in the unbreakable link between a poet and his country, as well as between a poet and his native literary tradition. By quoting Mandelstam’s line, Kibirov is indirectly explaining why he is returning to Moscow, for all of England’s advantages; Russia is the country that produced his poetry, and the poetic tradition to which he most immediately belongs.

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<sup>230</sup> Osip Mandel’shtam, *Sobranie sochinenii v 4 tomakh*, volume 3 (Moscow: Art-Business-Center, 1994). [https://rvb.ru/mandelstam/01text/vol\\_3/01versus/01versus/3\\_108.htm](https://rvb.ru/mandelstam/01text/vol_3/01versus/01versus/3_108.htm). Accessed January 7th, 2019.

<sup>231</sup> See, for example, “Chernozem” (1935). [https://rvb.ru/mandelstam/01text/vol\\_3/01versus/01versus/3\\_097.htm](https://rvb.ru/mandelstam/01text/vol_3/01versus/01versus/3_097.htm). Accessed March 31, 2019.

At the same time, Kibirov must also have had in mind Mandelstam's 1914 poem "I have not heard Ossian's stories" [*Ia ne slykhal rasskazov Ossiana*] which reflects on the "blissful inheritance" [*blazhennoe nasledstvo*] of "the wandering dreams of foreign singers" [*chuzhikh pevtsov bluzhdaiushchie sny*], asserting the freedom to "disdain deliberately our kin and tiresome neighborhood" [*Svoe rodstvo i skuchnoe sosedstvo/My prezirat' zavedomo vol'ny*].<sup>232</sup> Even when, like Pushkin, the poet is prevented from ever leaving his country's borders, he cannot be confined to his native literature; foreign poets are his "relatives," too. A poet chooses his family, and it may well be a transnational one. The addition of this intertext highlights the push and pull of England and Russia in Kibirov's own poem of the in-between.

Mandelstam's poem is extremely bleak, though threaded with bitter humor. Kibirov's transition in register from the Mandelstam quote to his own flippant final stanza is almost violent, as he jokes about plumbing and professes his love for Guinness beer. (That said, there may be a Mandelstam reference here, as well: Mandelstam writes about some of his preferred foreign libations: Asti Spumante, a sparkling white Italian wine, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and sherry brandy.)<sup>233</sup> Of course, the suffering Kibirov's late Soviet speaker has endured at the hands of the Soviet government can hardly compare to Mandelstam's. And unlike Pushkin, Kibirov is free to visit England, to develop a fondness for a foreign country—and then to return to the country of his native language.

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<sup>232</sup> [https://rvb.ru/mandelstam/dvuhtomnik/01text/vol\\_1/01versus/0065.htm](https://rvb.ru/mandelstam/dvuhtomnik/01text/vol_1/01versus/0065.htm). Accessed March 31, 2019.

<sup>233</sup> See Mandelstam's poems "Ia p'iu za voennye astry," 1931, [https://rvb.ru/mandelstam/dvuhtomnik/01text/vol\\_1/01versus/0175.htm](https://rvb.ru/mandelstam/dvuhtomnik/01text/vol_1/01versus/0175.htm), and "Ia skazhu tebe s poslednei," 1931, [https://rvb.ru/mandelstam/dvuhtomnik/01text/vol\\_1/01versus/0169.htm](https://rvb.ru/mandelstam/dvuhtomnik/01text/vol_1/01versus/0169.htm). Accessed March 28, 2019.

Kibirov, the sophisticated and erudite Conceptualist, mashes up texts with knowledge and purpose, asking readers to consider how poetic influence extends across centuries and across national and linguistic boundaries. When the reader refers back to the originals of the poems Kibirov “samples,” she finds works that share common themes: the pain of losing a loved one, the longing for one’s native land mixed with a desire to escape to a foreign place, and the power of poetry to relieve suffering and bring a kind of immortality. These intertexts form an undercurrent of passionate sincerity that is not immediately evident on the surface of Kibirov’s poem, but that forms an essential part of its meaning.

From this perspective, “Russian Song: Prologue” exhibits the highly ambivalent attitude to the Pushkin cult, and to Russian writer cults more broadly, that characterized much of the intelligentsia and press reaction to the 1999 Pushkin jubilee. In the end, for all his jokes, Kibirov returns to his native land. Over the course of his career, Kibirov worked extensively with foreign poetic texts, but he remained in Russia. Many Russians—including Russian poets like Kibirov—truly do love Pushkin, no matter how absurd or reprehensible they find the Russian state’s manipulation of his image.

The line about Guinness seems to conclude “Russian Song: Prologue” in *Pushkin’s Overcoat*. There follow three other poems: “To Chaadaev,” a single stanza of jokes about the Russian canon, taking its title from Pushkin’s poem of the same title; “Historical-literary triptych” [*Istoriko-literaturnyi triptikh*], a poem from Kibirov’s 1999 collection *Ostrovitianova Street* [*Ulitsa Ostrovitianova*] that playfully addresses the question of whether Pushkin’s wife was guilty of his death; and a longer 1986 poem called “A Lodger’s Christmas Carol” [*Rozhdestvenskaia pesn’ kvartiranta*]. This last

poem is followed by an ambiguous line of asterisks, after which we read lines that seem to fit with “Russian Song: A Prologue,” and that are indeed the second half of that poem as it was published in *Santimenty*. We return to the world of spectacularly mashed-up texts:

Прощай, моя любовь! Прощание славянки,  
Прощай, труба зовет, зовет Аэрофлот.  
Кремлевская звезда горит, как сердце Данко.  
«Архипелаг Гулаг» под куртку ревет.

Goodbye, my love! The farewell of a Slavic woman,  
Goodbye, the horns are calling, Aeroflot is calling.  
The Kremlin star shines like Danko’s heart.  
*The Gulag Archipelago* howls under [my] jacket (136).

With the exception of the children’s story, the allusions in the first half of “Russian Song” were to classic poems. Here we are brought into the world of Soviet sentimentality and kitsch, with the reference to the Russian patriotic song “A Slavic Woman’s Farewell” [*Proshchaniye slavianki*] that was first released in 1912 and gained renewed popularity during both World Wars, though during World War II the lyrics had to be altered to suit Soviet ideology. The song’s lyrics were revised again in 1984, with a sadder and less jingoistic tone.<sup>234</sup> This 1984 version engages, in its watered-down, popular style, with many of the themes we have already seen in “Russian Song: Prologue” and its more elevated intertexts: departure from the fatherland [*otchii krai*], parting gazes exchanged with a loved one, stars, and a plea to be remembered by one’s country. Kibirov’s lines about meeting the gaze of the Fatherland as he departs beloved Britannia gains a new level of irony: he is gently mocking the kitschy, sentimental Russian patriotism of which

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<sup>234</sup> Mikhail Chertok, *Russkii voennyi marsh: K 100-letiiu marsha “Proshchaniye slavianki,”* (Moscow: Kanon+, 2012), 237-240.



“A Slavic Woman’s Farewell” is such a prime example. He cries when he returns, not when he leaves. He is not going to defend Russia in battle; he is catching a flight. All the same, the clichéd language of “A Slavic Woman’s Farewell” is an extreme case of the vitiation of the kind of simple, elemental lyric that lies at the basis of the Russian poetic tradition, and therefore points to the difficulty of writing anything pure, new, sincere.

A reference to Gorky’s famous, pseudo-legendary 1894 story “Danko’s Burning Heart” [*Goriashchee serdtse Danko*], about a brave leader who sacrifices himself for his people, is followed immediately by a reference to *The Gulag Archipelago*, the magnum opus of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, another kind of martyr. The juxtaposition of Gorky, who was celebrated by the Soviets, with Solzhenitsyn, the ultimate Soviet dissident, unites the opposing elements of official and dissident Soviet literature. The Kremlin star—sign of Soviet power—and Gorky stand for the exterior of Soviet life, the state and its “legend.” (It should be noted, however, that after the end of the Soviet Union, the comparison also gestures towards the death of the Soviet state, which, like Danko, has perished, leaving behind only the glowing remnant of itself.) Meanwhile, Solzhenitsyn’s Gulag moans under the surface of Russian history. Official and dissident literature formed a binary system of opposites. Like many other Soviet-era writers who wished to depart from this constrictive, bipolar universe, Kibirov insists that Gorky and Solzhenitsyn are part of a single whole—and that whole includes patriotic kitsch like “A Slavic Woman’s Farewell,” Pushkin, Lermontov, and all the rest.

Kibirov spends two stanzas bidding farewell to English literary places and to King Arthur and his knights: “In the great Fatherland, I will remember/you, Sir Sagramore.” He addresses Russia in English before moving into a long list of nouns: “My native Land,

welcome./Welcome, welcome, store directors and garage directors [*zavmagi i zavgary*]. We are treated to a long procession of professional types (stokers, janitors, foremen, etc.), organizations, and objects (shacks, sleds, streetlights, pharmacies). The hodgepodge seems chosen for sound as much as for meaning, though it has an obvious Soviet proletarian-industrial flavor. Kibirov makes it appear as if Russia is returning to him rather than vice-versa, suggesting that in fact he is welcoming Russia and Russian back into his poetic consciousness—replete with all its ugly but pungent everyday vocabulary (*volochil'shchiki, kochegary, vakhtershi, khlopkoroby, bukhartsy, lachuzhki*, etc.). This is the point at which Pushkin rises to the surface of the poem through direct quotation: from the line “bad-tempered Afghan veterans” to the end of the stanza, Kibirov is quoting *Evgenii Onegin* (chapter 8, stanza 38), with a few small alterations. Used to complete a list teeming with Soviet references, Kibirov’s quotation serves to give a sense that he is extending Russian history and language from Pushkin to his own time, or perhaps that he is moving backwards along the course of Russian history. The intense intertextuality of Russian literature can be dizzying or oppressive at times, but it also offers a thread that guides us along a continuous stream of time. Kibirov’s streetlamps and pharmacies also evoke Blok’s gloomy, extremely famous 1912 poem “Night, street, streetlamp, pharmacy” [*Noch', ulitsa, fonar', apteka*], which comments on the absence of any hope of change or escape. Of course, Blok soon experienced a very dramatic change, the Russian Revolution; at the time Kibirov wrote “Russian Song: Prologue,” Russia was again in the throes of a major transformation.

Kibirov concludes the poem, and his contribution to *Pushkin's Overcoat*, with a borderline sincere reunion with his native land:

Привет, земля моя. Привет, жена моя.  
Пельмени с водочкой—спасибо!..  
Снег грязненький поет и плачет в три ручья,  
И голый лес—такой красивый!

Вновь пред твоей судьбой, пред встречей роковой  
Я трепещу и обмираю.  
Но мне порукой Пушкин твой,  
И смело я себя вверяю!..

Hi, my land. Hi, my wife.  
Pelmeni with vodka—thanks!...  
The dirty snow sings and cries in three streams,  
and the barren forest is so beautiful!

Once again before your fate, before the fateful meeting  
I tremble and swoon.  
But your Pushkin is my surety,  
And boldly I entrust myself to him! (136)

The dramatic “farewell” has been replaced with a casual “hi” [*privet*]. The speaker is ready to be reunited with his country and family, with Russian food and drink. He is ready to find the poetry, pathos, and beauty (as well as humor) in the Russian landscape, bleak though it sometimes seems. Kibirov’s last lines are a variation on the last lines of Tatiana’s letter to Onegin, which the narrator of *Evgenii Onegin* pretends to have translated badly from French: “Your honor is my surety, and boldly I entrust myself to it.” Russia’s Pushkin offers a kind of guarantee—of safety, of quality, of inspiration, of the solidity of the Russian literary tradition—and the speaker is willing to entrust himself again to Pushkin’s Russia, or perhaps to Russian literature. As is typical for him, Kibirov is being ironic and sincere at the same time. Meanwhile, Pushkin’s Tatiana represents purity and sincerity, as opposed to Onegin’s cynicism, but this sincerity is expressed in translation—since Tatiana is more comfortable in French, a supposedly foreign language,

than she is in Russian.<sup>235</sup> Kibirov's concluding quotation thus reminds us of the fact that translation does not preclude sincerity.

In 1987, Mikhail Epstein offered an alternative classification of Kibirov's work as "Postconceptualism," or the "New Sincerity," "an experiment in resuscitating 'fallen,' dead languages with a renewed pathos of love, sentimentality, and enthusiasm, as if to overcome alienation." Epstein explained, "If the absurd dominates conceptualism, postconceptualism moves in the direction of nostalgia: a lyrical intonation absorbs anti-lyrical material, comprised of the wastes from the ideological kitchen, errant conversational clichés and foreign loan words."<sup>236</sup> In "Russian Song: Prologue," Kibirov offers a joyful, tender exploration of the potentially oppressive intertextuality of Russian literature. Over the course of the poem, the narrator's movement—both literal and figurative--enacts his overcoming of alienation from the Russian language and Russian literature and culture, and his lyrical absorption of the anti-lyrical detritus of Soviet mass culture and everyday life. Kibirov's poetry is, of course, vastly more sophisticated and artistic than the television shows of Leonid Parfenov discussed in my previous chapter, but there is certain similarity in their "warm" irony and self-aware nostalgia: two manifestations of Russian "New Sincerity." The term "New Sincerity" was first introduced as a poetic formula by Prigov in 1985.<sup>237</sup> Epstein subsequently identified it as

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<sup>235</sup> One of Alexei Yurchak's examples of "post-post-Communist sincerity" is a young Russian artist's painting of a Pioneer girl reading Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin*, identifying with the pure and sincere Tatiana. Yurchak, "Post-Post-Communist Sincerity: Pioneers, Cosmonauts, and Other Soviet Heroes Born Today," in Thomas Lahusen and Peter H. Solomon, Jr. (eds), *What is Soviet Now? Identities, Legacies, Memories* (Berlin: Verlag, 2008), 264-266.

<sup>236</sup> Epstein, "A Catalogue of New Poetries," 146.

<sup>237</sup> Ellen Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism*.

a tendency that emerged as a response against postmodern absurdity and ridicule. This new sincerity avoided cynicism but did not exclude irony; in fact, it attained a surprising fusion of sincerity and irony, enabled by the use of a “warm” rather than derisive or cutting irony.<sup>238</sup> As Kibirov demonstrates in “Russian Song: Prologue,” the new sincerity offered a promising way forward for post-Soviet writers.



Figure 9: *Having a drink with Pushkin.* Dmitrii Shagin, “Mit’ki i kul’tura,” from *Pushkin’s Overcoat*

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<sup>238</sup> Yurchak, “Post-Post-Communist Sincerity,” 258. For an extensive discussion of Russian “new sincerity” in its literary and extraliterary uses, see Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism*.

Dmitrii Prigov began his artistic career as a sculptor in the 1970s, but he began writing what he later described as Conceptualist poems during the same period. He published a few poems in the USSR and also abroad in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1986 he was sent to a psychiatric hospital, supposedly for posting his “proclamations” on Moscow streets, but probably because he had been publishing abroad. Along with Lev Rubinshtein, Vsevolod Nekrasov, and Vladimir Sorokin, he is at the core of Moscow Conceptualism.<sup>239</sup> His work relies heavily on surprising juxtapositions and reworking of linguistic formulas from Soviet propaganda, Socialist realism, popular culture, and so on.

Prigov’s contribution to *Pushkin’s Overcoat* begins on a more straightforwardly iconoclastic note than Kibirov’s, with a poem from his 1979 collection *Doggerel for Every Day [Virshi na kazhdyi den’]*:

Когда я размышляю о поэзии, как ей дальше быть  
То понимаю, что мои современники должны меня больше,  
чем Пушкина любить  
Я пишу о том, что с ними происходит, или происходило,  
или произойдет--им каждый факт знаком  
И говорю им это понятным нашим общим языком

When I think about poetry and how it will continue,  
I understand that my contemporaries owe me more  
Than love for Pushkin  
I write about what happens to them, or what happened  
Or what will happen—every fact is familiar to them  
And I talk to them in our own shared, understandable language (139)

Here is a familiar complaint about the Pushkin cult, expressed by Mayakovsky, Dovlatov, and many others: why should all of society’s literary interest be focused on a single figure from the past? How can poetry have a future when living poets can never be

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<sup>239</sup> Janecek, *Everything Has Already Been Written*, 102-105, 139.

considered alongside Pushkin? Where is the space in literature for contemporary language, facts, experiences, and ideas?

The next half of this short poem introduces an element of absurdity and doubt:

А если они все-таки любят Пушкина больше, чем меня,  
Так это потому, что я добрый и честный: не поношу его,  
Не посягаю на его стихи, его славу, его честь  
Да и как же я могу поносить все это, когда я тот самый  
Пушкин и есть

But if they still love Pushkin more than me  
Then it's because I am kind and honest: I don't vilify him,  
I don't encroach on his poems, his fame, his honor  
Well and how could I vilify all this, when I am that very Pushkin

Under the patently ridiculous pretense that he could make Russians love him more than they love Pushkin, the speaker claims that he has refrained from making this happen because of his respect for Pushkin's work and reputation; despite his resentment of Pushkin's status, which leaves so little room for other Russian poets, he will not make any attempt on it. Why? Because he *is* Pushkin. In this final line, we see that not only does the Pushkin cult suck the air out of contemporary Russian literature; in fact, the influence and myth of Pushkin is so all-encompassing that every Russian writer's identity is consumed into Pushkin's own identity—a new twist on Apollon Grigor'ev's famous declaration, "Pushkin is our everything."

Prigov's next poem, from the 1981 collection *Terrorism with a Human Face*, continues in the tradition of Pushkin iconoclasm, taking on Moscow's Pushkin statue:

Вот бронзовый, Пушкин, и глупый стоишь  
А был уж как хитрый ты очень  
А я вот живой, между прочим  
А я вот по улице Горького  
Гуляю и думаю: Ишь!  
Забрался на цоколь гранитный

Поэзией руководишь!  
А вот как ужасную бомбу  
На город Москву опустить  
Погибнут тут все до единого  
И некем руководить

Here you stand, Pushkin, bronze and stupid  
Although you were once very cunning  
And I am alive, by the way  
And I walk along Gorky Street  
Thinking: Look!  
You climbed up on that granite plinth  
You're the poetry boss!  
And what if a terrible bomb  
Released on the city of Moscow  
Every last person here will be killed  
And there will be no one left to boss around (139)

This poem is clearly in dialogue with Mayakovsky's 1924 "Jubilee Poem," with its repudiation of the dead image of the poet on its pedestal and the preference for the living poet who is still able to speak. But while Mayakovsky invited Pushkin to come down from his pedestal and have a chat, Prigov imagines the total destruction of Moscow. Pushkin's "stupid" statue directs the course of Russian poetry from on high, but soon there will be no one left to follow his instructions; there will be no more Russian poetry.

Though Prigov wrote the ironically eschatological "Here you stand" before the end of the Soviet Union, it resonates with the concerns about the survival of Russian literature that were, as we have seen, at the forefront of discussions of the 1999 Pushkin jubilee, which is no doubt part of the reason Prigov chose to include this poem in *Pushkin's Overcoat*. What sounded scandalous in 1979 or 1981, when one could still get in trouble for mocking Soviet sacred cows, has a tinge of sadness in 1999, when the cultural prestige of literature itself was on the wane. The Pushkin statues were still standing—but would they outlive the Russian poetic tradition? While Mayakovsky was



able to offer swaggering promises of a new poetic world motivated by revolutionary politics, Prigov does not have the backing of a utopian political project; he has only the relics of the old world and the threat of annihilation. Conceptualism is the movement of an exhausted civilization, a shifting collage that draws on a vast archive of references, an intertextual hall of mirrors. The past is enormous and dead, while the future threatens to be nothing but a series of inside jokes.

Another poem, also written in the 1970s or 80s, continues the theme of Pushkin's image enduring while his poems disappear:

Внимательно коль приглядеться сегодня  
Увидишь, что Пушкин, который певец  
Пожалуй, скорее что бог плодородья  
И стад охранитель, и народа отец

Во всех деревнях, уголках бы ничтожных  
Я бюсты везде бы поставил его  
А вот бы стихи я его уничтожил —  
Ведь образ они принижают его

Today, if you look closely,  
You see that Pushkin, who is a singer  
Is probably more of a fertility god  
And keeper of the flock, and father of the people

In all the villages and insignificant corners  
I would put his busts everywhere  
And I would eradicate his poems  
After all, they diminish his image (140)

Here, again, is a criticism of the idea that Pushkin's image—both in terms of literal statues, busts, etc. and in terms of his biographical myth, his cult identity—will fully replace his poetry, the original (or ostensible) reason for his cult status. There is obvious resonance with the criticisms of the 1999 jubilee's preference for image over substance. As Andrei Zorin remarks in his introduction to *Pushkin's Overcoat*, this stanza bears at

least a superficial resemblance to the standard “academic phobia,” as Zorin calls it, of the privileging of Pushkin’s personal life over his writing (7).

In the first poem in the selection, Prigov suggested that every Russian poet is Pushkin, making it impossible to overcome the ur-poet’s primacy. In the tenth short poem included, he offers another idea: that everyone is guilty of Pushkin’s death:

Кто выйдет, скажет честно:  
Я Пушкина убил! –  
Нет, всякий за Дантеса  
Всяк прячется: Я, мол  
Был мал!  
Или: Меня вообще не было!

Who will come out and say honestly:  
I killed Pushkin!—  
No, everyone hides  
Behind d’Anthès: I, they say,  
I was little!  
Or: I didn’t exist at all! (141)

The poem then switches from verse to prose, as if the poetic form has collapsed or lost its utility:

Один я честно выхожу вперед и говорю: Я! я убил его во исполнение предначертания и вящей его славы! а то никто ведь не выйдет и не скажет честно: Я убил Пушкина! – всяк прячется за спину Дантеса – мол, я не убивал! я был мал тогда! или еще вообще не был! –один я выхожу и говорю мужественно: Я! я убил его во исполнение предначертаний и пущей славы его!

I alone step forward honestly and say: It was me! I killed him as part of the fulfillment of the plan and of his utmost fame! and after all, no one comes out and says it honestly: I killed Pushkin!—everyone hides behind d’Anthès’ back—they say, I didn’t kill him! I was little then! or I didn’t yet exist at all!—I go out alone and say bravely: It was me! I killed him as part of the plan and for the sake of his fame!

The idea that every person (presumably, every Russian) is guilty of Pushkin’s death is an absurd extension of the already absurd idea, long evident in the Pushkin cult, of Pushkin

as a Christ-like figure who died for Russia's sins. Everyone is guilty but no one will admit it—except the poem's speaker, who boasts about his honesty and bravery in admitting that he was the one. Of course, if everyone is guilty of Pushkin's death, it does not make sense for an individual to admit his own, specific guilt. In fact, it becomes clear that he wants not only to admit culpability but also to claim credit, because Pushkin's premature death in the duel with d'Anthès can be understood retroactively as an essential part of the Pushkin myth. (Could the Pushkin cult have been so successful if Pushkin had died of old age?) Meanwhile, Prigov embeds another literary reference in his "confession": the line "I go out alone" [*odin ia vykhozhu*] evokes Lermontov's classic 1841 poem "I go out onto the road alone" [*Vykhozhy odin ia na dorogu*]. Killing Pushkin is not enough to liberate the speaker from the Russian addiction to canonical references.<sup>240</sup> Instead, he moves along the course of the Russian literary canon, killing Pushkin only to quote Lermontov—himself an inveterate literary collage-maker and reappropriator.<sup>241</sup>

Prigov's selection of poems ends with his 1980 "obituary" of Pushkin, from his series *Obituaries* [*Nekrologi*], which also includes obituaries for Lermontov, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy:

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<sup>240</sup> Jonathan Brooks Platt observes that Prigov's poem offers a reversal of the usual motif, especially prominent in jubilees, of wishing to save Pushkin from his fatal duel. For Platt's discussion of several Prigov poems about Pushkin, see Platt, *Greetings, Pushkin!*, 288-292.

<sup>241</sup> See Mikhail Iampolski, "Lermontovization, or the Form of Emotion," *Russian Review* 75 (April 2016), 220-240. Iampolskii draws on Boris Eikhenbaum's work on Lermontov to show how Lermontov himself created literary "collages" that drew heavily on the work of other poets. This adds another layer to Prigov's affinity for Lermontov; in fact, Lermontov occasionally looked like a proto-Conceptualist.

Центральный Комитет КПСС, Верховный Совет СССР, Советское правительство с глубоким прискорбием сообщают, что 10 февраля (29 января) 1837 года на 38 году жизни в результате трагической дуэли оборвалась жизнь великого русского поэта Александра Сергеевича Пушкина. Товарища Пушкина А.С. всегда отличали принципиальность, чувство ответственности, требовательное отношение к себе и окружающим. На всех постах, куда его посылали, он проявлял беззаветную преданность порученному делу, воинскую отвагу и героизм, высокие качества патриота, гражданина и поэта.

Он навсегда останется в сердцах друзей и близко знавших его как гуляка, балагур, бабник и охальник. Имя Пушкина вечно будет жить в памяти народа как светоча русской поэзии.

The Central Committee of the CPSU, Supreme Soviet of the USSR, and Soviet government announce, with deep sorrow, that on February 10<sup>th</sup> (January 29<sup>th</sup>) 1837, at age 37, the great Russian poet Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin's life was cut short by a tragic duel. Comrade Pushkin A.S. always distinguished himself by his principles, sense of responsibility, and demanding attitude towards himself and those around him. At all the posts to which he was sent, he displayed selfless commitment to the task at hand, valor and heroism in battle, and excellence as a patriot, citizen, and poet.

He will always remain in the hearts of friends and those who knew him well as a playboy, joker, womanizer, and mischief-maker. The name Pushkin will always live in the memory of the people as a luminary of Russian poetry. (143)

This “obituary” parodies the rote nature of Soviet discourse, in which fact became infinitely malleable. Set phrases were applied when they were deemed appropriate to a situation, not because they had any power to describe reality; over time, this process led to the sense that official language had been voided of meaning, that it had become a dead sign or an empty vessel. The first paragraph of Prigov’s “obituary” is ersatz Soviet boilerplate that has very little connection to Pushkin’s biography, poetry, or self-presentation. In the second paragraph, part of the truth seeps through the chinks in the official story; Pushkin was much more a playboy than a heroic soldier or a dutiful patriot.

His identity as a “playboy, joker, womanizer, and mischief-maker” is part of the “taboo Pushkin” who was excised from the government’s cult version.<sup>242</sup>

As Prigov was surely aware, his “obituary” took on a new mordancy after the 1999 Pushkin jubilee, when Irina Surat had described the celebration at the Moscow Pushkin monument as a kind of funeral for the famous statue. The jubilee marked the bicentenary of Pushkin’s birth, presumably a joyful occasion, and yet many observers were more focused on their worry that Russian literature itself was dying. Much of the coverage of the Pushkin jubilee had a whiff of necrology—but it was very often ironic, as well. Prigov’s obituary may have seemed far less shocking and subversive in 2000 than it had in 1980, but its mockery of the banality and distortion of the Pushkin cult remained highly relevant, as evidenced by the 1999 jubilee, and its ironic approach had gone mainstream. The final line of the obituary, meanwhile, gained a new poignancy in a time when people were beginning to worry that, in a post-literary era, even Pushkin’s name might fade into oblivion.

The last of Prigov’s contributions to *Pushkin’s Overcoat* is one of his most famous acts of literary recycling. “Pushkin’s Evgenii Onegin” is presented as a “retyping” of Pushkin’s novel in verse with many of the original words replaced by variants of the words “insane” [*bezumnyi*] and “unearthly” [*nezemnoi*]<sup>242</sup>—words that

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<sup>242</sup> See Igor Pilshchikov, “If Only Pushkin Had Not Written This Filth: *The Shade of Barkov* and Philological Cover-ups,” in Alyssa Dinega Gillespie (ed.), *Taboo Pushkin: Topics, Texts, Interpretations* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 159-184. On Prigov’s obituaries and their relation to Soviet discourse, see Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 266-7. Yurchak argues that Prigov’s obituaries, which circulated in samizdat, “engaged the discontinuities of authoritative [Soviet] discourse...overidentified with the form of authoritative obituary and decontextualized it by mixing it with historical temporalities and references.”

resemble one another in their negated form and constituent letters. The lines are often slightly rearranged to retain the iambic tetrameter and distinctive rhyme scheme of the famous “Onegin stanza.” The even, iconic form combines with the droning repetition of “insane” and “unearthly” to create a hypnotic, dissociative effect. A familiar form is emptied of content while retaining its shape, and very little information is conveyed. Prigov replaces Pushkin’s plot with a delirious mood. The reader grasps at the memory of Pushkin’s original, trying not to become hopelessly distracted by Prigov’s “insane” version. One often dreams of language that is not quite comprehensible, writing that is familiar yet mysteriously inscrutable. In a similar way, Prigov’s lines closely resemble poetry, but the mind cannot quite make sense of what is being said.

Prigov explores the dichotomy between language that conveys content and language that is performative. There is a clear link between Prigov’s “retyping” and his performance of *Onegin*, in which he adopted what he referred to as religious styles: Buddhist, Muslim, Russian Orthodox. In the “Buddhist” style, for example, he delivered the poem in an attenuated, nasal tone reminiscent of mantras or Tuvan throat singing, speeding up as he went along. The famous poem was soon reduced to a series of meaningless twangs and drones.<sup>243</sup> Reduction of Pushkin’s iconic text to an incomprehensible mantra highlights the ritualized, quasi-religious treatment of his work in Russian culture, while also pointing to the ways in which ritualization, overfamiliarity,

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<sup>243</sup> A portion of Prigov’s performance of *Onegin* is available on YouTube: Dimitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov, “The Mantra of Russian Culture—Evgenii Onegin,” Excerpt of Prigov’s lecture to students in the course “New Artistic Strategies,” filmed by Yuliia Ovchinnikova, “Artistic Projects Fund.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aN51oN6k6Is> See also [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2my8S\\_dwZA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2my8S_dwZA). Accessed on January 16, 2019.

can make the meaning of the work unrecognizable—as if it had been written in a foreign language, or as if it were an art form closer to instrumental music than to poetry.

Prigov had first published a portion of “Pushkin’s Evgenii Onegin” in 1998. That edition was presented as the sixth of twelve volumes, of which all the others had purportedly been lost. A short introduction by the author is followed by what appears to be a facsimile of a manuscript produced on a typewriter, like most samizdat manuscripts, complete with lines of mistyped text covered up with lines of x’s—the sort of detail that helped create the special “aura” of samizdat.<sup>244</sup> The front page of the “facsimile” bears the year 1992, when Prigov began composing the work.<sup>245</sup> Mit’ki artist<sup>246</sup> Aleksandr Florenskii’s “drawings in the margin,” which are made to look like the doodles of an idle, playful reader, consist of a friendly cartoon Pushkin, in a frock coat and holding a cane, lifting and replacing his top hat; if you flip through the pages quickly, you see him moving.<sup>247</sup> (Pushkin was himself an energetic doodler, especially when he got stuck on something he was writing.) In striking counterpoint to Prigov’s alienating revision, the illustrations offer the friendly, approachable, charming Pushkin familiar to Russian children.

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<sup>244</sup> On the aura of samizdat, see Ann Komaromi, “The Material Existence of Soviet Samizdat,” *Slavic Review* 63, no. 3 (2004), 597-618, and “Samizdat as Extra-Gutenberg Phenomenon,” *Poetics Today* 29, no. 4 (2008), 629-667.

<sup>245</sup> Iampolski, “Lermontovization,” 220.

<sup>246</sup> For an extensive analysis of the playful, non-conformist Mit’ki art group, see Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 238-243, and Alexandar Mihailovic, *The Mitki and the Art of Postmodern Protest in Russia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018).

<sup>247</sup> Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov, *Faksimil’nye vosproizvedenie samodel’nyi knigi Dmitriia Aleksandrovicha Prigova “Evgenii Onegin Pushkina,” s risunkami na poliakh raboty Aleksandra Florenskogo* (Saint Petersburg: Mitkilibris and “Krasnyi Matros,” 1998).

*Pushkin's Overcoat* is, to my knowledge, the first full publication of Prigov's "Pushkin's Evgenii Onegin," with an introduction (much longer than that in the 1998 edition) in which Prigov discusses the aims of the project—albeit in his usual convoluted, tongue-in-cheek style.<sup>248</sup> He opens by declaring that this may be his "most ambitious project" (149). This may seem surprising: at first glance, the project resembles a practical joke or a Conceptualist one-liner (so to speak) rather than a candidate for a writer's crowning achievement. But we soon come to grasp that the project's ambition must be understood in the context of Pushkin's domination of Russian literary culture, past and present.

Prigov explains that over the course of his career, he has often referred to Pushkin and to *Onegin* in particular; in fact, he found it impossible to avoid writing about Pushkin. This was not because he wished to emphasize his "authorial ambitions," but because he "strove for the best and most intense way of securing readers' attention," which is so sensitive to the stimulation of any cultural memory—and above all to the memory of Pushkin's "crystalline lines and stanzas." In other words, no matter what his intentions or the nature of his project, it was impossible for Prigov to write without making some reference to Pushkin, and without awakening the memory of Pushkin in his readers' minds. While it was impossible to write without Pushkin, to write with Pushkin meant constant danger; it provoked readerly suspicion that Prigov was taking Pushkin's name in vain, engaging in "blasphemy," "mockery," or perhaps even a "direct, conscious degradation of a classic." This caused Prigov to return to his shelves, where, with a sigh of relief, he found everything [i.e., the literary canon] "entirely safe, ready at the first

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<sup>248</sup> Dmitrii Prigov, "Evgenii Onegin Pushkina: Predvedomlenie," *"Shinel' Pushkina*, 149-151.



request to be given to anyone who adored spiritual wholeness and inviolability”

[*dukhovnoi tselostnosti i nezyblemosti*] (149).



*Figure 10: Konstantin Zvezdochetov, “Beware, Pushkin!” from Pushkin’s Overcoat*

The body of “Pushkin’s Evgenii Onegin” offers a potential solution to the quandary that Prigov describes in his introduction. Since allusions to Pushkin are both inevitable and risky, Prigov takes Pushkin’s work whole, moving from the realm of allusion to that of full-on appropriation, which evokes the comforting integrity of the Russian literary canon. Now we understand why Prigov calls “Pushkin’s Evgenii Onegin” his most ambitious project. The contemporary Russian poet presenting his own, new work will only be accused of blasphemy; his sole hope of acclaim lies in a reversion

to the canon that formed long ago, represented first and foremost by Pushkin. Part of Pushkin's cultural cachet lies in his reputation as the (supposed) father of Russian literary language, as someone who created not only new kinds of art, but a new kind of language, and with it a new Russian identity. But now Russian literary culture seems to have reached a creative dead end. Russian poets can only fold themselves back into the canon; the ambitious will simply recreate canonical works.

The idea for "Pushkin's Evgenii Onegin," Prigov explains in his introduction,<sup>249</sup> first came to him in the 1970s, when "the culture of samizdat reigned" in some circles, and was the principal mode of opposition to official culture. Prigov understood that this was not the right time for the project, which would have seemed forced, "immediately legible and predictable" [*srazu prochityvaema i ugadyvaema*]. It would also have been misunderstood: the "translation [*perenesenie*] of the text from the zone of the official to the unofficial" would have been interpreted as a provocation even by liberals "opposed to the official line of the nationalization [*ogosudarstvlivaniia*] of Pushkin" (150).<sup>250</sup> (Though he does not refer to Siniavskii/Tertz or the *Strolls with Pushkin* scandal, Prigov no doubt remembered that as late as 1989, a playful, irreverent "translation" of Pushkin into the unofficial sphere provoked a scandal among those who felt that Siniavskii had taken Pushkin's name in vain.<sup>251</sup>)

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<sup>249</sup> Prigov's introductions are themselves works of literature, with as much irony and playfulness as his poems—they cannot be interpreted as straightforward explanations.

<sup>250</sup> The concept of "nationalizing" Pushkin resonates with 1999 criticisms of the "privatization" of Pushkin discussed in my previous chapter.

<sup>251</sup> On the *Strolls with Pushkin* controversy, see Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, *Abram Tertz and the Poetics of Crime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 29-34; Stephanie Sandler, "Sex, Death and Nation"; and Wendy Slater, "The Patriots' Pushkin."

Still, Prigov adds, there would have been an advantage to publishing the project in the heyday of samizdat: “Pushkin’s *Evgenii Onegin*” would have benefited from the “warm aroma of the samizdat aura,” with its “personal, pleasant, hidden, solitary, non-violent, desired, secret, dangerous, fair, etc.” air (150). This aura of samizdat, Prigov continues, would have permitted many to read *Evgenii Onegin* with fresh eyes, in many cases with a “passionate attention” that a long-familiar canonical work can rarely stimulate. Associating *Onegin* with the secret and the forbidden rather than with the official sphere would have made it, in a certain sense, into an entirely different book. On that level, publication in the 1970s could have accomplished Prigov’s goal of making *Onegin* newly legible through defamiliarization.

The 1990s and their drastic changes, Prigov explains, offered yet another set of possibilities for the work, giving it a primarily “existential” rather than “conceptual, gestural” orientation. As in his introduction to the 1998 publication of a portion of the work, Prigov compares his “retyping” to the ecstatic work of monastic scribes. He pushes the concept of *Onegin* as a “sacred work”—as one of the most important books in Russia’s secular religion—to absurdity, imagining himself as a monk who is copying *Onegin* like scripture. He observes, however, that this comparison that would not have worked just a few years earlier; in the 1990s, his project began to exhibit an unexpected “humility and awe” [*smirenje i blagogovenie*]<sup>1</sup>—two words with strong religious inflections that suggest that the project took on new sacred meaning after the end of the Soviet Union (150).

There are several similarities between medieval scribes and samizdat typists. Both groups of “scribes” often introduced errors; at times they “hypercorrected” the texts

entrusted to them, distorting the original meaning.<sup>252</sup> Their work was laborious, associated with a higher vocation (for the monks a religious one; for the samizdat typists, a political and/or moral one), and a hand-copied manuscript has a special value and aura. So why does Prigov see such a dramatic change in the significance of his project between the 1970s and the 1990s?

The texts circulated in samizdat were the ones that were unpublishable in the Soviet Union; with the possible exception of a handful of “taboo” (mostly obscene) works,<sup>253</sup> Pushkin’s writing was never unpublishable. As a centerpiece of the officially endorsed Russian literary canon, Pushkin’s oeuvre was positioned firmly in the “official” field, no matter how incompatible it may have been with Soviet ideology. Pushkin’s own work was therefore excluded from the realm of samizdat’s special aura. His original manuscripts, of course, were of tremendous value, but the Soviet Union was flooded with cheap editions of Pushkin. When the Soviet Union ended, the polarized landscape of official and unofficial writing disappeared, and the “translation” of Pushkin from the official to the unofficial sphere began to lose its significance. On one hand, as is noted in *Pushkin’s Overcoat*, irreverent treatments of Pushkin lost much of their power as they lost their risk. But the new landscape also opened the door to new approaches to “rewriting” Pushkin. With samizdat removed from the cultural landscape, retyping lost its primarily anti-government aura and reverted to an older, simpler association with the reverent reproduction of “sacred” texts on which everyone can agree; at the same time,

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<sup>252</sup> On monastic scribes, see Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011). On samizdat typists, see Komaromi, “The Material Existence of Soviet Samizdat” and “Samizdat as Extra-Gutenberg Phenomenon,” and Sophie Pinkham, “Zdesizdat and Discursive Rebellion: The Metropol Affair” (*Ulbandus* 17, 2016).

<sup>253</sup> See Pilshchikov, “If Only Pushkin Had Not Written This Filth.”

some former samizdat texts entered the realm of officially recognized great literature, “sacred” literary texts such as Solzhenitsyn or Mandelstam.

Prigov claims to have written his version of *Onegin* as if it had been “recorded from memory, when memory obligingly distorts the text in a way that reflects dominant modern stylistic devices and more frequently used words,” so that when he forgot an “epithet” he replaced it with either “insane” or “unearthly.” The choice of these words was part of his project of “Lermontovizing” and “romanticizing” Pushkin’s text.<sup>254</sup> Canonical texts are imprinted in public memory—at times so effectively that mass-produced books, he playfully suggests, seem extraneous. He explains that the production of “inaccurate handwritten reproductions” is in fact a “well-established tradition with a fully explicable psychological basis and a certain charm,” as it conveys the “author-copyist’s sincerity” while registering “the alienating time distance blocking the [reader’s] ability to read not only each individual word of the original but even its general ideas, having replaced them with more recognizable and understandable ones” (150-151).<sup>255</sup> The reader of such an inaccurate reproduction will not know exactly which words the author intended. But perhaps, Prigov’s argument suggests, that is not of much importance, given that the distance of time makes it increasingly hard to understand even the broader ideas behind and within a text. With each recopying the original is corrupted—but what do small errors mean, when each year that passes makes a work less comprehensible to readers? From a certain perspective, the distortions introduced by

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<sup>254</sup> This concept is discussed at length in Iampolskii, “Lermontovization.” See also David Remnick’s account of a meeting with the merry Prigov and their discussion of his “romanticization” of *Evgenii Onegin* and Stalin’s speeches in Remnick’s *Resurrection: The Struggle for a New Russia* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 229-231.

<sup>255</sup> Translation is from Iampolskii, “Lermontovization,” 221.

copyists—often made in the name of comprehensibility—offer a text’s best hope of surviving in a form legible to the living. This, perhaps, is the source of the “sincerity” that Prigov mentions. With his idea of a post-postmodernist “new sincerity” in mind, we can also see how the postmodernist effort of recopying with “errors” is transfigured into an act of ironic sincerity.

A national literary canon is a form of commemoration, of public memory, driven by many of the same political processes that help erect monuments, establish museums, and celebrate jubilees. Prigov’s introduction nods to this fact, while also noting, in a typically slantwise, ironic way, that memory (whether public or personal) distorts original texts, superimposing its own preoccupations, desires, and prejudices. This process is evident throughout the development of the Pushkin cult, as successive political regimes and literary and historical interpretations sought to “edit” Pushkin’s oeuvre and biography to fit contemporary needs, values, and tastes. This process often erodes the idiosyncrasy of the original, making it less distinctive and more easily palatable to a mass audience; the rough spots are smoothed away. “Pushkin’s Evgenii Onegin” draws attention to this process of revision, presentism, and homogenization by using a (supposed) failure of memory to produce a version of *Onegin* in which the words “insane” and “unearthly” have corroded the text with their numbing repetition, eating away Pushkin’s original words, with their far greater diversity of sound and meaning. It is highly significant that Prigov’s two chosen words are both negative; this process is about taking away, not adding. “Insane” [*bezumnyi*] which appears far more often than “unearthly,” is also notable for its more literal meaning, “without reason”: the workings of public memory can wear away the meaning, reason, and sense of canonical texts.

“Unearthly,” on the other hand, gestures towards the treatment of works like *Evgenii Onegin* as sacred texts written by god-like geniuses.

“Perhaps if our young people,” Prigov’s introduction concludes, “instead of selflessly and unconsciously giving birth to new, inconvertible texts that nobody needs, would turn their attentions to our classics, it would be much more useful for both sides” (151). This is an obvious parody of Soviet official discourse, with its constant references to Soviet youth, its sanctimonious attitude to canonical texts, and its emphasis on social utility. Prigov strips the word “new” of its positive connotations; what is new is useless, as “inconvertible” as Soviet rubles. The only way forward is through the past; copying manuscripts is a more meaningful form of cultural production than the invention of new works. Prigov’s suggestion that new work is useless, and that the only promising avenue of literary labor lies in transcription of “sacred” texts, should not, of course, be taken at face value. Dripping with irony, his introduction demands to be read as a literary text.<sup>256</sup> Nevertheless, he is clearly pointing to the sense—so widely expressed in 1999—of the post-Soviet crisis of Russian literature. At the same time, he shows us how much the meaning of a single text can change with the passage of time, and not only because of sloppy copyists. Older texts slough off meanings with time, as old context and ways of being are forgotten. But texts also acquire new meanings as readers consider them in new cultural and historical contexts. Prigov highlights and valorizes this process through his

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<sup>256</sup> In their discussion of Prigov’s introductions, Mark Lipovetsky and Ilya Kukulín argue that these texts are simultaneously parodic and engaged with “serious reflexive problems.” In 1996, Prigov collected his introductions to various poetry cycles in a single book, a testament to their self-sufficient nature. Mark Lipovetsky and Ilya Kukulín, “The Art of Penultimate Truth,” translated by Alice E.M. Underwood and Jesse Savage (*Russian Review* 75, 2016), 188.

rewriting, which gives tradition a new kind of comprehensibility in terms of both meaning and emotion; his rewriting infuses the aged text with fresh sincerity.

*Pushkin's Overcoat* concludes with a playful essay by Mikhail Novikov (born 1957), a poet, prose-writer, journalist, and critic who died in a car accident in 2000. Novikov wrote under several pseudonyms during his short career. His output included a number of erotic stories published in a paper called *Again* [*Eshche*], which was closed in 1993 after being accused of the dissemination of pornography; he was therefore experienced in falling afoul of even post-Soviet censorship.<sup>257</sup>

“The Insurance Will Not Be Paid Out: In Place of an Afterword”<sup>258</sup> is part essay, part short story. Unlike many of the other works in *Pushkin's Overcoat*, “The Insurance” was clearly written specially for the occasion. It deals directly with a question that pervades the collection as a whole: how can contemporary writers cope with the overwhelming presence of Pushkin?

Novikov opens with an imperative:

*Hussars, not a word about P.*  
*Not a sound.*  
*Not a gesture.*  
*Better nothing at all about P.*

Throughout the essay, Novikov refers to Pushkin as “P” (without a period—the ones above mark the end of lines), though of course it is obvious to whom he is referring. Pushkin becomes like the Jewish “G-d”, whose name is too sacred to be committed to paper, a perishable medium at constant risk of desecration. There is an obvious irony to

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<sup>257</sup> “Mikhail Novikov,” *Laboratoriia fantastiki*, <https://fantlab.ru/autor3094>. Accessed January 20, 2019.

<sup>258</sup> Mikhail Novikov, “Strakhovka ne vyplachivaetsia: Vmesto poslesloviia,” in *Shinel' Pushkina*, 229-234.



applying this religious practice to a writer, whose profession is entirely dependent on paper. Prigov imagined the post-Soviet writer as a scribe copying Pushkin's sacred texts, in an age when mass-produced books and new literature had lost all appeal; Novikov imagines a post-Soviet writer too God-fearing to commit the god-poet's name to paper.

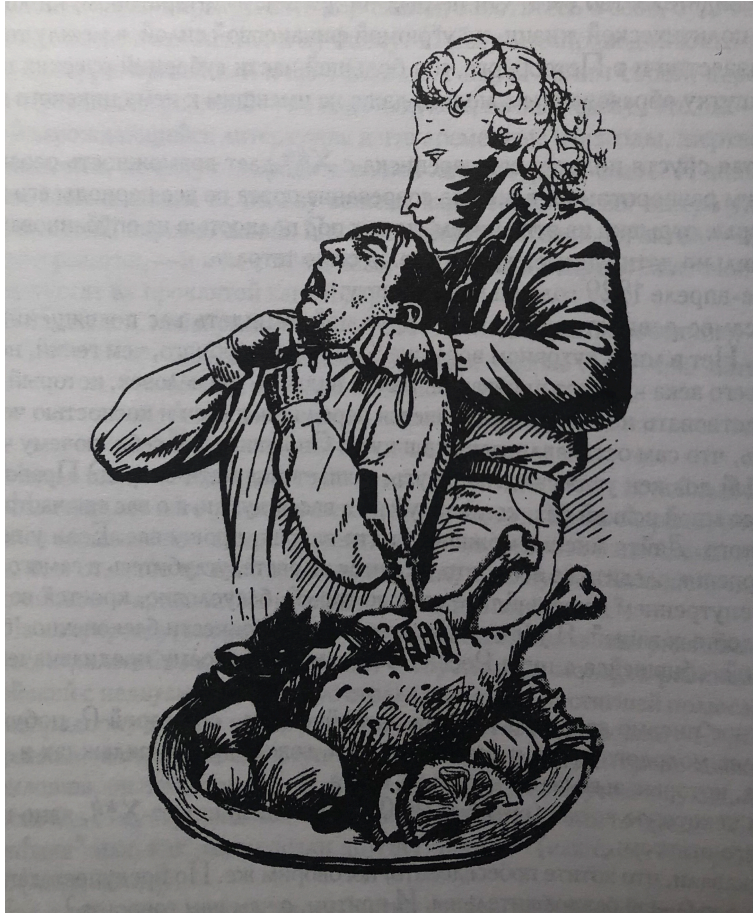


Figure 11: Konstantin Zvezdochetov, “Dushi prekrasnye poryvy”<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> An illustration from *Pushkin's Overcoat*. This is a pun on Pushkin's line from “To Chaadaev” [*K Chaadaevu*], “The soul's wonderful outbursts,” which out of context can also mean “strangle the wonderful outburst.”

Novikov uses a series of encounters to show us why it is better not to mention “P”. A “guru” explains that everything about Pushkin has already been said and written; Novikov feels ashamed at the “little text” [*tekstishko*, one of many dismissive diminutive forms used in the essay] he has already written for the jubilee edition, at the request of his editor. Only a vampire [*upyr*’, a figure from Slavic folklore who rises from the grave at night to drink the blood of people and livestock] can write about Pushkin, Novikov goes on to say, following this statement with a surprising sequence of descriptions: “You know, there are some people who can’t hear the word ‘frost’ without adding ‘and sun.’ Who say “shituation” [*situevina*]. Or “nonsensism” [*erundistika*]. A specific kind of neurasthenia, verbal incontinence.” “Frost and sun” is a reference to Pushkin’s 1829 poem “A Winter Morning,” which begins with those words. “*Situevina*” and “*erundistika*,” on the other hand, are humorous neologisms, the first one a vulgar play on words. The two examples seem quite different, but Novikov characterizes both as “verbal incontinence.” The “frost and sun” example is evidence of an irritating, compulsive need to link everyday speech to canonical texts, to complete the “quotation” whose memory is triggered by the simple noun “frost.” That such a common word would evoke a Pushkin poem is a testament to the overpowering presence of Pushkin’s most famous poems in Russian culture and everyday life. Though the Pushkin poem arrived long after the word “frost” appeared in the Russian language, the noun is retroactively loaded with the Pushkin reference. As Prigov observes in his introduction to “Pushkin’s Evgenii Onegin,” it has become impossible to say anything without making a reference to Pushkin. More broadly, the example points to the hyper-referentiality of Russian literary language, in which no word is innocent of canonical intertexts. Novikov’s next negative example

seems to refer to an entirely different phenomenon: the use of vulgar or silly neologisms. This could point to the degradation or trivialization of language, or to the compulsive need to link one perfectly good word (“situation,” “nonsense”) with others, creating a self-conscious chain of references. As in the “frost” example, simple words can never be left in peace. Compulsive Pushkin-quoters and neologism-spouters are like vampires roaming the countryside, sucking the blood of innocent nouns.

Though Novikov does not mention Siniavskii/Tertz’s *Strolls with Pushkin*, his *upyr’* recalls a passage from that work in which Tertz likens Pushkin himself to a vampire:

Something of the vampire was hidden in so heightened a susceptibility. That’s why Pushkin’s images have such a luster of eternal youth, of fresh blood, high color, that’s why the present manifests itself in his works with such unprecedented force: the whole fullness of existence is crammed into the moment when blood is transfused from random victims into the empty vessel of the one who in essence is no one, remembers nothing, does not love, but only declares to the moment: “You’re beautiful! (You’re full of blood!) stop!—guzzling until he slides off.”<sup>260</sup>

In Tertz’s playful comparison, it is not Pushkin’s work but Pushkin himself who becomes the “empty vessel,” the sign voided of meaning. This emptiness is what makes Pushkin’s work so vital and so varied. Following Prigov’s lead, Novikov looks at this image from another angle: Pushkin has sucked the life out of Russian literature. If Pushkin’s vampiric nature allowed him to express the “whole fullness of existence” of his own time, for Russian writers in the 1990s this vampirism serves to drain the meaning from the present,

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<sup>260</sup> Abram Tertz (Andrei Sinyavsky), *Strolls with Pushkin*, trans. Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy and Slava I. Yastremski (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 83. This passage is also quoted and discussed in Nepomnyashchy, *Abram Tertz and the Poetics of Crime*, 212-13. Tertz’s observation pairs well with Bitov’s emphasis, in “Pushkin’s Photograph (1799-2099),” on the importance of living in the present rather than devoting all of one’s attention to the past and future.

making it impossible to move forward. Of course, like both Prigov and Tertz, Novikov is employing a heavy dose of irony, and I do not mean to suggest that he genuinely believes that Pushkin killed Russian. As with Tertz, Kibirov, Prigov, and many other critics of the government-sponsored Pushkin cult, the true target of these comparisons is the tyranny of the canon, the unhappy position of the living writer, and the burden of postmodern cynicism.

“All this could be called the discourse of the post-Pushkin delirium,” Novikov continues:

This little book [*knizhechka*<sup>261</sup>] that you hold in your hands...collects the remnants, scrapes the bottom of the barrel of the aforementioned discourse. ‘*Sovok* [a pejorative slang term for Soviet culture] has made us monstrously deformed!’ I scream in a falsetto. That damned [*sovok*] has shoved P down our gobs, like some kind of monstrous literary ragout. And now the guys have gone out on the porch to throw up.” (230)

Novikov presents *Pushkin’s Overcoat*, which was published at the dawn of a new millennium and at the beginning of a new political era for Russia, as a pitiful ending. Russian writers have reached the bottom of the Pushkinian barrel, the end of the Pushkinian line. Pushkin was force-fed to generations of Soviet people, and now the only option is to vomit him up. In this formulation, to write about Pushkin—perhaps to write anything at all—can only be a form of logorrhea; no worthwhile literary output can result. On the other hand, perhaps this vomiting up of the Soviet Pushkin is a necessary process as post-Soviet writers strive to free themselves from the oppressive legacy of the Soviet Union and of an all-powerful canon.

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<sup>261</sup> Prigov used the diminutive *knizhechka* to describe his poetry cycles, as Novikov was no doubt aware. Lipovetsky and Kukulin, “The Art of Penultimate Truth,” 188.

“The one terrible thing is that Pushkin has definitely not left us anything to write about,” Novikov complains, in a passage that jokingly links writing for pay to prostitution. “Go ahead, find a loophole! This is what the authors of this collection (offered for your kind consideration) have been doing: they’re trying to find a loophole” (230). Far from presenting *Pushkin’s Overcoat* as a celebration of a beloved author on the occasion of his bicentenary, Novikov depicts the contributors searching for any way to be gainfully employed writers in the interstices of a language and culture that Pushkin has sucked dry. Novikov offers the reader a “small professional secret”: “P” wrote all of Russian literature, from *The Lay of Igor’s Campaign* to *Quiet Flows the Don*—and yet “P” is a forbidden topic. “A good text about P is impossible,” Novikov explains. “A parody of one of P’s texts (or of a text about P) is impossible. No matter how clever and cultivated the text, as soon as P is mentioned it turns to dust” (231). At the same time, Novikov’s text is a pastiche, with numerous references to Pushkin’s texts, to texts about Pushkin, and to texts that have nothing to do with Pushkin, such as the theme song from the film *Titanic*. He ironically undercuts his own claim of the impossibility of writing about Pushkin, instead producing a postmodern clamor of references from the Russian classic tradition and from global popular culture.

Like many of those who commented on the 1999 jubilee, including Lev Rubinshtein, Novikov observes that everything that could conceivably be said about Pushkin has already been said, as have many things that one would never have imagined. Pushkin is everyone and no one; a “follower of Shiva,” Novikov says, told him that Putin was himself an incarnation of Pushkin (233). Here is another echo of commentary about the 1999 jubilee, when many writers remarked sardonically that it seemed like Pushkin

was a presidential candidate—and a candidate far more pleasing to the Russian public than the genuine options.

In response to potential accusations that, by proposing that everyone is Pushkin, he is defaming Pushkin’s genius, Novikov uses the phrase “with a sleepy brush” (234). The phrase is lifted from Pushkin’s poem “Resurrection” (1819) which reads, in its entirety:

Художник-варвар кистью сонной  
Картину гения чернит  
И свой рисунок беззаконный  
Над ней бессмысленно чертит.

Но краски чуждые, с годами,  
Спадают ветхой чешуей;  
Созданье гения пред нами  
Выходит с прежней красотой.

Так исчезают заблужденья  
С измученной души моей,  
И возникают в ней виденья  
Первоначальных, чистых дней.

The barbaric artist, with a sleepy brush,  
Blackens the painting of a genius,  
Tracing his lawless drawing  
Meaninglessly over it.

But with the years, the foreign paint  
Grows old and peels away;  
The genius’ creation appears again before us,  
With all its former beauty.

Thus vanish the mistakes  
From my exhausted soul,  
And in it visions rise again,  
Of my purer early days.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin, *Sobranie sochinenii v desiati tomakh*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1959-1962), 94. The date of the poem is disputed—it may have been written in the later 1820s.

In its first two stanzas, Pushkin's poem can be read as a testament to great art's power to endure over time, outliving mediocre creations that may temporarily obscure it from view. Where genius is present, iconoclasm is impossible; even a direct defacement of a masterpiece will not erase it, as the inferior over-painting will peel away with time. But the simple dichotomy of the genius artist and the barbaric dauber is complicated by the third stanza, which suggests that the genius and the barbarian also represent two phases of Pushkin's own life or work: his early moments of pure inspiration, and his later mistakes. Artists are not necessarily so easily divided into categories; a single artist's work can include the brilliant and the uninspired. In this case, perhaps it is the brilliant work that survives, while the artist's lesser work slides into oblivion; or maybe it is true artistic inspiration that is eternal, albeit not always in view.

Pushkin's short poem gets to the heart of one of the central concerns of *Pushkin's Overcoat*, and of many of the writers and journalists who commented on the monstrous spectacle of the 1999 Pushkin jubilee (though Pushkin does it with a simplicity and sincerity that is virtually inconceivable for anyone writing in 1999). How can one return to the pure beginnings of literature, to the first sources of literary inspiration? Is it possible to return to the first work of genius, the one that has been obscured by generations of mediocrity, by an increasingly convoluted chain of references and allusions? Is it possible that the torments of later periods will eventually be forgotten, and that Pushkin's lost time can be regained? Much as Kibirov studs his poetry with allusions that radically expand the meaning of his own words, Novikov uses an allusion to gesture towards a perhaps naïve hopefulness that would be incongruous on the surface of his ironic, tortuous, postmodern text. As in the public discussions that accompanied the 1999

jubilee, beneath the laughing, blasé surface of *Pushkin's Overcoat* lurks a sincere love of literature, and of Pushkin.

*Pushkin's Overcoat* explores and exploits the acute intertextuality of Russian literature. Russia's oft-memorized classics function as both a resource and a straitjacket for contemporary writers, who can rely on an extensive collective literary memory but who also find it frustratingly difficult to break new ground, to find words that feel fresh. As many writers in the collection note, it seems impossible to write without bringing in Pushkin, whether intentionally or simply because so many Russian words are charged with the memory of his poems. Writers find themselves circling back again and again, almost helplessly, to Pushkin. During the Soviet period, anything but the most pious use of Pushkin risked accusations of irreverence or even desecration. With the end of the Soviet Union, on the other hand, even the most overtly iconoclastic approaches lost much of their sting. The problem of Pushkin's outsized influence remained, but writers had to find new ways to cope with it, even as some of them mourned literature's loss of social status. In the post-Soviet period, mentioning Pushkin became less likely to offend and more likely to bore or irritate one's audience. The end of the Soviet Union changed, but did not eliminate, the problem of what to do about Pushkin.

Though the contributors to *Pushkin's Overcoat* did not know it, Russia would soon experience yet another sharp turn. The next decades would see a return to censorship, albeit in a new form, and a renewed focus on the sanctity and celebration of Russian national identity and culture (including Pushkin, but also some of the Soviet writers who had once criticized or mocked the Pushkin cult). Iconoclastic post-Soviet artists would once again face arrest, trial, and imprisonment. Meanwhile, the global



movement towards digitization and the widespread availability of pirated e-books (especially in Russia) meant that books as material objects lost much of their cultural prominence, making the aura of authenticity more important than ever. These are some of the issues that I will explore in Part II.

**Part II:**  
**HOME SWEET MUSEUM**

### Chapter 3 Pushkin's Houses, Pushkin's Grave

Jubilees mark the passage of time, but in the process they often enact changes to places, whether through renovation or reconception. Mayor Iurii Luzhkov used the 1999 Pushkin jubilee as part of his project to concentrate power—including cultural and historical capital—in Moscow, glossing over St. Petersburg's central role in Russia's Golden Age. Jubilee celebrations often provide the occasion for the establishment or renovation of sites relevant to the cultural hero in question; the renovation of Pushkin places has been an important element in almost every Pushkin jubilee, including the 1999 bicentenary. Having looked at the Pushkin jubilee across the transition from communism, I will now examine the Pushkin cult from the perspective of the literary house museum, in particular the Moika 12 apartment museum and the Pushkin Sanctuary in Pskov. After reviewing the origins of these institutions and the ways in which their meaning was established over time, I will show they exhibit two different sides of Pushkin cult, with Moika 12 exemplifying a tragic narrative of persecution and transcendence and the Sanctuary focusing on a more positive narrative of the inspiration Pushkin took from the Russian land and Russian national heritage. In keeping with the nationalist undertones of the Pushkin cult, the narratives of both museums evoke a national myth of Russia's persecution, suffering, and resurrection; this myth is particularly explicit in rhetoric around the Sanctuary, which focuses so much on the landscape and geographical setting of the estate museum. In my discussion of the Pushkin Sanctuary, I will analyze Dovlatov's novella *Pushkin Hills* as a critical late Soviet literary response to the Sanctuary as an institution and to the Soviet Pushkin cult more broadly. My analysis of

Dovlatov will shed light on how the Pushkin Sanctuary was perceived in the late Soviet period, but it will also open, in Chapter 4, into my discussion of the post-Soviet Dovlatov cult, which nests inside the Pushkin cult.

*Moika 12: The house of the dead poet*

The Pushkin apartment museum in St. Petersburg, at 12 Moika Embankment, is perhaps the most poignant house museum devoted to the poet, being the place where he died. After the rocky early Soviet period, Moika 12 was granted corresponding importance, established as a state-run museum and renovated repeatedly. Moika 12 is organized around Pushkin's tragic death and his image as a martyred hero, persecuted by the tsars and murdered by foreign conspirators. It is the museum equivalent of the commemoration of a death: its gloomy focus on death and injury followed by transcendence through memory recalls the 1987 Pushkin jubilee. This resonance may also be explained by the fact that the museum appears to have undergone few updates since Soviet times; it remains more or less as it was in the 1980s.<sup>263</sup>

During tsarist times, Moika 12 was not a protected site; according to a former director of the museum, N.I. Popova, in 1910 the apartment was renovated in a "barbaric" fashion according to housing standards of the time. It was first opened to the public in February 1925, and declared a state-protected site in 1927. At this point, it was still divided as it had been in 1910, and, as Popova writes, "Only the power of our love and memory of Pushkin made it possible not to notice the many historical absurdities and

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<sup>263</sup> See Sandler's description from the late 1980s in *Commemorating Pushkin*, 76-80.

anachronisms.”<sup>264</sup> It was partitioned into communal apartments in 1929; residents were evicted just a few years later, and the apartment was hastily restored late in 1936, in preparation for the 1937 Pushkin jubilee. The apartment was reopened as a public institution in 1937, becoming a house of national cultural memory at a moment when the residents of the Soviet Union’s major cities faced a dire housing shortage.<sup>265</sup> After the Second World War, during which it escaped serious damage, Moika 12 was quickly restored and reopened yet again for the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the poet’s death, in early 1947.<sup>266</sup> A Pushkin statue was placed in the courtyard in 1949, during that year’s Pushkin jubilee. Another round of restorations was completed as part of the 1987 jubilee. It is notable that renovations of the museum were associated primarily with death anniversaries: this made sense, since Moika 12 is where Pushkin died, but it may also have contributed to the central role played by death in the museum’s presentation.

While state interest fluctuated, hardcore Pushkin fans maintained Moika 12’s mystical qualities through the end of the Soviet period. From the mid-1960s to the early 1990s, there was an annual vigil at Moika 12 on the day of Pushkin’s death, with prayers at the exact moment of his death (2:45 in the afternoon), lit candles placed in the snow, speeches, and poetry readings addressed to the dead poet. According to S.B. Adon’eva,

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<sup>264</sup> N.I. Popova, *Muzei-kvartira A.S. Pushkina na Moike* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1989), 5. Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin*, 55.

<sup>265</sup> A prescient 1927 feuilleton by Zoshchenko had imagined a simple Soviet man who lost his hard-won room when it turned out to be in one of Pushkin’s former apartments, and had to be emptied out for memorialization. Mikhail Zoshchenko, “Pushkin,” *Golubaia kniga, sentimental’nye povesti, Pered voskhodom sol’ntsa, rasskazy i fel’etony* (Saint Petersburg: Azbuka, 2014), 209-211.

<sup>266</sup> Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*, 91, 223.

participants viewed this mourning ritual as a moral duty, just as a visit to the poet's place of death—either Moika 12 or the duel site—was obligatory for any cultured person visiting Leningrad.<sup>267</sup>

One Moika 12 tour guide explained in a 1999 interview that visitors craved contact with Pushkin through an object-intermediary, for which authenticity was essential:

...For [museum visitors] the most important thing is that everything is as it was during his life. This is the pivotal point for everyone. In this room there is nothing that was his own. "Oy, how can it be like this." The only place where they relax is the study, because there it's his—this, this, this. Everything is his, everything is the realest...Because there is the authenticity of an object, it belonged to the master of the house, it carries a part of him, so to speak, of his spirit, some kind of charge of energy. It makes contact with the real...<sup>268</sup>

In keeping with the long tradition of literary house museums, the authenticity of an object was essential in its ability to act as a medium between visitor and writer. But Moika 12 had a shortage of clearly authentic items, as Adon'eva's interviewee notes. This meant that curation and presentation of the museum would be a struggle against the anonymity of placeholder or replica objects. Those items that did have a strong claim to authenticity would have to be exploited to maximum benefit—as with the couch where Pushkin died, which I will discuss below.

A former employee at a Pushkin museum explained that guarding Pushkin's relics was a vocation that could give meaning to unhappy lives, making lonely museum attendants feel like Brides of Pushkin:

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<sup>267</sup> S.B. Adon'eva, "Dukh Pushkina," 65.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

There was a feeling that we were important and needed...Ladies who worked at the Pushkin Museum—usually ladies with unsettled fates, personally, as women...it's like their own personal unsettledness is in service to him...They all love him very much...They're all very different, but they're similar in their crazy love...Their unhappy fates have been devoted to the altar of service. They all wanted something like that, something sublime.<sup>269</sup>

As with any religion, service in the Pushkin cult offered a sense of purpose that transcended the problems of the present.

When I visited Moika 12 in May 2017, I entered, as all visitors to the museum do, from the basement, covered my shoes in the obligatory blue plastic bags, and made my way through the first part of the visit, an exhibit of journals (such as *The Contemporary*, many copies of which remained unsold in the apartment during Pushkin's last year of life, as the journal proved a drain on his resources rather than a source of profit<sup>270</sup>) and papers that, as the audio guide said, “cast light on the poet's mysterious poetic process.” Then the tour ascended the stairs and turned to the titillatingly personal, in keeping with the longstanding preoccupation of literary biographers and house museums with the intimate details of a writer's life. Images of Pushkin's wife, Natal'ia Goncharova, over whom Pushkin's fatal duel was fought, were followed by an explanation that Georges d'Anthès had married Natal'ia's sister Ekaterina Goncharova in order to realize his nefarious plan to seduce Natal'ia Nikolaevna. D'Anthès's marriage to Ekaterina Goncharova only “postponed the inevitable,” the fatal duel between d'Anthès and Pushkin.<sup>271</sup> This tone of tragedy, conspiracy, and gloom dominated the museum, much as

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>270</sup> Binyon, *Pushkin*, 523, 506.

<sup>271</sup> Natal'ia has often been cast as one of the villains of the Pushkin myth; Marina Tsvetaeva and Anna Akhmatova, among others, clearly wished that Pushkin had never married her. Natal'ia is

it had dominated the 1987 jubilee. At the oak front door from which Pushkin had left for the last time, and through which he was carried, wounded, after his duel with d'Anthès, tragic music played as the guide described how Pushkin's fellow poet Zhukovsky had posted updates on his friend's condition for the many concerned visitors.

Continuing up the stairs, I arrived at the Pushkin family's ground floor apartment and began examining the items—including A.A. Kozlov's 1837 painting of Pushkin on his deathbed, and one of the original castings of his plaster death mask<sup>272</sup>—in the vestibule. When she saw what I was doing, the elderly attendant rushed to veil the death mask with a cloth, exclaiming, “This is the *last* room! This is about his *death!*” The apartment is arranged in a circular plan; the tour was intended to begin in the adjoining room. As in Antsiferovian literary excursions, there was a set script for the experience. Museum visitors were not allowed to deviate from the prescribed narrative arc, from the curators' teleology; for visitors, as for Pushkin, everything had to lead ineluctably to Pushkin's tragic death. The path taken through this memory palace was as important as the contents and functions of the individual rooms.

In the dining room, the audio guide explained that Pushkin liked to have dinner with his family—but on *that day* he returned home long after dinnertime, mortally

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still popularly portrayed as a flirt who helped provoke d'Anthès' attentions and thus contributed to Pushkin's death. But Binyon shows convincingly that d'Anthès was clearly what we would now call a stalker; between his obsessive attention and Pushkin's short temper, Natal'ia found herself in an impossible situation. This reality has not made it into the Pushkin myth, but it gives the tragic triangle a new psychological complexity and pathos. See Binyon, *Pushkin*.

<sup>272</sup> About fifteen copies of Pushkin's death mask were made from the original plaster cast. L.P. Fevchuk, “Pervye skul'pturnye izobrazheniia Pushkina. Posmertnaia maska Pushkina,” in *Pushkin i ego vremia: Issledovaniia i materialy* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha, 1962), 396.



wounded. Then the dining room became a reception hall for Pushkin's concerned friends. In the drawing room was a manuscript of "I have built myself a monument," stressing Pushkin's conscious attempt to attain literary immortality, his success witnessed by the museum itself. The guide explained how Natal'ia Nikolaevna had slept in the drawing room, beside the bedroom where Pushkin lay dying in silence; though the doctor told him it would do him good to groan with pain, the poet did not want his wife to hear him. In reality, he groaned and even screamed at the excruciating pain that he was experiencing.<sup>273</sup> The story of his stoic silence was part of his image as a hero-martyr whose endurance and self-sacrifice much exceeded his suffering, severe though it was.

With each room, the sense of pathos increased. In the nursery, the guide described how, on the morning of January 28<sup>th</sup>, Pushkin asked to say goodbye to his children, putting his hand on their heads and making the sign of the cross. In Pushkin's study, where he died, the guide pointed out some of Russia's most precious Pushkin relics: the coffer where Pushkin kept his manuscripts; his cane with a button from Peter the Great's coat<sup>274</sup>; his goose quill; and his inkwell in the shape of a Moorish boy, a gift from his friend Pavel Nashchokin, who had said, "I am sending you your ancestor with inkwells."<sup>275</sup> Pushkin's couch had been arranged so that he could write while reclining. The guide explained that microscopic traces of blood found on the couch matched the blood on the waistcoat he wore during his fatal duel, proving that it was on that couch

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<sup>273</sup> Binyon, *Pushkin*, 604. See also Irina Reyfman, "Death and Mutilation at the Dueling Site."

<sup>274</sup> Bitov's reference to Pushkin's coat button in "Pushkin's Photograph (1799-2099)", discussed in Chapter 1, is likely a play on this famous Pushkin artifact; Pushkin himself was not above a fascination with the mundane possessions of heroes of the past.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 523.

that he had died. This couch compensated for all the lack of authenticity elsewhere in the apartment; this “relic” was a kind of trump card by the standards of the literary house museum. As we have seen, the place where the writer worked is central to nearly every literary house museum, as it is a crucial place at which the visitor can imagine how the writer felt as he produced his brilliant works, visualizing the genius in a particular setting. But this couch is also the piece of furniture on which Pushkin died—another crucial category of literary relic—and, even better, it contains some of his biological material, as proven by science. The couch united Pushkin’s process of writing with his tragic death, and was thus an ideal expression of Moika 12’s depiction of this poet-martyr.

I had now circled back to the vestibule, where the attendant unveiled the death mask and stood in solemn silence as I examined it. In the nineteenth century, Russian death masks were usually stored in reliquary-like cases, or kept out of sight except when being shown to guests. A.F. Onegin, a Pushkin memorabilia collector in the late nineteenth century, kept Pushkin’s death mask in a glass case with fresh flowers. During the Soviet period, it remained fashionable to own Pushkin’s death mask and display it as a sign of culture; Vladimir Vysotskii, for instance, kept one on display in his home. It was typical for Soviet museums—including house museums—to use death masks as their central relics. At the Lenin Museum near Red Square, the “hall of mourning” was the last entered by visitors, with Lenin’s death mask the centerpiece and emotional climax of the tour.<sup>276</sup> In the same way, the death mask was the central exhibition and the climax of a tour of Moika 12. At last the visitor comes face-to-face with the poet, with his terrible

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<sup>276</sup> Neumeyer, “The Final Struggle,” 18-19.

fate—but also with his relic, the proof of his holiness and immortality.<sup>277</sup> The Soviet emphasis on death masks goes a long way towards explaining why foreign visitors have been impressed by the morbid tenor of Soviet and Russian cultural commemoration. The most famous example of the Soviet preoccupation with corpses, of course, is the continued preservation and display of Lenin’s body. As with house museums, preservation of Lenin’s corpse is in fact a task that involves constant reconstruction: the body is now largely synthetic, and requires constant infusions of new material to maintain a “life-like” appearance.<sup>278</sup> The exceptional Soviet focus on death masks and dead bodies reflects the extreme degree to which Soviet cultural commemoration substituted for religion in a society of forced atheism. This preoccupation with corpses also insists that the visitor reflect on the body, the physical remains, of the writer, in tandem with his literary achievements—and contrary to his own stated values. “I have built myself a monument not made by human hands” is a poem that is explicitly about the poet ensuring that he will be remembered through monuments that are made of words, not physical material. Moika 12’s organization did not allow Pushkin to have the last word: the display of “I have built myself a monument” preceded the bloodstained couch and then the death mask. Ultimately, Moika 12 suggested, Pushkin’s body mattered very much, as did the object that permitted a sense of contact with him as a physical being.

The implications of Moika 12’s curation go beyond the myth of Pushkin as an individual writer, and extend to a larger story about Russia. The museum’s focus on

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<sup>277</sup> Pushkin’s death mask plays an important part in Andrei Bitov’s 1978 novel *Pushkin House* [*Pushkinskii Dom*].

<sup>278</sup> See Alexei Yurchak, “Bodies of Lenin: The Hidden Science of Communist Sovereignty,” *Representations* 129, no. 1 (2015), 116-157.

conspiracy and transcendence evokes the longstanding Russian national narrative of repeated struggle against foreign invasion and connivance, with martyrdom followed by resurrection. (Two of the most important examples are Russia's victory over Napoleon and the Soviet victory over the Nazis.)<sup>279</sup> The visitor moves through Pushkin's last home, knowing all along that he is fated to die—but that he will also be resurrected through his own literary achievement, his Horatian “monument,” and through public memory. In this way, it seems to me, the museum's biographical narrative becomes a miniaturized version of the story of Russia. The fact that the biographical narrative has hardly been revised since the end of the Soviet Union is a testament to the enduring authority not only of this version of the story of Pushkin's life, but also of the broader narrative of Russian national martyrdom and resurrection.

*The Pushkin Sanctuary: Homeland studies and object-witnesses*

Mikhailovskoe, Pushkin's family's estate in Pskov oblast, is another of the most important of the “Pushkin places” scattered across the former Russian Empire. Unlike Moika 12, Mikhailovskoe—which was expanded, during the Soviet period, into the “Pushkin Sanctuary,” a sprawling area comprised of three estates as well as sites in the nearby town of Pushkin Hills—includes a considerable amount of surrounding land. This allows for a much more immersive experience for visitors, and invites, almost demands, reflection on the connection between the landscape and Pushkin's work. The Pushkin Sanctuary shows how a landscape can itself be perceived as a kind of “house museum.”

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<sup>279</sup> For a thorough analysis of the historical development of the narrative of Russia's repeated persecution and resurrection, see Gregory Carleton, *Russia: The Story of War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017).

This concept is familiar from Karamzin's reveries in landscapes permeated with Rousseau, a deeply personal, intimate, individual example of literary pilgrimage. But the Pushkin Sanctuary also, and to a much greater extent, builds on the traditions of *kraevedenie*, a.k.a. *rodinovedenie*. Contemplation of Pushkin and the landscape at the Sanctuary is not a matter of personal exploration, like Karamzin's trip; it is an established, scripted, guided experience. This way of considering the landscape, moreover, is about much more than just feeling a deeper connection with an author and his literary creations; as in *kraevedenie*, the Sanctuary landscape's inspiring qualities are connected to national identity. As I will show in this chapter and the following one, the presentation of the Sanctuary in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods shows how the estate's geographical placement has been used to reinforce the nationalist overtones of the museum—at times giving national history a prominence rivaling Pushkin's. The landscape at Mikhailovskoe has also been employed to establish a thread of continuity—linked to national history, identity, and essence—that seems to transcend political upheaval and episodes of destruction and violence. In rhetoric about the Sanctuary, the land and also the Sanctuary's collection of material items, “object-witnesses,” are endowed with anthropomorphic qualities, able to observe history and inspire human endeavors. Both function as vehicles for a sense of authenticity that is central to the literary estate museum experience.

Mikhailovskoe received minimal attention until the Pushkin jubilee of 1899. By then, Mikhailovskoe as Pushkin had known it was long gone. In 1860, his younger son,

Grigorii, had sold the house for parts, building another in its place.<sup>280</sup> A museum at “Pushkin Corner” [*Pushkinskii Ugolok*] was opened in 1899, as part of the jubilee events, near Sviatogorskii Monastery, where Pushkin is buried. It contained a few dozen objects received as gifts. That same year, the house at Mikhailovskoe was purchased from Pushkin’s descendants, using donations from the public, and put under government control. From 1910-11, a proper museum was created at Mikhailovskoe, the first government-run literary estate museum. In addition to the museum exhibit, there was a collection of objects from Pushkin’s time,<sup>281</sup> not endowed with the magic of Pushkin’s touch. From the point of view of authenticity, Mikhailovskoe had very few assets; but it was rescued by the greatest relic of all, Pushkin’s corpse.

This decade saw extensive destruction and upheaval at Mikhailovskoe and in its environs. Before the revolution, the forest around Mikhailovskoe was being cut down by builders and by locals; some locals threatened to burn the area out of political resentment. Varvara Timofeeva, Dostoevsky’s former secretary, lived in Mikhailovskoe from 1911 to 1917, and wrote with pain about the violence perpetrated against trees that still seemed to be animated by Pushkin’s genius. Along with Trigorskoe, the estate of Pushkin’s friends the Osipov-Wolf family, and Petrovskoe, the estate of Pushkin’s relatives the Gannibals, Mikhailovskoe was burned to the ground in February 1918; all that remained was the

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<sup>280</sup> Anna Kovalova and Lev Lur’e, *Dovlatov* (St. Petersburg: Amfora, 2009), 260-61.

<sup>281</sup> Shpineva and T. Geichenko, “Veshchi imeiut svoiu sud'bu.” “Spravka o muzee,” *Pushkinskii Zapovednik*, <http://pushkin.ellink.ru/museum/msm16.asp>. Accessed Nov. 12, 2018.

picturesque landscape. The artifacts at Pushkin Corner were also destroyed.<sup>282</sup> Most disturbingly, Pushkin's burial place became so decrepit that his coffin was visible.<sup>283</sup>

Timofeeva wrote in her memoirs about being inspired by Switzerland's William Tell sanctuary to propose to the Soviet government, in 1920, that Mikhailovskoe and Trigor'skoe be made permanent sanctuaries. The project was taken under consideration, and Timofeeva was instructed to oversee the preservation of Pushkin Corner. The elderly Timofeeva's involvement was short-lived, however, and the official story was swiftly revised to depict the creation of the preserve as a matter of popular will, one of many Soviet triumphs. In fact, arguments over logging and grazing rights around Mikhailovskoe continued almost to the end of the 1920s; peasants and farmers needed firewood and food for their livestock.<sup>284</sup>

In 1922, the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) recognized the ruined Mikhailovskoe, Trigor'skoe, and Pushkin's grave at Sviatogorskii Monastery as a "sanctuary" [*zapovednik*].<sup>285</sup> In the 1920s more items were collected, including rarities.<sup>286</sup> Before the 1937 Pushkin jubilee the Sanctuary was further expanded, a new building was erected at Mikhailovskoe, and a simple museum was established.<sup>287</sup> Much of this

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<sup>282</sup> Shpineva and Geichenko, "Veshchi imeiut svoiu sud'bu."

<sup>283</sup> Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin*, 50-53.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-52, 72.

<sup>285</sup> Kovalova and Lur'e, *Dovlatov*, 260-61. "Spravka o muzee," Pushkinskii Zapovednik. Accessed Nov. 12, 2018.

<sup>286</sup> E. Shpineva and T. Geichenko, "Veshchi imeiut svoiu sud'bu." 29-30.

<sup>287</sup> Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin*, 53.

progress was undone, however, by the Second World War, when most of the museum's objects were destroyed or disappeared,<sup>288</sup> and when Mikhailovskoe was again seriously damaged. The Germans dug a bunker under the oak tree that is taken as the model for the famous tree in Pushkin's narrative poem *Ruslan and Liudmila*, used Pushkin's house as a firing position for artillery, and mined Pushkin's grave. (The mines did not explode.) Pushkin's corpse had come even closer to annihilation, saved at the last moment. The Pushkin Sanctuary was taken back from the Germans in July 1944.<sup>289</sup> Sanctuary curators would later describe the German assault on Mikhailovskoe as an attack on a shrine of Russian culture; taking back Mikhailovskoe was a correspondingly powerful symbolic act not only for Pushkinists, but for all of Russian culture.<sup>290</sup>

In 1945, art historian Semen Stepanovich Geichenko was entrusted with the task of restoring the Pushkin Sanctuary, a mission to which he would devote the rest of his life. The reconstruction of Mikhailovskoe and the Sviato-Uspenskii Sviatogorskii Monastery was completed in 1949—another Pushkin jubilee year—when there was a ceremonial opening of the Sanctuary.<sup>291</sup> In the decades after the war, the museum became a complex that included Mikhailovskoe, Trigor'skoe, Petrov'skoe, the Bugrov'skaia windmill, and other sites,<sup>292</sup> the beginning of a move towards the ethnographic

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<sup>288</sup> Shpineva and Geichenko, "Veshchi imeiut svoiu sud'bu," 29-30.

<sup>289</sup> *Pushkinskii zapovednik i ego khranitel'*, 65-66.

<sup>290</sup> Mikhail Dudin, "Khranitel' Lukomor'ia," in *Pushkinskii zapovednik i ego khranitel'*, 4-7.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 7. "Spravka o muzee," *Pushkinskii Zapovednik*. See also Levitt, *Russian Literary Politics*.

<sup>292</sup> Shpineva and T. Geichenko, "Veshchi imeiut svoiu sud'bu," 29-30.



orientation that is evident at the Sanctuary today, as I will discuss in the next chapter. Trigoroskoe was restored in 1962 and Petrovskoe in 1977. From 1996-2007, as part of the Russian government's efforts around the 1999 Pushkin jubilee, restorations were completed throughout the Sanctuary, which is currently a federally recognized and federally funded cultural heritage site, under the aegis of the Russian Federation's Ministry of Culture.<sup>293</sup> The monastery was returned to the Russian Orthodox Church in 1992.<sup>294</sup>

Given the waves of destruction that afflicted Mikhailovskoe and its surrounding areas during the Russian Revolution and the Second World War, as well as the neglect to the estate throughout the nineteenth century, the Pushkin Sanctuary's post-war curators faced a task of restoration—or perhaps resurrection—more than conservation or guardianship. Geichenko arrived at the task with his own personal experiences of destruction and restoration. Formerly employed at Leningrad's Pushkin House [*Institut russkoi literatury (Pushkinskii dom)*], Geichenko had been repressed from 1941-43, conscripted into the Red Army, and seriously wounded outside Novgorod.<sup>295</sup> The catalogue accompanying the exhibit commemorating the centenary of his birth, in 2003, frames his task as a “feat” [*podvig*], a word used to describe the works of saints:

It was necessary to clear out, dig up this war-torn earth and restore everything out of ashes... It was necessary to restore equilibrium in his own war-torn soul, to restore this soul...It was necessary to find in himself the strength for this double

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<sup>293</sup> “Otkrytye dannye,” Pushkinskii Zapovednik, <http://pushkin.ellink.ru/museum/msm13.asp>. Accessed Nov. 12, 2018.

<sup>294</sup> “Sviatogorskii Sviato-Uspenskii Monastyr’,” Pushkinskii Zapovednik, <http://pushkin.ellink.ru/reserve/res8.asp>. Accessed Nov. 12, 2018.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.

feat. [Geichenko] understood very well that to restore is far more difficult than to build something new. But for him, the word was the deed.<sup>296</sup>

In his service to the Pushkin shrine, Geichenko himself achieved a saint-like status; divine inspiration allowed him to perform miracles. The emphasis on restoration as a greater achievement than the creation of something new also exhibits the “restorative nostalgia” that became characteristic of much of post-Soviet official culture, which has devoted so much time and energy to rebuilding lost monuments, staging historical reenactments, and so on. This restoration is often of religious sites, or of cultural shrines that retain a quasi-religious status, like Mikhailovskoe.

Like many curators of literary house museums, Pushkin Sanctuary staff had to piece together an experience that would allow visitors to have imaginative contact with Pushkin and his time. As in Antsiferov’s methodology, the Sanctuary was to be a place where people could be guided through the relationship between place, biography, and poetry; again, a far cry from Karamzin’s solitary ramblings. Part of the strategy was historical accuracy; the original house and most of its contents were gone, but the building could be reconstructed according to what was known about its plans, and it could be furnished with authentic objects from Pushkin’s time, even if these were not imbued with the magic of Pushkin’s touch. The objects in the museum that were genuinely Pushkin’s, of course, had a special status as relics. But the museum staff members clearly considered authenticity to be a state of mind. As Sanctuary employees E. Shpineva and T. Geichenko write, “The creators always strove to achieve the atmosphere, the credible atmosphere of authenticity, the key to which was not historical

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<sup>296</sup> Dudin, “Khranitel’ Lukomor’ia,” 6.

and documentary conditions or a mundane, typological resemblance, but the mark of authenticity achieved through the creation of an environment [*sreda*].”<sup>297</sup> This emphasis on imagination facilitated by the careful curation of a tour experience is also recognizable from Antsiferov’s theories.

In the Pushkin Sanctuary’s philosophy under Semen Geichenko, the objects that contribute to this “atmosphere of authenticity” are not insentient, though they may be silent and motionless. Semen Geichenko and his colleagues express an extraordinary respect for objects in general, to which they readily attribute various human qualities. Geichenko describes objects as “silent witnesses of the most ancient truth,” asserting, “there are no inanimate [*neodushevlennye*] things. There are inanimate people.”<sup>298</sup> Shpineva and T. Geichenko write about the museum’s “*veshchevedskaia*” tradition—its study of objects. They write, “All collectors and preservationists know that things live their own lives, independent even of people’s will. But the will of museum people is to love things, to protect, attract, lure them, not frightening them off, trying not to let them run away. This is what Semen Semenovich did, and what he taught his younger comrades in arms [*soratniki*].”<sup>299</sup> Their philosophy of *veshchevedenie* goes beyond the worship of relics, approaching something like animism. Here we see another clear similarity to *kraevedenie*, in the conviction that a material entity (whether a place or an object) can have a kind of soul, recalling Antsiferov’s book *The Soul of Petersburg. Veshchevedenie*

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<sup>297</sup> Shpineva and T. Geichenko, “Veshchi imeiut svoiu sud'bu,” 30.

<sup>298</sup> Semen Geichenko. *U Lukomor'ia: Rasskazyvaet khranitel' Pushkinskogo zapovednika* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1973), 13.

<sup>299</sup> Shpineva and T. Geichenko, “Veshchi imeiut svoiu sud'bu,” 30.

is the antithesis of the attitude to material objects displayed in the 1899 and 1999 Pushkin jubilees. On those occasions, critics derided the proliferation of kitschy Pushkin souvenirs, perceiving them as degrading to Pushkin's noble image. Someone like Geichenko would surely argue that the objects at the Sanctuary served an entirely different and more honorable purpose, allowing visitors to commune with Pushkin's spirit. (That said, the Sanctuary also sold kitschy souvenirs, though they were more along the lines of plaster medallions with Pushkin's image—they were not meant to be amusing or ironic.) The production of Pushkin ketchup is a money-making endeavor, not an educational project. But, as I will show in my discussion of Dovlatov later in this chapter, some critics felt that Geichenko's approach to objects was just as offensive as Pushkin ketchup. In both cases, literary-minded observers took issue with the idea that literature should be associated with material items. They did not want literature to be brought down to earth, to be embodied (except, obviously, in the form of books and manuscripts).

Over the years, the only thing that has remained of Pushkin's estate as he knew it is the landscape—which became the central appeal of the Sanctuary and its greatest claim to authenticity.<sup>300</sup> Both staff and visitors have tended to ascribe magical qualities to this landscape. In his book *At Lukomor'e [U Lukomor'ia]*, Geichenko attributes mystical and transformative powers to this "Pushkin place." A view from a window becomes extraordinary when one knows that Pushkin once sat beside it, seeing the same vista. Every morning, Geichenko writes, the keepers of Mikhailovskoe replace the old scene with a new one and seem to say, "Pushkin saw all this. You look at it, too. You will

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<sup>300</sup> Kovalova and Lur'e, *Dovlatov*, 260-61.

become better.”<sup>301</sup> The water of the river and lakes is the faithful guardian of Mikhailovskoe, and Geichenko says that planting lilacs outside Pushkin’s window is a way of retrieving Pushkin from Lethe. In each leaf, Geichenko claims, there is writing [*pis’mena*, a word with religious connotations]; Pushkin knew how to read these writs, and to understand Pushkin each visitor to Mikhailovskoe must try to decipher them as well. Here, we see that Geichenko goes beyond the idea, common in literary tourism and *kraevedenie*, that the writer has been shaped by a landscape and then shaped it again in turn; in his view, there are actually mystical inscriptions on the landscape of Mikhailovskoe that Pushkin could read, and that helped make Pushkin who he was. The landscape itself possesses a magical literature that predates Pushkin’s presence. Pushkin read the script of Russian culture in the landscape; by visiting Mikhailovskoe visitors can have the opportunity to do the same.

The magic of the landscape helps compensate for the limited availability of traditional relics and authentic interiors at Mikhailovskoe. When Pushkin was asked about his study, Geichenko writes, he answered, “the countryside [*derevnia*]—that’s my study” [*derevnia—vot moi kabinet*].<sup>302</sup> The study is one of the most important elements of a literary house museum; though no traditional study is available, Pushkin himself offered a rationale for treating the estate’s landscape itself as the place most closely

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<sup>301</sup> Geichenko. *U Lukomor’ia*. 14.

<sup>302</sup> In fact, Geichenko is misquoting Pushkin. In his unfinished prose work “A Novel in Letters” [*Roman v pis’makh*], Pushkin has the character Vladimir write, “the country...is our study.” As so often happens with house museums, Geichenko is adapting Pushkin’s image for his own curatorial purposes. *Roman v pis’makh*, in A.S. Pushkin, *Sobranie sochinenii v desiaty tomakh* (Moscow: GIKhL, 1959-1962), vol. 5, p. 484. At <https://rvb.ru/pushkin/01text/06prose/02misc/01misc/0874.htm>. Accessed July 2, 2019.

linked to his creative process. The landscape, nature, can function as the kind of authentic “relic” that is in short supply at Mikhailovskoe. Geichenko imagines Pushkin walking barefoot across the grass; the implication is that visitors crossing Mikhailovskoe’s manicured landscapes can imagine their proximity to the touch of the poet’s own skin.

In Geichenko’s impassioned imagination, Pushkin haunts the grounds of Mikhailovskoe and is ready to answer the calls of visitors, not unlike the Pushkin who was contacted during séances in the nineteenth century. If you stand at the edge of the estate at dusk and call Pushkin’s name, Geichenko claims, he will answer you.<sup>303</sup> Pushkin merged with his home, with his beloved landscape. Geichenko writes: “Sometimes a person becomes so close [*srodnit’sia*] with his home that it becomes difficult to tell where the residence ends and the residents begin.”<sup>304</sup> Pushkin possessed the entire landscape, and continues to do so; at the same time, Pushkin was formed, in part, by the landscape.

Geichenko’s approach is highly mystical. While its similarity with *kraevedenie*, or *rodinovedenie*, gives it a nationalistic tinge, this is not the central focus of Geichenko’s approach. Other Sanctuary staff, by contrast, have adopted an approach that is explicitly framed in relation to patriotism. Arkadii Gordin worked from 1945-1949 as deputy director at the Pushkin Sanctuary. In the introduction to his book *The Pushkin Sanctuary [Pushkinskii Zapovednik]*, first published in 1952, Gordin presents Pushkin as a patriot

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<sup>303</sup> Geichenko, *U Lukomor’ia*. 13-14.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

above all, stressing the connections between the Sanctuary site and Russian triumphs over invaders. His opening paragraph reads:

Pushkin. His name is embraced, in our country, by the love of all the peoples [*vsenarodnaia liubov'*]. His lively, joyful poetry has been completely integrated into our lives. Poet-patriot, warmly and tenderly loving his motherland [*rodina*], his people, poet and freedom lover, singing of liberty, light and reason, poet-humanist, revealing all that is wonderful and noble in man, Pushkin is our greatest pride and glory.<sup>305</sup>

Gordin goes on to state that the poet-patriot's name unites the people of the Soviet Union in shared love; in his love for his country and freedom, Pushkin is the greatest pride and glory of the Soviet people.

Gordin devotes substantial attention to the historical importance of the Sanctuary's location, going back to the fourteenth century and emphasizing that the Sanctuary, like Pskov oblast more generally, is a place where Russians have repeatedly defended their country from invaders, where blood has been spilled again and again over the centuries. Gordin plays extensively on words with the root *rod* [family, clan], in keeping with his patriotic theme. Pushkin went to Mikhailovskoe to commune with his own people [*rodnym narodom*], his native nature [*rodnoi prirodoi*], the richness of folk poetry [*narodnoi poezii*], and folk language [*narodnoi rechi*]. According to Gordin, it was Pushkin's time at Mikhailovskoe—as a “cheerful youth” in 1817-1819 and as an exile in the “two long years” of 1824-1826, when he was sent away for his “freedom-loving poems” and “brave thoughts”<sup>306</sup>—that allowed him to make his poetry fully Russian, fully original.

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<sup>305</sup> Arkadii Gordin, *Pushkinskii Zapovednik* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo “Iskusstvo,” 1963), 3.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 4.

As he wrote his book on the Sanctuary, Gordin was certainly constrained by late Stalin-era censorship; his statements bear an obvious similarity to the 1949 Pushkin jubilee rhetoric. It would be inappropriate to read his guide as a direct expression of his ideas about Pushkin and the Sanctuary. Instead, his framing of his guide should be understood as a manifestation of the official line on Pushkin, which cast the poet as a patriot who, while expressing and glorifying a uniquely Russian essence, was also capable of uniting the diverse peoples of the Soviet Union. As a person and as a writer, Pushkin had channeled and ennobled the essence of “the people,” which, in the nineteenth century and then in the later Stalinist period, were at once the Russian people—the *russkii narod*—and the common people, the supposed winners and beneficiaries of the revolution. In Gordin’s description, the importance of the Russian land, and the spiritual link between the people and the land, is typical of late Stalinist rhetoric (itself largely a revival of nationalist rhetoric that developed in the nineteenth century), for which the Second World War (the “Great Patriotic War”) had required the resurrection and intensive mobilization of Russian patriotic feeling.<sup>307</sup>

Gordin’s emphasis on the historical and geographical significance of the Sanctuary’s site, and his stress on Pushkin’s patriotic nature, reinforces the nationalist elements of the Pushkin cult as expressed through the estate museum. Nineteenth and twentieth-century European nationalism was preoccupied with the connection between a nation and its land. In their quieter way, literary tourism sites often work to establish a

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<sup>307</sup> On Stalin’s approach to nationalities policy and positioning of Russians as “first among equals,” see Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*; Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*; and Serhy Yekelchuk, *Stalin’s Empire of Memory: Russian-Ukrainian Relations in the Soviet Historical Imagination* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004).



sense of shared national heritage, largely through the power of place as an authentic, irreproducible expression of a unique national identity. Despite the homogenizing effects of globalization, place remains resistant to reproduction.<sup>308</sup> Unlike urban house museums, which usually have little control over their surroundings and whose modern qualities may interfere with the tourist trying to imagine herself in another century, Mikhailovskoe has possession of the surrounding area; visitors see few distracting traces of modernity. (It helps that Mikhailovskoe is located in a sparsely populated, undeveloped area of Russia.) The visitor is rewarded by an experience that cannot be imported, exported, or transferred. The placement of the estate-museum within a beautiful, pristine landscape and the museum's presentation, as orchestrated primarily by Geichenko, suggest that Pushkin's genius must be understood within the context of the Russian land, and that, in a mystical way that is hard to define, Russian nature gave rise to, rather than simply furnishing a subject for, Pushkin's great works. In this way, as seen in Gordin's book and as I will show in my next chapter, which examines a 2012 guide to the Sanctuary, worship of the landscape at Mikhailovskoe becomes an expression of patriotism.

As I showed in Part I, Pushkin jubilee celebrations have triggered many forms of protest and mockery over the years, primarily from people of literary inclinations, with criticisms reflecting larger social concerns as well as a protective impulse towards the "real" Pushkin and his work. Pushkin house museums, too, have raised the ire of some observers, especially literary-minded ones. As early as 1927, Zoshchenko wrote a humorous feuilleton about a man who loses his apartment when it becomes a Pushkin

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<sup>308</sup> Hendrix, "Writers' Houses," 7.

museum. In the 1970s, Dovlatov wrote *Pushkin Hills*, his novella-length attack on the Pushkin Sanctuary. Dovlatov mocks the inaccuracy that plagues the tours, showing the hollowness of the love for Pushkin that one is required to profess when working at the Sanctuary. He attacks Geichenko in particular, tearing apart the Sanctuary's construction of the aura of authenticity and Geichenko's idea that things and landscapes have their own souls: he insists that words should be kept separate from objects. Having shown the official perspective on the Sanctuary put forth by Geichenko and Gordin, I will examine *Pushkin Hills* as an unofficial writer's protest against the practices at the Soviet-era Pushkin Sanctuary.

*Dovlatov at Pushkin Hills: An attack on the literary estate museum*

During Soviet times, the Pushkin Sanctuary—like Pushkin studies—became a refuge for writers and literary scholars. A job as a tour guide there paid well, with fewer qualification requirements than for more formal literary or scholarly jobs that paid a comparable amount while subjecting writers to the onus of censorship. Distance from Moscow and St. Petersburg offered a certain safety, as well; there was a greater sense of freedom, along with an opportunity to enjoy the beauty of nature and open space. One former guide said later that the Pushkin Sanctuary was “almost the only place in the whole country where [literary Leningraders] could do creative work and receive decent pay.”<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Kovalova and Lur'e, *Dovlatov*, 262-65.

Sergei Dovlatov's novella *Zapovednik* (*The Sanctuary*, published in English as *Pushkin Hills*) was inspired by the author's time working as a tour guide at the Sanctuary in the mid-1970s.<sup>310</sup> *Pushkin Hill*'s narrator, Boris Alikhanov, is, like Dovlatov, a chronic alcoholic who cannot publish his stories in the Soviet Union, and who earns money as a hack journalist. Separated from his wife, he takes a relatively well-paying job at the Pushkin Sanctuary, even as his wife is planning to immigrate to the United States with their young daughter. Published in 1983, after Dovlatov's emigration to New York, *Pushkin Hills* uses the Pushkin Sanctuary as a starting point from which to challenge the Soviet Pushkin cult and what Dovlatov sees as its deleterious effect on contemporary literature and living writers. It stops short, however, of attacking the image of Pushkin himself.

Alikhanov's disgust at the sterility and falseness of the Pushkin Sanctuary as an official space is contrasted with his deeply personal love of Pushkin the writer. Alikhanov mocks and rejects the Pushkin cult and its obligatory public displays of affection, searching for a Pushkin of his own, a private Pushkin (in the tradition of Marina Tsvetaeva's 1937 essay "My Pushkin,") who still generates literary inspiration as well as heartfelt admiration. For Dovlatov, Pushkin's true eternal life derives from the unofficial sanctuary that exists in the minds of individual readers and writers, who are free to relate to his work in their own ways. *Pushkin Hills*' portrait of late Soviet society is bleak, if hilarious, but the novella finds comfort in the enduring possibilities for the private Pushkin, for the ever-changing Russian language and its literature. Dovlatov's insistence

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<sup>310</sup> Jekaterina Young, *Sergei Dovlatov and His Narrative Masks* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 110.

on a private rather than a public Pushkin is antithetical to the state-sponsored use of literary house museums as sites of a fixed, mythical version of the writer's biography, and as national *lieux de memoire*. Dovatov's perspective is also antithetical to the Soviet literary excursion, pioneered by Antsiferov, which is designed for group consumption and conceived as an almost theatrical performance.

Alikhanov mocks the misquotations and misrepresentations of Pushkin that he sees and hears at the Sanctuary, as well as what he considers to be phony artifacts.

Alikhanov can never resist making fun of these, with his own intentional misinterpretations and plays on words. (His approach bears a strong resemblance to many reactions to the 1999 Pushkin jubilee.) When he starts work, Galina, one of the guides, tells him, "Thoroughly study the guidebooks. So much in Pushkin's life is waiting to be discovered. Certain things have changed since last year..."

"In Pushkin's life?" Alikhanov asks.

"Not in Pushkin's life, but in the layout of the collection," Galina answers, evoking, to comic effect, the literary museum's creation of biography through curation. She mentions the real-life example of the recent removal of a portrait of General Ivan Ivanovich Möller-Zakomel'skii, which had been misidentified as a portrait of Pushkin's great-grandfather, Abram Petrovich Gannibal. When asked how this error could have occurred, given the different races of the two men, Galina explains that Zakomel'skii was

tanned by the Asian sun during his military expeditions, or perhaps the paint darkened with age (12-13).<sup>311</sup>

Alikhanov horrifies the museum curator, Viktoria Albertovna, when he says that he has come to the Pushkin Sanctuary for the easy money [*za dlinnym rublem*]; she tells him that jokes are “out of place here” [*shutki zdes’ neumestny*]. Alikhanov goes on to ask her which of the museum’s exhibited items are “authentic” [*podlinnye*]; the *podlinnye* is undermined by its proximity to the mercenary *dlinnym*, while also, perhaps, evoking its supposed etymological root in the old Russian practice of forcing people to tell the truth by beating them with *podlinniki*, long sticks.<sup>312</sup> With this play on words, Dovlatov associates the museum’s manipulation of the sense of authenticity with financial profit. This is a common criticism, as we have seen, of literary house museums, and of cultural commemoration in general: recall the horror evoked by Pushkin vodka in 1999. There is also, perhaps, an association of authenticity with state violence, which is most present in *Pushkin Hills* in the form of censorship and police harassment of writers. (Alikhanov, like Dovlatov, is advised by the secret police to emigrate if he does not want to be arrested.<sup>313</sup>) Literary house museums, of course, have frequently been used, in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, for political ends, another reason for Alikhanov/Dovlatov to object to them.

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<sup>311</sup> Sergei Dovlatov, *Pushkin Hills*, trans. Katherine Dovlatov (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2014). English translations are taken from this edition, with some adjustments. When citing *Pushkin Hills* I will include page numbers in the body of the text.

<sup>312</sup> “Podlinnyi.” Maksimilian Fasmer, *Etimologicheskii slovar’ russkogo iazyka* (Progress, 1986), <http://vasmer.slovaronline.com/II/IIO/9839-PODLINNYIY>.

<sup>313</sup> Young, *Sergei Dovlatov*, 33-4.

Viktoriya Albertovna responds to Alikhanov's question about authenticity by speaking about the natural features of the territory: "Everything here is authentic. The river, the hills, the trees—they are all Pushkin's contemporaries, his companions and friends" (33-34). Dovlatov exaggerates the absurdity of this statement, but as we have seen, it demonstrates an important aspect of the real-life Sanctuary, which placed special value on the landscape's authenticity and its intimate connection to Pushkin and his work. When further pressed on the issue of authenticity, Viktoriya Albertovna reminds Alikhanov, reasonably enough, that "the museum was created decades after [Pushkin's] death," i.e., it is absurd to expect that all the objects in it are Pushkin's own. In Dovlatov's telling, this brief exchange serves to demonstrate the absurdity and paradoxes of the Pushkin Sanctuary in general. Any vaguely appropriate object can be imbued with the aura of genius simply by being placed in the Pushkin museum. The magical quality is self-generating, tautological; the cult produces its own talismans.

In its criticisms of the Sanctuary tours, *Pushkin Hills* emphasizes self-referentiality, (mis)quotation, and the dissociation of words from their meaning—hallmarks of late Soviet culture.<sup>314</sup> Alikhanov is troubled by these uses of language because he sees them as making words into things, crossing a border from language into materiality in a way that for him is antithetical to the purpose of literature, and to the respect due to a writer as great as Pushkin. (Dovlatov's own love of Pushkin is well documented.<sup>315</sup>) Meditating on his inability to publish or earn money with his fiction,

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<sup>314</sup> See Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*.

<sup>315</sup> See Aleksandr Genis, "Pushkin u Dovlatova," in Andrei Ar'ev (ed.), *Sergei Dovlatov: Tvorchestvo, lichnost', sud'ba: Itogi pervoi mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii "Dovlatovskie chteniia"* (St. Petersburg: Zhurnal "Zvezda," 1999), 186.

Alikhanov tells himself philosophically, “Looking around, do you see ruins? That is to be expected. He who lives in the world of words does not get along with things.” By reasserting the opposition of words and things, Alikhanov implicitly rejects the literary house museum’s project of offering visitors communion with a writer through proximity to that writer’s relics. But for him, the problem goes beyond the false association of words and things, extending to the treatment of words *as* things, as vessels that can be exchanged even when emptied of meaning. He notes that the work of his published contemporaries is characterized by the detachment of words from their meaning: “A word is turned upside down. Its contents fall out. Or rather, it turns out it didn’t have any. Words piled intangibly, like the shadow of an empty bottle...” (18) This sense of the transformation of words into objects is specific to late Soviet culture, as Alexei Yurchak has shown.<sup>316</sup> It is embodied by a literary house museum where worship for a writer’s words is expressed through worship of his things. When Alikhanov tags along for one of Galina’s tours, she misquotes a line from “I have built myself a monument,” the essential poem of the Pushkin cult. The irony here is that the Sanctuary was made almost without Pushkin’s own participation, composed primarily of things rather than words, and of things that Pushkin never touched; meanwhile, Pushkin is being misremembered by those entrusted with his memory.

In *Pushkin Hills*, Soviet culture’s voiding of content from language is connected to the Sanctuary’s worship of objects that have little substantive relation to the work of their former owner. Both phenomena are manifested in the tour guides’ cultish love for Pushkin: they profess it constantly, they demand its proof from others, and yet it has little

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<sup>316</sup> See Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*.

or no apparent relation to Pushkin's actual poetic work. "Everyone was crazy about Pushkin," Alikhanov laments, "Crazy about their love for Pushkin. Crazy about their love for their love" (26). When Galina asks, "Do you love Pushkin?" Alikhanov tells us, "Something in me winced, but I replied: 'I love... *The Bronze Horseman*, his prose...'" This is a perverse answer: *The Bronze Horseman* is one of Pushkin's most famous poetic works, but few people would rank Pushkin's prose among his greatest achievements. Galina's next question is, "And what about the poems?" When Alikhanov says he loves the later poems, she asks about the earlier ones; Alikhanov gives in and says he loves those, too (14). The Pushkin cult demands an all-encompassing, undifferentiated love for Pushkin and his work (except, of course, for the material, such as his obscene poetry, that has been excluded from the canon).

Galina's love of Pushkin is not materialistic in any obvious sense: she insists on expressions of love for his writing, and would no doubt be aghast at the thought of Pushkin vodka. Nevertheless, Alikhanov's criticisms resonate with those made against the 1999 jubilee, when critics expressed irritation and even anger at the use of Pushkin's image on kitschy souvenirs. Critics in 1999 wanted to return to the actual literature Pushkin had written, to the unmediated, private relationship between writer and reader. At the end of the twentieth century, this concern about Pushkin materialism was connected to anxieties about the post-Soviet commodification of literature and the privatization of resources, including cultural ones. In *Pushkin Hills*, by contrast, the central problem lies in the use of Pushkin "artifacts" in the service of empty Soviet language and ideological manipulation. The Soviet ritualization of official language makes words into objects rather than conveyors of meaning, let alone the building blocks



of poetry. The phony artifacts are a symptom of this emptiness, and of the results of this ideological manipulation. In comparison to the questions raised in *Pushkin's Overcoat* about the exhaustion of the Russian language, Dovatov exhibits a relatively innocent faith in the possibility of returning to a more authentic way of approaching language.

Dovatov treats the worship of the Pushkin Sanctuary's landscape with casual contempt. "Everything here lives and breathes Pushkin," the ridiculous Galina tells Alikhanov. "Literally [*bukval'no*] every twig, every blade of grass. You can't help but expect him to come out from around the corner... The top hat, the cloak, that familiar profile..." (14). Galina is clearly echoing Geichenko's comment about how Pushkin will answer anyone who calls his name at dusk. By using the word "*bukval'no*," which comes from the word for "letter," in relation to Pushkin's presence within natural objects, she may also be evoking Geichenko's idea that there is writing in every leaf in Mikhailovskoe. Dovatov rejects the idea that letters can be written on leaves, yet another spurious association of the literary and the material, along with the idea that literature is inextricably linked to a landscape—a concept that, as in *kraevedenie* or *rodinovedenie* or in Gordin's guidebook, has nationalist overtones in twentieth-century Russia.

The Sanctuary is teeming with images of Pushkin, but most of them are inaccurate; the real Pushkin has slipped out of sight. On his first visit to the tourist center, Alikhanov notes, "An image of Pushkin greeted me everywhere I looked. Even near the mysterious little brick booth with the 'Inflammable!' sign. The likeness was confined to the sideburns" (21). As Aleksandr Genis writes, "Innumerable Pushkins, overrunning the

sanctuary, are copies without originals, in other words—simulacra.”<sup>317</sup> (Dovlatov seems to have predicted the parade of Pushkin namesakes during the 1999 jubilee.) These Pushkin imitators are empty vessels, representing Pushkin without containing any of his essence.

Part of the work of *Pushkin Hills*, from the perspectives of both Dovlatov and his protagonist Alikhanov, is to retrieve, or perhaps preserve, a version of Pushkin that still feels real to a late Soviet writer or reader. This work must occur outside the realm of official, public discourse, the arena in which the state Pushkin cult has been elaborated, in which the writer has been so thoroughly mummified that he has become unrecognizable. It must happen in private imaginations—individual memory palaces—rather than in public estates. Rediscovery of Pushkin in *Pushkin Hills* is rediscovery of “my Pushkin,” a specific Pushkin who interacts with his reader in private, a Pushkin who is not “our everything,” in the famous formulation of Apollon Grigor’ev, but rather someone specific who must be hidden and defended from the depredations of the official order, the public gaze, state-sponsored communal memory. Asked again and again whether he loves Pushkin, Alikhanov eventually bursts out, “To love publicly is beastly [*skotstvo*]! There is a special term for it in sexual pathology!” (25) Alikhanov has to find a way to love privately in this most public of spaces.

What place, Dovlatov asks in *Pushkin Hills*, can there be in the Pushkin Sanctuary, in the Soviet Union, for a writer who is still alive and trying to make something new? “First they drive the man into the ground and then they begin looking for his personal effects,” Alikhanov tells Viktoria Albertovna. “That’s how it was with

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<sup>317</sup> Genis, “Pushkin u Dovlatova,” 187.

Dostoevsky, that's how it was with Esenin, and that's how it'll be with Pasternak. When they come to their senses they'll start looking for Solzhenitsyn's personal effects..." (34). In imperial Russia and the Soviet Union alike, a writer can only be worshipped properly after he is dead, and society works to hasten his demise. Once the writer has ceased to be inconveniently alive, his personal effects can be collected or represented by rough approximations. Voiceless objects and dead bodies, which pose no danger to the state, can stand in for dangerously articulate subjects and living words with unstable meanings. Alikhanov's choice of outspoken dissident Solzhenitsyn, in particular, seems to explicitly evoke the vitiation of political protest through posthumous celebration.

In the introduction to "Postcards from Pskov," a story that includes material that later made its way into *Pushkin Hills*, Dovlatov writes that he originally thought of dedicating the story to Abram Tertz and calling it "Strolls with d'Anthès." He offered a rather cruel quip in explanation: "Pushkin's murderer, d'Anthès, and the falsifier of [Pushkin's] biography, Geichenko, can be regarded as intellectual allies."<sup>318</sup> Tertz's controversial *Strolls with Pushkin* (written in the second half of the 1960s and published in *tamizdat* in London in 1975) sought to revive the understanding of Pushkin as a real writer by creating an outrageous fantasy that violated taboos associated with the Pushkin cult. Tertz's act of iconoclasm in *Strolls with Pushkin* was motivated by love and respect for the "real," "private" Pushkin, but it was a sharp enough attack on the pieties of the Pushkin cult to provoke a huge backlash when excerpts of it became available in Russia in 1989. Dovlatov does not come close to this level of iconoclasm; his project is more

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<sup>318</sup> Sergei Dovlatov, "'Pskovskie otkrytki' (iz romana *Piat' uglov*)," *Novyi Amerikanets*, 34 (September 27-October 2, 1980), 26. Quoted in Young, *Sergei Dovlatov*, 111.

restorative in nature. He does his best to defend Pushkin by condemning Geichenko. In Dovlatov's depiction, the Pushkin Sanctuary is not a shrine but an extended murder of Pushkin the writer; in order to stop this crime, it is necessary to debunk and discredit the cult. At the same time, it is important to restore the proper respect to Pushkin's remains.

In a key scene, Alikhanov visits the Sviatogorskii Monastery, where Pushkin is buried. Tourists are standing in front of Pushkin's grave, grinning for the camera; Alikhanov finds their smiling faces "repugnant" (35). Alikhanov seems to be troubled not so much by the cult-like treatment of Pushkin, but by the loss of any solemn, spiritual aspect. These tourists cannot be called pilgrims; they lack the necessary reverence and awe at the proximity of the great writer's body, a relic worthy of veneration and sad meditation. The Uspenskii Cathedral, on the other hand, is "real, substantial, and graceful," in contrast with the falsity of so much at the Pushkin Sanctuary. (At that time, the Uspenskii Cathedral, which is located in the same complex as the Sviatogorskii Monastery, was used as a museum to display Pushkin-related artifacts.) In the southern chapel are Bruni's drawing of Pushkin in his grave; Pushkin's death mask; a large painting showing the secret removal of Pushkin's body from Moika 12 (the secrecy was necessary in part to avoid inflaming the sentiments of the public and in part because he had died in an illegal duel); and a second large painting of his funeral.

Apart from Pushkin's writing, these objects are, for Alikhanov, the most authentic at the Pushkin Sanctuary, not only because they depict real events but because they depict the dead Pushkin, the true object of adoration at the Pushkin Sanctuary. At Pushkin's burial site, disrespectful tourists make it impossible to commune with the poet's presence in any meaningful way; Pushkin is hidden from view, both literally and metaphorically.

At the Uspenskii Cathedral, on the other hand, Alikhanov finds himself able to meditate on Pushkin's body and Pushkin's sacrifice. We see that Dovlatov is not opposed to all aspects of Pushkin commemoration: he seems to embrace the solemn genre exemplified by the 1987 jubilee. While he objects to the use of material items as relic-mediums and to Geichenko's theory of the landscape, he has due reverence for Pushkin's actual corpse, and for artistic representations of his corpse. While he might not like the bloodstained couch at Moika 12, one imagines that he would be moved by the death mask. While Tertz and the Conceptualists played with the idea of Pushkin's actual body (and references to the body were among the most controversial elements of *Strolls with Pushkin*), Dovlatov stops short of irreverence towards the poet's person. He rejects what he views as the murder of the writer through commemoration, but he embraces the veneration of the poet's corpse.

It is not surprising that Dovlatov, an author himself, rejects the literary tourism rites at the Sanctuary. For him, the reader should commune with the author alone, on individual terms; the cult-like worship of a writer, with its attendant restriction and manipulation of the writer's image, biography, and oeuvre, is degrading to writer and reader alike, and a symptom of the Soviet Union's larger preference for dead writers over living ones. The writer's death is usually a prerequisite for the establishment of the house museum, and thus for the codification of the writer's biography as part of a larger national biography and the conversion of a private, domestic space into a public, political one<sup>319</sup>; in this sense, Dovlatov is right that for a society intent on reinforcing its sense of its own national identity by using a writer's house and possessions, the only good writer

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<sup>319</sup> Booth, "House and Things," 236.

is a dead writer. On the other hand, *Pushkin Hills* takes a sympathetic, even defensive view of a core aspect of the Pushkin cult, the worshipful treatment of the poet's corpse. In that sense, Alikhanov's responses do not, perhaps, evidence a full rejection of the Pushkin cult, but rather a protest against its corruption. On the other hand, the focus on a respectful visit to the poet's grave could also be interpreted as an attempt to return to a private, intimate relationship between reader and writer. Either way, Dovlatov does not engage in the type of iconoclasm we saw from Prigov, for example, or flaunt taboo depictions or interpretations of Pushkin himself, in the manner of Tertz. Ultimately, *Pushkin Hills* demonstrates a deep respect for Pushkin himself, and, importantly, for his corpse. Dovlatov resembles many of the more middlebrow critics of the 1999 Pushkin jubilee in his urge to defend Pushkin from state-sponsored commemoration. This, I will argue in my next chapter, made him a candidate for semi-official post-Soviet cult status in a way that Prigov or Kibirov were not.

*Выставка рисунков А.С. Пушкина и С. Довлатова*  
**ПУШКИН В ГОСТЯХ У ДОВЛАТОВА**



*«Дом Довлатова в Заповеднике» деревня Березино, Пушкинские Горы, 2016 г.*

*Figure 12: "Pushkin Visits Dovlatov":  
Flier for a 2016 exhibit of drawings of Pushkin and Dovlatov at Dovlatov House*

## **Chapter 4**

### **Pushkin's Happy Home, Dvlatov's Soviet Shack, and the Post-Soviet Writer Cult**

Though state-sponsored excursions are a thing of the past, the post-Soviet Pushkin Sanctuary remains a significant tourism site, maintained with generous state funding. It sees far fewer visitors than it did during the Soviet period, but Russian national identity remains central to its official importance. In particular, the landscape of the Sanctuary, the land of Russia's westernmost contiguous oblast, continues to be framed, as it was by Arkadii Gordin, as central to the site's value for Russian national identity, linked to anxiety about a potentially hostile Europe. In this chapter, I will argue that the current presentation of the Pushkin Sanctuary shows how the Pushkin cult functions as a vehicle for a celebration of Russia's "Golden Age," and as an affirmation of Russian resilience and "resurrection" over the centuries. Despite the fact that the Pushkin Sanctuary as it now exists is a Soviet cultural product, as I showed in the previous chapter, the Sanctuary today leapfrogs over the memory of the Soviet Union, asserting an easy continuity from the "golden" imperial past to the present. This effort is facilitated by the Sanctuary's rustic, undeveloped setting, which seems to exist almost out of time; the nearby town of Pushkin Hills, however, offers a jarring reminder of the poverty that afflicts much of provincial Russia.

Just outside the boundaries of the Sanctuary, however, is a site of literary commemoration whose subject is the late Soviet experience. The recently founded Dvlatov House museum aims to integrate dissident and official, Soviet and post-Soviet alike. Given Dvlatov's hostility to the literary house museum, it is ironic that his former



place of residence near Mikhailovskoe has recently been made into a house museum in his honor—one that seems to parody the house museum tradition while also continuing it. The founding of this private museum is part of the wider tendency to include Dovlatov in what might be termed the semi-official post-Soviet Russian canon. Dovlatov House has been incorporated into an annual cultural festival that is sponsored by the state, and that promotes Putin-era Russia’s eclectic brand of nationalism. Dovlatov’s liminal position—between political poles, between Russia and the U.S., between the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, between mockery of the Pushkin cult and sincere love for Pushkin the writer, between high literature and mass culture—makes him an ideal subject in attempts to reconcile elements of official and dissident culture, to “return” Soviet-era émigré and repressed writers to their homeland, and to create a comforting sense of continuity between the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. These efforts exhibit a conciliatory form of ironic nostalgia, blending affectionate memories of the past with an ironic self-awareness of the trials and tribulations of the late Soviet period.

Dovlatov’s warm, humane, funny stories allow readers to bask in Soviet *byt*, remembering both good and bad through a soft lens. Readers can indulge in nostalgia without feeling like Soviet apologists. This phenomenon is a central element in Aleksei German Jr.’s 2018 biopic *Dovlatov*, which brought ironic nostalgia for the late Soviet intelligentsia into international film festivals, winning praise from many foreign critics. Another 2018 film, Anna Matisson’s *The Sanctuary*, sets Dovlatov’s novella in the present and makes the protagonist a musician rather than a writer. This film affirms Dovlatov’s enduring popularity while emptying his work of much of its original meaning. Its highly unrealistic depiction of the Sanctuary reimagines Pushkin as a global celebrity, rebranded

for the age of Instagram and machine translation. Its Pushkin and Dovlatov are post-Soviet cultural heroes whose status as writers is almost an afterthought. In this, *The Sanctuary* is an apt reflection of the nature of the contemporary Russian writer cult.

*Mikhailovskoe today: Post-Soviet continuity*

I visited Mikhailovskoe in mid-May of 2017, taking a seven-hour bus ride from St. Petersburg to the small, deserted bus station at Pushkin Hills. The town center is a strip of graying wooden houses, dusty roads, and understocked shops. It feels abandoned, even when you see schoolchildren boarding a bus or women out grocery shopping. While Moscow and St. Petersburg have come to feel almost interchangeable with other European metropolises, Pushkin Hills looks like it never made it out of the 1990s. But the town's sad state is overshadowed by the magnificence of the western Russian landscape. In May, the weather was exquisite, warm and sunny without being too hot; the air was fragrant, and golden light filtered through the dense trees of the forest that lies on either side of the road from Pushkin Hills to Mikhailovskoe. By the time one enters Mikhailovskoe's boundaries, just a few kilometers from the town center, the decrepitude of Pushkin Hills is long forgotten. A lake stretches into the distance, reflecting fir trees, cattails, the blue sky and white clouds.

The end of government-sponsored Soviet vacations has limited the Pushkin Sanctuary's visitors to school groups and individuals who are interested either in Pushkin or in the Sanctuary as a historical or natural tourist site, and who can finance their own trips. I observed only one group of schoolchildren and three grown-up tourists, on a beautiful Thursday in mid-May. It is clear, however, that the Sanctuary is well funded

and well maintained: I saw a number of young people planting flowers and shrubs in the manicured landscape.

The houses at Mikhailovskoe can only be entered on a guided tour. The guide for my tour, Iana, was clearly prepared to cater to a variety of interests. A neatly dressed woman in her thirties, she declaimed Pushkin's verses in the fruity, dignified tones of the seasoned Russian literary tour guide, but she also provided bountiful details about cooking, crafts, interior decoration, and other aspects of daily life in Pushkin's time. The tour began in the "kitchen annex" (reconstructed in 1999, as was the "nanny's house" annex nearby, using sketches from 1838<sup>320</sup>) next to the big house; Iana asked us to imagine Arina Rodionovna, Pushkin's famous nanny, sitting by the fire and sewing. She explained the workings of the traditional stove and pointed to a large copper pan, explaining that Pushkin's mother had enjoyed making *varenie* [jam] herself from time to time. The kitchen annex was an idealized model, with snowy white towels spread out to display their exquisite folk embroidery and pristine bundles of dried flowers and herbs. A hybrid of museum and tour styles was evident: the traditional, European-style literary house museum, the more idiosyncratically Russian Antsiferovian performance-tour, with the careful timing of literary quotations, and the ethnographic museum.

The interior of the main house was as pristine as its recently painted exterior. Though Iana quoted Pushkin and inserted biographical details at regular intervals, the tour was largely focused on the function, craftsmanship, and origins of the objects in the rooms. She explained that girls had embroidered the wallpaper by hand, and that their

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<sup>320</sup> Gosudarstvennyi memorial'nyi istoriko-literaturnyi i prirodno-landshaftnyi muzei-zapovednik A.S. Pushkina "Mikhailovskoe." *Ves' Pushkinskii Zapovednik: Putevoditel'* (Mikhailovskoe, 2012), 22-4.

parents had to be careful to marry them off before the girls went blind from sewing. Bearing in mind Geichenko's idea of *veshchevedenie*, of "object-witnesses" and "animate things," or recalling my own recent visit to Moika 12, it was striking how little emphasis Iana placed on the aura of authenticity of the objects at Mikhailovskoe.

Iana asked us to imagine how cozy it had been for the Pushkin family to sit beside the ceramic stoves by gentle lamplight. At the back entrance to the house, where a steep flight of stairs led down to the river, she explained that Pushkin had liked to take just a dip in the river, preferring not to swim for any length of time. On the whole, the image Iana painted of Pushkin was that of a delightful, if somewhat naughty, product of an idyllic society. His unhappiness or frustration became amusing, the occasional sulking of a beloved child.

While Moika 12 offered a carefully choreographed narrative of dramatic martyrdom followed by transcendence, with a heavy emphasis on pain, blood, grief, and death, Mikhailovskoe offered a bucolic vacation experience with an ethnographic bent. The tour guide made no effort to present Pushkin as a proponent of any particular political ideology, and I did not notice any ideological distortions in what she said, apart from her excessively rosy picture of the Pushkins' domestic life and of nineteenth-century life in general. The idea of peasants and aristocrats living in perfect harmony, of course, does have political undertones, and shows how much post-Soviet Russia has distanced itself from the concept of class struggle. One thing missing from the Sanctuary tour was any mention of the Russian Revolution or the Soviet period; it was as if these things had never happened.

Rather than being “*nashe vse*,” “our everything,” a national prophet, the Pushkin at Mikhailovskoe felt like a dear old friend, gifted and charming but not overwhelming. Rather than insisting on being the center of attention, he faded politely into the background, wandering off for a swim as tourists oohed and aahed over the magnificent landscape of western Russia, as they admired their cultural heritage. The Sanctuary offered visitors an opportunity to reflect on the happy coexistence of peasants, with their tidy huts, artful handicrafts, and intimate knowledge of flowers and herbs, and benevolent landowners, with their tastefully furnished country houses, amusing intrigues, leather-bound libraries, and elegant writing tables.

At Mikhailovskoe in 2017, it was not Pushkin who was “our everything:” it was Russia itself. The magic of Pushkin suffused the landscape through the memory of his presence, his writing about it, and the presence of some of his possessions in the house museum; at the same time, the Sanctuary was infused with magic by Pskov’s regional history; recall *kraevedenie* and its belief in the way that place shapes and defines human culture. As in Soviet times, the link from Pushkin to Russia was established through discussion of the land surrounding Mikhailovskoe. In his foreword to a 2012 guidebook to the Pushkin Sanctuary, Sanctuary director Georgii Vasilevich adopts an approach quite similar to that of Arkadii Gordin, though Vasilevich is unconstrained by the nominal Soviet opposition to nationalism. In a pious, sentimental tone that is far removed from literary or historical scholarship, Vasilevich begins by noting that the estate-museum is located on “ancient Pskov land,” then discusses the development of the region from the sixth century on. Its history is that of a united Russian people developing the power to defend their country against foreign invasion: Vasilevich cites the “peasants’ labor,

monks' prayers, architects' talents, military feats and masterful craftsmanship" that fortified the Pskov frontier, which was the first to "take upon itself enemy blows." When the enemy does manage to break through the frontier, Pskov resurrects itself: Vasilevich compares it to a phoenix rising from its own ashes. Generations of Pskovians fulfilled their God-given mission; although most of their names have been lost to history, the sound of their native language survives, as do their frescoes, icons, huts, and folk traditions which, like their hard work, glorified God.

Pushkin arrived, Vasilevich writes, with his gift of "perfect pitch for his father-language [*otchii iazyk*], responsive heart, searching intellect, love for the land of his birth [*rodnaia zemlia*]." Pushkin held "all the Russian world" in his heart; "this world began speaking in today's contemporary language, found immortality in the images of the heroes of Pushkin's works, in depictions of the timeless beauty of the motherland [*rodnaia zemlia*]." In his life and work Pushkin "transfigured [*preobrazil*] the corner of the earth" now called the Pushkin Sanctuary. Today, the Pushkin Sanctuary is the kind of place where the soul "becomes attuned to the great and noble, learns about the world, quiet, peace, harmony."

In Vasilevich's telling, the Pushkin Sanctuary is not only a pleasant tourist attraction; visiting it is a patriotic duty. Vasilevich continues, "It is not possible to fully experience the Motherland [*Rodina*] without encountering this remarkable world. To understand oneself, to understand and love Russia, the Motherland, it is imperative to visit Pushkin at Mikhailovskoe." Vasilevich rhapsodizes about the Sviatogorskii Monastery ("bulwark of faith") and about the mill and historical village in Bugrovo, outside Mikhailovskoe. "Coming to Mikhailovskoe," he writes, "we return home, to the

motherland of our soul, to the lullaby of our great Russian language, our glorious culture, to Pushkin.” He gives the impression that the value of the Pushkin Sanctuary lies primarily in its ability to connect visitors to Russian heritage and nature, not in historical value related to a specific understanding of the poet or his work.<sup>321</sup>

Tourist visits to Stratford-on-Avon, as to other literary pilgrimage sites, skyrocketed in the nineteenth century, when, even as they were facilitated by the new railroad system, they served to counteract anxieties about modernization with nostalgic admiration for England’s cultural heritage. By this point, it was almost considered a patriotic duty to make a Shakespeare pilgrimage.<sup>322</sup> Along similar lines, a visit to the Pushkin Sanctuary is framed—today, as in Soviet times, when Pushkin pilgrimages were paid for by the state— as an opportunity to take pride in Pushkin’s literary achievement and in Russian literature and cultural identity more generally, and to reflect on what the guides and museums depict as the ineffably Russian qualities of Pushkin’s achievement. This Russianness is associated with Pushkin’s nanny, Arina Rodionovna, who inculcated him with Russian folklore, and also with his own active role in making Russian folklore the subject of great poetry (as in his *skazki*, or fairy tales), and in developing a modern Russian literary language. But Pushkin’s “Russianness” is also a matter of wishful thinking, of the desire to cast him in the role of Russia’s bard, to make his glory Russia’s glory. Guidebooks from the Soviet and post-Soviet periods depict a pilgrimage to Mikhailovskoe as a patriotic duty for reasons that have relatively little to do with

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<sup>321</sup> Georgii Vasilevich, “Priglasenie k puteshestviuu,” in *Ves’ Pushkinskii Zapovednik*, 3-4.

<sup>322</sup> Rosenthal, “Shakespeare’s Birthplace.”

Pushkin's biography or with the influence of Mikhailovskoe on the poet's oeuvre, and everything to do with the larger Pushkin cult, Russian national identity and Mikhailovskoe's location in Pskov, the westernmost oblast of contiguous Russia and, over the centuries, the site of many battles with invaders. It is striking that both Arkadii Gordin, writing about the Sanctuary in 1952, and Vasilevich, writing in 2012, find it necessary to mention medieval battles in Pskov in the context of a Pushkin estate museum.

During my trip, I noted that the more jingoistic elements of Russian nationalism were kept outside the Sanctuary, confined to the town of Pushkin Hills—which, with its far less charming landscape and less well-kept interiors, is in need of a more potent kind of national pride. Down the road from Pushkin's grave at Sviatogorskii Monastery is a monument to local heroes of the Second World War; when I visited, a huge banner across the street bore an image of Pushkin with the words, "But there is no Russia without my little motherland!" (*"A net Rossii bez maloi rodiny moei!"*) Thanks to its connection to Pushkin, the small town was an indispensable part of the great Russian project. The alienation of the Russian provinces from Moscow and St. Petersburg is an important problem in contemporary Russian politics: in Pushkin Hills, the Pushkin cult was being milked for its potential to affirm the significance of a town that had been abandoned by progress.

*Dovlatov House: An ironic literary house museum*

Just beyond the boundaries of Mikhailovskoe is Arina R., an upscale, pseudo-rustic hotel and restaurant named for Pushkin's nanny, with guest cottages and an



unobstructed view of fields and forests. Across the street is a dusty, unpaved road with a sign announcing “Dovlatov House.” This unassuming path leads to a lopsided house of graying planks, its crooked window frames painted a faded blue. The sagging roof is propped up by metal beams, obviously a recent addition. This is the house where Dovlatov lived when he worked as a tour guide at Mikhailovskoe. It served as the model for the squalid shack where Alikhanov lives in *Pushkin Hills*. Quotes from the novella were printed on plaques and affixed to the walls and trees, as in Mikhailovskoe, but the effect was quite different, since the quotes included significant amounts of profanity and irreverent humor, in keeping with the overall tone of *Pushkin Hills*.

In the 1990s, Vera Sergeevna Khaliziva, a sometime poet, bought the house for a negligible sum, using it as a summer dacha. Appreciating its literary appeal, Khaliziva allowed Dovlatov fans to visit, turning the house into an informal “people’s museum” [*narodnyi muzei*]. But the house was falling apart, Khaliziva did not have the money to renovate it, and she was soon becoming too old to visit. She was, however, reluctant to sell it to a non-literary buyer, since such a person would most likely demolish it. Eventually, a group of businessmen were found who wanted to preserve the house as a literary monument.<sup>323</sup> What had functioned in *Pushkin Hills* as the antithesis of the Pushkin estate museum became a private house museum, albeit a rather ironic one.

When I visited, there was only one person at this private house museum: Natal’ia Ivanovna Riasintseva, a seventy-something woman who had known Dovlatov personally. After selling me my ticket (150 rubles, expensive by Pskov standards), she commenced a tour that began with a set of banners that hung outside the house, each devoted to a

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<sup>323</sup> Conversation with Natal’ia Riasintseva, May 21, 2017.

different phase of Dovlatov's life. They had recently been blown down by the wind and put back up in the wrong order: an act of accidental Conceptualism.

Riasintseva had a strong sense of the tragedy of twentieth-century Russian literature: the writing that was confiscated by the KGB, never to be seen again, as in the cases of Babel and Zoshchenko, and the literature that never had the chance to be written, because its authors were killed. "The history of twentieth-century Russia was a never-ending series of changes, catastrophes, cataclysms," she said, "from tsarist tyranny to proletarian tyranny." In Pushkin Hills, however, Dovlatov was far from the center of power, and this gave him a measure of freedom. Despite his irreverent treatment of the Pushkin Sanctuary in his fiction, Dovlatov really did love the place, Riasintseva insisted; after he emigrated, it was one of the lost places he remembered with the greatest nostalgia, along with St. Petersburg and Tallinn, Estonia, where he lived from 1972-75 while working at Russian language newspapers, experiences he documented in his book *The Compromise* (1983), which he worked on at the Sanctuary.

Riasintseva explained that she had known Dovlatov through her husband, a scientist who made regular expeditions to the Arctic. She was full of affection for Dovlatov as a man and as a writer, describing the way he captivated people with his beautiful, deep voice, inspiring adoration in his readers, radio listeners, and acquaintances. She firmly believed that reading Dovlatov was a requirement for cultured people; for her, he was part of the canon. However, she stopped short of presenting him as a heroic figure. Instead, he was a flawed man and a writer of works that continue to give pleasure and comfort to readers. The Dovlatov of Riasintseva's account had done his best to navigate the perilous straits of political compromise in an authoritarian system.

She emphasized the period he had spent in Estonia, which she viewed as a pivotal one in his life, the beginning of his defeat: his first attempt to “sell himself,” as she put it, and a failed one. Her casual, chatty, realistic tone was a far cry from the idealized, carefully choreographed tours at Moika 12 or Mikhailovskoe; Riasintseva was not an adherent of the Antsiferov method.

Mikhailovskoe was an idealized restoration in which the visitor experience relied, as Geichenko explained, on creative curation and imaginative effort from visitors. That museum was about creating an atmosphere, a mood, a sense of inspiration. At Dovlatov House, by contrast, Riasintseva told me that everything in the house was authentic: the uninviting metal-framed single beds, the rusted stove, the warped floorboards. “You just have to use your imagination to add cigarette butts, empty bottles, a terrible smell,” she laughed. She apologized for the fact that there were curtains hanging in Dovlatov’s bedroom; someone had hung them up, she said, after Dovlatov was gone, and no one had ever taken them down again. The authenticity of the attractions extended even to the people who worked at the museum. The model for Tolik, one of Alikhanov’s drinking buddies in *Pushkin Hills*, lived just across the street from the house; he and his wife helped take care of the museum, and visitors were sometimes fortunate enough to meet him. Karamzin imagined Rousseau’s characters in the Meillerie landscape; visitors to Dovlatov House could see one of Dovlatov’s characters in the flesh. Dovlatov House took a warts-and-all approach to authenticity that was, at least superficially, the polar opposite of the approach taken by Mikhailovskoe, in the Soviet period and in the present.

At Mikhailovskoe everything is pristine, polished, idyllic—but also reconstructed, re-created, and distant from its source. At Dovlatov House, everything is squalid,

decrepit, cheap, old, rusty—and authentic. (In fact, the objects were apparently not quite as authentic as Riasintseva claimed—on which more below.) In this sense, Dovlatov House appears to follow Dovlatov’s lead in mocking Geichenko’s attempts to create an aura of authenticity. In *Pushkin Hills*, Alikhanov objects to the idea of relating to an author through material objects, and also to the lack of authenticity—what he perceives as the phoniness—of many of the “artifacts” at the Sanctuary. While the Sanctuary offers a space in which to imagine an idealized pre-revolutionary Russian past of harmony, elegance, and beauty, glossing over the violent ruptures of Russian history, Dovlatov House brings visitors into Soviet *byt*, mundane, dirty, uncomfortable everyday life. The house is presented with a strong dose of humor that is generated in part by its non-conformity to traditional expectations of the literary house museum. Mikhailovskoe is a shining example of such museums, with its immaculate buildings, carefully curated historical and literary exhibit, and magnificent grounds; the ramshackle Dovlatov House laughs at its neighbor, even as it follows in its footsteps. Dovlatov House highlights the dissonance between the squalid qualities of its physical space and lofty literary ideals, offering visitors the chance to imagine the effect on the writerly soul of living in a shack whose ceiling was too low to stand upright. The result of such an imaginative exercise is, in some ways, the desired result of a visit to a literary house museum. The visitor will likely find it easy to imagine the allure of drinking binges under such conditions, and also, perhaps, the satirical urge, allowing a deeper understanding of Dovlatov.

Dovlatov House does not stimulate feelings of Russian national pride in the way Mikhailovskoe aims to do; it is instead a vivid testament to the miserable living conditions of at least some Soviet people. A visit to Dovlatov House is thus a much more

ambiguous and perhaps uncomfortable experience than a trip to Mikhailovskoe. The Russian Golden Age, a flawless expanse of countryside, offers fertile ground for patriotism and nostalgia. A rural Soviet hovel, on the other hand, draws the mind to a much less admirable period in Russian history, while also gesturing towards the continued problem of rural Russian poverty and decline, so evident in the nearby town of Pushkin Hills. From this perspective, Dovlatov House diverges dramatically from the classic literary house museum's link to national pride and celebration. The museum accurately reflects Dovlatov's depiction, in *Pushkin Hills*, of the ludicrous contrast between the Sanctuary's Pushkin fantasy land and the debauched, grimy Soviet world that lies beyond it.

The nature of the objects in Dovlatov House raises questions about authenticity and aura that are specific to Soviet mass production, while pointing to the difficult material reality faced by a Soviet writer. Most are authentic, in the sense that they are (according to the museum staff, at least) the objects that were there when Dovlatov was. Many of the objects are also items that were mass-produced in the Soviet Union; their twins could no doubt still be found throughout the countries of the former Soviet Union, where even private spaces were often remarkably homogenous due to the extremely limited variety of items available for purchase. Soviet mass-produced objects imbued with the aura of proximity to a famous author offer a new twist on ideas about the aura of the original, and on the idea of relics as mediators of a tourist's contact with a writer. For visitors to Dovlatov House today, many of the objects on view are likely to be familiar; perhaps the visitor had, or has, an identical object in his own home, or remembers one from his childhood. The sense of familiarity is not only general (the writer ate breakfast

every morning at this table; I eat breakfast every morning, too) but specific: the writer listened to a radio identical to the one I listened to at my parents' house.

The Dovlatov House website states, however, that the objects in the house did not *belong* to Dovlatov, but are from the period; it calls for donations of other artifacts of the Soviet 1970s.<sup>324</sup> This suggests that Riasintseva was exaggerating the museum's claim to authenticity. Of course, the excitement a viewer might feel at being confronted with a room just as Dovlatov experienced it is only produced by the viewer's belief that the scene is authentic; the interchangeability of mass-produced Soviet objects makes "authenticity" even more nebulous. At the same time, Riasintseva never claimed that the objects had belonged to Dovlatov; there is no sense of Dovlatov's personality (let alone his DNA) in the objects, as there is at Moika 12 in Pushkin's library or at his desk. This is not only a reflection on Dovlatov House; it also reflects the realities of life for a writer who had almost no money and no fixed residence, who was renting a cheap room for a brief period, and who probably brought nothing with him save a few personal effects, which he no doubt took with him when he left. Dovlatov House inscribes the suffering of Soviet writers in public memory, even as it erases the transient nature of Dovlatov's residence in Pushkin Hills by making the shack a shrine.

The website for Dovlatov House presents the museum as a place that can help visitors understand the "fate of Soviet writers" through the "object-witnesses"

[*veshchestvennye svideteli*] of the era:

Sergei Dovlatov is one of those writers who succeeded, in his work, in preserving history. But to truly get a feel for the difficult fate of Soviet writers and simple

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<sup>324</sup> "O muzee," Dom Dovlatova v Pushkinskikh Gorakh, <http://dom-dovlatova.ru/o-my3ee>.

people, it is usually not enough to read even the greatest artistic works. Fortunately, one might say through a miracle, the object-witnesses of this epoch have been preserved. Thanks to them, today we can not only imagine but see the conditions in which the tour guide Sergei Dovlatov was living in the summer of 1977... The creators of the Dovlatov House museum have done everything in their power to preserve the atmosphere and spirit of the epoch. And now this unprepossessing structure has become a monument to the writer, to literature, to history, and to the complicated fate of Soviet people.<sup>325</sup>

The debt to the philosophy of the Sanctuary, and in particular to Geichenko, is obvious; the text almost directly echoes Geichenko's language about animate objects, which is extremely ironic given Dovlatov's relentless mockery, in *Pushkin Hills*, of Geichenko's idea of *veshchevedenie*. On the other hand, the Dovlatov House text devotes less emphasis to the animation of the place and its objects by the writer's genius, focusing instead on its ability to illuminate the life experience not only of Dovlatov, but of Soviet writers and Soviet people more generally. In this sense, the museum seems to position itself as part literary museum, part museum of the Soviet everyday.

The website text goes on to state that Dovlatov went to the Pushkin Sanctuary to escape from his debts and from family problems that were imperiling his creative output, the central goal of his life. He hoped also to find a way to resolve the conflict with state power [*vlast'*] that was endangering the "freedom of thought that gives birth to creativity." But the website explicitly decouples the experience of censorship from political dissidence, explaining that Dovlatov "had no relation to dissidents"; he wrote for official publications, he never signed any petitions against the government. The text also notes the paradox that no matter how much Soviet writers might try to escape the strictures of Soviet reality, this reality was their subject, even their muse:

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

Many people ‘ran away’ to Pushkin Hills in the ‘70s and ‘80s, wanting to hide for a while from Soviet reality [*deistvitel’nosti*]. Nevertheless, the work of all the great writers of that epoch, including Dovlatov’s, became great because it expressed the essence of that epoch. What would Dovlatov have done without that Soviet reality? What would he have written about? Would he have become a writer? He didn’t know how to do anything except describe this Soviet reality. In it he found his muse.”

Unpleasant though it might have been, Soviet reality—as captured in Dovlatov House, and documented in *Pushkin Hills*—also provided the material for the art of the period, which otherwise would not have existed. In this sense, the museum is as much about the epoch as it is about the writer, but the everyday becomes important in part as a source of cultural inspiration.

The museum’s directors hope, they announce on the website, to create a larger museum to Soviet writers of the 1970s and ‘80s: Brodsky, Solzhenitsyn, Aksenov, Bitov, Bondarev, Rasputin, Bykov, Popov (it is not clear whether this is Valerii or Evgenii Popov; both are still alive), Okudzhava, Vysotskii, Kushner (also still alive). The diversity of their list, which mixes conservative dissidence, postmodern experimentation, post-Stalinist war writing, Village Prose, ersatz Gulag songs, and much more, testifies to their desire to depolarize the Soviet cultural field, thereby creating a monument to a lost literary civilization. This complicated period, they say, is the “bronze age” of Russian literature, in which it is now almost impossible to divide writers according to their political beliefs or literary predilections: “for us, Soviet literature is a single cultural layer, whose memory must be preserved in Pushkin Hills.” They promise that the museum will include a vodka bar [*riumochnaia*], “immortal [*netlennyi*] symbol of the Soviet epoch.” Dovlatov House does not offer an appealing picture of Soviet *byt*, but its connection to a popular tragicomic novella suggests that for all its problems, Soviet *byt*



could be productive and amusing, and therefore not devoid of nostalgic or imaginative appeal. Meanwhile, the website's attempt to move away from the old dichotomy of "official" and "dissident" writing and towards a unifying understanding of the writers of the late Soviet epoch can be understood as an attempt to create a usable literary past, to memorialize late Soviet culture in a way that is not focused on irreconcilable differences between writers and the state. This new, more peaceable reading of cultural history resembles the Sanctuary's long-running project of emphasizing continuity over rupture.

The Dovlatov House website presents the Pushkin Sanctuary as a space with cultural significance for Soviet-era writers, independent of Pushkin the writer, whether as a literary or a cultural figure. The most important factor uniting the different house museums of Pushkin Hills is Russia's unique natural beauty:

There is no other place that better reflects the Russian soul, which cannot remain indifferent to the beauty of local nature. Today, too, people come to Pushkin Hills not only because two centuries ago a great poet created his immortal works here. Not only because Dovlatov came here during the twilight of the Soviet epoch. They come for nature: gullies, groves, storks, and stunning landscapes, crystal-clear air and endless vistas. People go to these places to see and enjoy the stunning beauty of nature, which is eternal, like the eternal values passed from one generation of Russians to the next!

Dovlatov House's website, like the writing of Soviet and post-Soviet Sanctuary directors alike, emphasizes the spiritual link between Russian people and Russian land, and the central importance of the landscape in the experience of visitors to Pushkin Hills. This serves to reinforce and extend the Sanctuary's sense of continuity through the pre-revolutionary, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods, a thread that endures despite many moments of violence and uncertainty.

Despite the parodic qualities of Dovlatov House, its founders have created a house museum, something to which Dovlatov appears to have been opposed on principle; they celebrate the idea of “object-witnesses,” following Geichenko’s ideas of *veshchevedenie*; and they echo the Sanctuary’s attribution of semi-magical qualities to the landscape, linking it to national qualities and national values. In this sense, Dovlatov House rejects the most basic ideas of Dovlatov’s novella. This violation of Dovlatov’s principles seems relatively minor, however, when we examine the newly established “Dovlatov Fest,” the topic of my next section, which tells the story of a persecuted Soviet writer’s transmogrification into a semi-official literary icon of the Putin era.

*Dovlatov Fest: Post-Soviet institutionalization of a Soviet writer*

Dovlatov’s work began to be published in large print runs in Russia just a few months after his death in 1990; he had never been famous in Russia before then, though he had experienced significant success in the United States after emigrating, in part thanks to his friend Joseph Brodsky’s patronage.<sup>326</sup> He soon became intensely popular in Russia, though many literary critics there were unimpressed by his work. In 2001, prominent writer Dmitrii Bykov argued that Dovlatov became famous not because of his exceptional literary achievements or personal qualities, but simply because his work was first published in Russia just as the Soviet Union collapsed; at that moment, Bykov argued, those who had left appeared to be geniuses, and those who remained seemed “at best conformists, and at worst traitors.” (Bykov asserts that Brodsky, too, benefitted from

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<sup>326</sup> Oleg Kudrin, “Dovlatov kak kul’t,” *Novyi mir* 1.1065 (2014), 162-63.

this phenomenon.) According to Bykov, it helped that Dovlatov died at exactly this moment.<sup>327</sup> The coincidence of Dovlatov's death with the end of the Soviet Union would help create a strong association between commemoration of Dovlatov and commemoration of the Soviet Union, as shown by the rhetoric of Dovlatov House's creators.

According to Oleg Kudrin, nearly every article and review about Dovlatov during his first wave of fame in Russia announced something like "Dovlatov has reached the Russian reader (or the motherland, or his admirers) after his death." In Kudrin's melodramatic phrasing, Dovlatov's burst of posthumous fame "created the effect of a miraculous Easter resurrection."<sup>328</sup> New waves of fame for dead writers, the "resurrection" of literature suppressed by the Soviet Union, were characteristic of perestroika, when enthusiasm for the newly available works of writers like Pasternak and Zamiatin contributed to the explosive popularity of "thick journals."<sup>329</sup> While it is not uncommon for dead writers to be rediscovered, the booming posthumous careers of writers like Bulgakov during perestroika suggested a kind of alternate history for the Soviet Union, a reminder of what Russian culture could have been if not for Soviet censorship and repressions. An alternate canon emerged for the Russian twentieth century, as Mandelstam, Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, Babel, and Bulgakov, among others, assumed the positions denied them during their lifetimes.

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<sup>327</sup> Elena Ivanitskaia and Dmitrii Bykov, "Pisali, ne guliali: Epistoliarnyi roman odnogo epistoliarnogo romana," *Druzhba narodov* (2001), No. 4. Accessed online at <http://magazines.russ.ru/druzhba/2001/4/ivan.html>.

<sup>328</sup> Kudrin, *Dovlatov kak kul't*, 162-63.

<sup>329</sup> Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution*, 108.

Dovlatov occupies a more ambiguous position in the post-Soviet literary canon. Though he was a victim of Soviet censorship, he did not die as a direct consequence of political persecution, and he managed to emigrate many years before his death. Most of his work was published in the U.S. during his lifetime, when he was already out of the Soviet Union and thus safe from the kind of retaliation that writers could face for sending their work abroad; besides, most of his work was published in the 1980s, as the Soviet censorship mechanisms were disintegrating. His suffering at the hands of the Soviet state was not nearly substantial enough to qualify him as a political martyr. In any case, he made it clear that he was not prepared to sacrifice himself for his political beliefs: he went out of his way to reject any identity as a political dissident. And yet he received kind words from the ultra-conservative super-dissident Solzhenitsyn, to whom he had presented signed copies of his books, and their names became linked.<sup>330</sup> He also received crucial professional help from Nobel laureate Brodsky, who had rejected dissident status but had been the defendant in a much-publicized 1964 trial, accused of “parasitism,” exiled to Archangel’sk oblast, and then pressured to emigrate, which cemented his status as a persecuted, heroic writer in the eyes of the world. Dovlatov became associated with yet another subsection of late Soviet unofficial culture when the three-volume edition of his work, released in 1995 by St. Petersburg’s Limbus Press, was illustrated by Aleksandr Florenskii, a member of the Mit’ki group, underground artists who refused political identification or any participation in mainstream society. (The first edition of Prigov’s “Pushkin’s Evgenii Onegin” was also illustrated by Florenskii, and Florenskii and other Mit’ki members contributed illustrations to *Pushkin’s Overcoat*.) Meanwhile, Dovlatov’s

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<sup>330</sup> Kudrin, *Dovlatov kak kul’t*, 163.

writing shows deep respect for the Russian literary classics—differentiating him from the iconoclastic antics of the Conceptualists or the Mit'ki, among other underground late Soviet cultural movements—and he clearly aspires to be a serious writer, but he deals with low, comical themes. His prose has an easy, realistic feel, and is not challenging in the manner of experimental literature. In short, Dovlatov's connections and associations extend into many of the subcategories of late Soviet culture and politics, making him difficult to categorize. In the binary systems of official and dissident literature and of high and low culture, Dovlatov is firmly planted in a gray area.

That said, as noted by the Dovlatov House website, it is impossible to imagine Dovlatov's writing without the Soviet Union. This is in part because of the time period in which he wrote (unlike Mandelstam or Akhmatova, Dovlatov never had a chance to be a pre-Soviet writer, simply because of his date of birth), and in part because the Soviet way of life is a central topic in all of his work, even that written after emigration. Dying just a year before the end of the Soviet Union, Dovlatov missed the chance to evolve as a post-Soviet writer, and he did not seize the opportunity to become an American writer, either. Bykov observes cuttingly that while Brodsky emigrated to “America,” Dovlatov emigrated to “Russian America,” a small pond. Meanwhile, despite tragic elements in his own fate and in his work, Dovlatov appears to be a friendly, approachable, endearing figure. His work is amusing, engaging, and accessible. While he points clearly to many awful aspects of the Soviet Union, his portraits of it often have a warm irony that does not exclude the possibility of nostalgia. In 2000, Stephen Lovell hypothesized that Dovlatov's popularity might be explained by readers' desire for a measure of comfort, writing, “What post-Soviet citizens appear to want is reading matter that does not remind

them of the malaise of their own society and at the same time projects a fundamentally stable moral universe.”<sup>331</sup> For all these reasons, Dovlatov was a perfect candidate for fame in post-Soviet Russia, functioning as a vehicle for the mixed feelings of the masses, who recognized the drawbacks of the Soviet Union but who were also increasingly aware of the shortcomings of the new system that followed it, and who were—as developments in contemporary Russian culture and politics show—increasingly susceptible to nostalgia, albeit of a selective and sometimes ironic variety, for the Soviet period. Bykov suggests that Dovlatov’s posthumous fame was in part a product of Russia’s first wave of literary capitalism, as readers “voted with their wallets”<sup>332</sup>; the novelty of capitalism is essential to this formulation.

Dovlatov’s appeal to ambivalent nostalgists helps explain his place in the new semi-official Russian literary canon. The Putin years have seen a marked rise in certain types of nationalist rhetoric and a selective nostalgia for the Soviet Union, fostered and curated by the government.<sup>333</sup> Rather than attempting to impose a monolithic ideology, the state actively cultivates multiple ideological strains.<sup>334</sup> Dovlatov’s work certainly does not celebrate the Soviet Union, but it allows for fond remembrance of some aspects of it. Meanwhile, the links between Dovlatov and the Sanctuary, and Dovlatov House’s

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<sup>331</sup> Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution*, 135-6.

<sup>332</sup> Ivanitskaia and Bykov, “Pisali, ne guliali.”

<sup>333</sup> See Shaun Walker, *The Long Hangover: Putin’s New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>334</sup> See Marlene Laruelle, “Putin’s Regime and the Ideological Market: A Difficult Balancing Game,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Task Force White Paper, March 16, 2017. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/03/16/putin-s-regime-and-ideological-market-difficult-balancing-game-pub-68250>. Last accessed on Nov. 28, 2018.

ironic reinforcement of the tradition of the house museum, permit the integration of the enduring Pushkin cult, which has survived three epochs of Russian government, and the much newer Dovlatov cult, which bridges the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Dovlatov's link to Pushkin offers a convenient way of presenting a continuous line of Russian literature, from Pushkin to the present.

The newfound Dovlatov cult is most evident in the recently established Dovlatov Fest. Andrei Turchak, a member of Putin's United Russia party and governor of Pskov oblast until his replacement in October 2017,<sup>335</sup> is a Dovlatov fan; Natal'ia Riasintseva, the tour guide at Dovlatov House, told me that this was the reason for the annual Dovlatov festival that began in 2015. (She also said that this event required "reconciliation" with the Sanctuary; apparently the Sanctuary's management was not pleased by the idea.) While Dovlatov House is a private institution, Dovlatov Fest was sponsored by the Russian Ministry of Culture, Pskov oblast, TASS (Russia's official state news agency), and the state-owned TV station Rossiya 24.

The first Dovlatov Fest was held in September 2015. It had been envisioned as a cultural event that would bring together contemporary literature, poetry, film, theater, and sculpture. Well-known figures in each artistic area had been enlisted to curate the program: novelist Viktor Erofeev, poet Vera Polozkova, filmmaker Andrei Plakhov, theater artist Pavel Kaplevich, and sculptor Aidan Salakhova. Activities included a trip to Pushkin Hills, a tour of Mikhailovskoe and of Pushkin's grave, a visit to Dovlatov House,

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<sup>335</sup> "Another Russian Regional Governor Replaced," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 12, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-pskov-governor-replaced-regional-reshuffle-continues/28789764.html>. Accessed Nov. 28, 2018.

a tour of the Pskov Kremlin, and literary and theatrical performances. None of the activities were focused on Dovlatov's specific works; instead, he was taken as a general inspiration.<sup>336</sup>

Erofeev cited Dovlatov's value as a non-didactic example of how to live in a fallen world, making an implicit parallel between the political difficulties of the Soviet period and the present: "The figure of Dovlatov is becoming our pocket guide to how to live. We have to thank him for never wagging his finger, never telling us what to do, but giving each of us the ability to choose our own compromise." Filmmaker and festival participant Aleksei German Jr. (whose 2018 film *Dovlatov* I discuss below) struck a different note, saying that Dovlatov was unable to force himself to become a "Soviet writer," that he was "absolutely uncompromising."<sup>337</sup> (This is an odd statement to make about someone who wrote for Soviet newspapers and published an entire book called *The Compromise*.) The festival was attended by a reported 10,000 people, including conservative nationalist Russian Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinskii, who told a Russia 1 interviewer that Dovlatov was "without a doubt, an extraordinary literary phenomenon [*vydaiushcheesia literaturnoe iavlenie*] of the second half of the nineteenth century [*sic*]."<sup>338</sup> It was a gaffe that could have been straight out of Dovlatov, or any other satirist of official stupidity.

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<sup>336</sup> "Festival' Sergeia Dovlatova v Pskove," *Snob*, September 22, 2014, <https://snob.ru/profile/26015/blog/81334>. Accessed Nov. 28, 2018.

<sup>337</sup> "Festival' Sergeia Dovlatova 'Zapovednik'," *Sobaka*, September 21, 2015, <http://www.sobaka.ru/photo/photo/40111>.

<sup>338</sup> "Vladimir Medinskii nazval Sergeia Dovlatova pisatelem 19 veka," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DIItHzJE4OaY>. On Medinskii's political views, see Maria Lipman, "Meet the Second-Rate Academic Who is Vladimir Putin's Culture Cop," *The New*



The 2015 Dovlatov Fest met with controversy due to Pskov governor Turchak's participation. Just as the festival was scheduled to begin, the daily newspaper *Kommersant* published an interview in which Turchak was accused of ordering the near-fatal 2010 assault of prominent journalist Oleg Kashin, who had called Turchak a profane name in an online comment. In response, the well-known poets Sergei Gandlevskii, Aleksei Tsvetkov, and Polina Barskova announced that they would boycott the festival, which they characterized as Turchak's pet project. The staff of the magazine *Russkii Pioneer* joined in the boycott. The head of the Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communications issued a statement that he had canceled his visit to the festival because he did not want to appear to support Pskov oblast leadership, but later announced that the statement had been "incorrectly" issued, and that he would miss it because he was on vacation.<sup>339</sup> The awkward retraction suggested political pressure. Here was deep irony of the non-literary variety: a festival named in honor of a censored, harassed writer was now being boycotted because its key sponsor had been involved in an attack on a journalist.

Unsurprisingly, the website for Dovlatov Fest emphasizes many of the same themes stressed in Soviet and post-Soviet guides to the Pushkin Sanctuary, while folding Dovlatov into the mixture. Pskov oblast is "a land of monasteries and sanctuaries, of

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*Republic*, May 23, 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/117896/vladimir-medinsky-russias-culture-minister-putin-toady>. Accessed Nov. 28, 2018.

<sup>339</sup> Tom Balmforth, "Outcry Mounts As Russian Governor Accused In Journalist's Beating," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 17, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-kashin-attack-turchak-accused-outcry/27254123.html>. Andrew Roth, "Journalist Oleg Kashin knows who tried to kill him," *Washington Post*, September 18, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/09/18/journalist-oleg-kashin-knows-who-tried-to-kill-him/?utm\\_term=.ac9a51af418c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/09/18/journalist-oleg-kashin-knows-who-tried-to-kill-him/?utm_term=.ac9a51af418c). Accessed Nov. 28, 2018.

lakes and national parks, of Pushkin and Dovlatov, ancient Rus' and new Russia."<sup>340</sup>

Pskov was among the first places settled by Russians, with archaeological discoveries from the ninth century and frescoes from the twelfth century, the “oldest monument of the Christian culture of Rus’.” Once again, the Sanctuary is a place emblematic of the resilience of the Russian nation, of historical continuity, and of the close ties between Russia’s culture and its land.

It was at the Pushkin Sanctuary that Dovlatov collected material for *Pushkin Hills*, which of all Dovlatov’s works is, the Dovlatov Fest website observes, “the hardest to translate into English—due to both the form of the novella [*povest*’], atypical for English-language literature, and its wordplay and large quantity of expressions that are only comprehensible to Russians.” Unlike Dovlatov’s other works, the website continues, which were translated into English shortly after publication, *Pushkin Hills* was translated only recently, thanks to Dovlatov’s daughter Ekaterina.

There are a number of odd statements here, and all of them can be linked to an attempt to glorify the unique attributes of Russia and Russian. While the novella form is certainly more common in Russian literature than in English-language literature, it is by no means unknown, and there is no reason its form—which is a simple question of length—would add to translation difficulties. Almost all of Dovlatov’s works are novellas, and many use extensive wordplay that poses serious problems for translators—notably *The Zone*, with its prison slang. Pointing to the fact that *Pushkin Hills* was only (could only be) translated by Dovlatov’s daughter suggests that a blood tie was

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<sup>340</sup> “O festivale,” Zapovednik/Dovlatov Fest, <http://dovlatovfest.ru/o-festivale/istoriya.html>. Accessed Nov. 28, 2018.

necessary; a non-Russian would have been incapable of the task. The book is only comprehensible to Russians; mastery of the Russian language and familiarity with the cultural context is not enough. In this framework, Dovlatov’s writing, like the Pushkin Sanctuary, is essentially Russian, by and for Russians and closed to outsiders. This is similar to Russian nationalist portrayals of Pushkin as a writer who stands for Russia’s “shared spiritual space,” which can never truly be grasped by non-Russians.<sup>341</sup> (Of course, Pushkin’s poetry is also extremely difficult to translate well.)

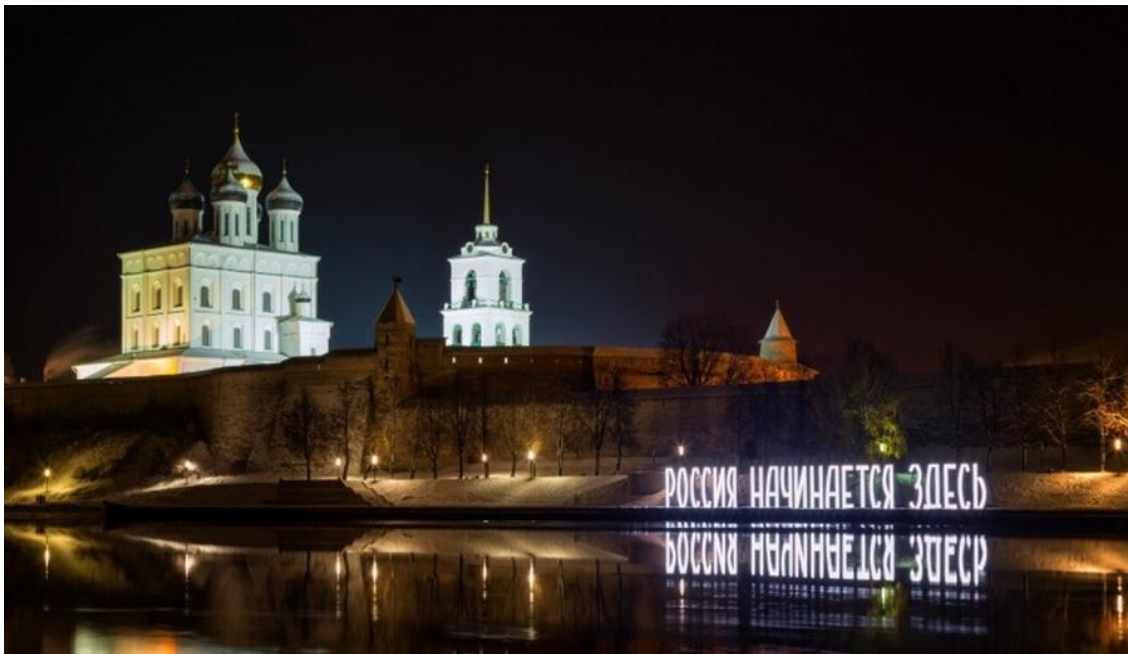


Figure 13: “Russia Begins Here” light installation, Pskov.<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Surat, “Pushkinskii iubilei kak zaklinanie istorii.”

<sup>342</sup> From “U sten Pskovskogo kremlia vkliuchili svetovuiu installiatsiiu “Rossiia nachinaetsia zdes’,” *Pskovskoe Agenstvo Informatsii*, Sept. 23, 2016, <https://informpskov.ru/news/222962.html>. Accessed Nov. 18, 2018.

In 2016, Dovlatov Fest included such diverse figures as musician Leonid Fedorov of the innovative underground 1980s band Auktsyon, film director Pavel Lungin, and Pskov governor Turchak—apparently the scandal around Oleg Kashin’s attack had faded enough in public memory that he was allowed to appear. The festival included the governor’s opening of a public art work on the banks of the Velikaia river, in front of the walls of the Pskov Kremlin: a 60-meter neon sentence, “RUSSIA BEGINS HERE” [*Rossiia nachinaetsia zdes*].<sup>343</sup> “This phrase belongs by right to Pskov,” said Turchak. “The sacred Russian land came from here, this is the motherland of the holy princess Olga, the Russian government was born here.”<sup>344</sup> Dovlatov Fest bridged art and national power, marking Pskov as the boundary of Russia, in defiance of menacing Western Europeans who threatened Russia’s western border. Dovlatov and Pushkin were re-nationalized, this time becoming part of the cultural complex of Putin’s post-Soviet Russia.

The 2017 festival took a similarly eclectic approach, with free rap and rock concerts, the unveiling of a St. Petersburg artist’s graffiti-style portrait of Dovlatov on the cement support of a Pskov bridge, and an appearance by the filmmaker Andrei Zviagintsev, who received international acclaim for his 2014 film *Leviathan*, which was widely interpreted as a criticism of Russian corruption despite Zviagintsev’s statement that it was based on an American news story, as well as on Biblical sources. The film had been partly funded by the Russian Ministry of Culture, but Medinskii announced that he

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<sup>343</sup> “V Pskove proshel trekh dnevnyi festival, posviashchennyi zhizni i tvorchestvu Sergeia Dovlatova,” *Pskovskoe Aгенstvo Informatsii*, September 27, 2016, <http://informpskov.ru/news/224013.html>. Accessed Nov. 18, 2018.

<sup>344</sup> “U sten Pskovskogo kremlia.”

disliked it, saying, “However much the authors made them swear and swig liters of vodka, that doesn’t make them real Russians. I did not recognize myself, my colleagues, acquaintances or even acquaintances of acquaintances in ‘Leviathan’s’ characters. Strange, but among the movie’s characters there is not a single positive one.”<sup>345</sup> (One assumes Medinskii would not approve of the work of the “extraordinary nineteenth-century writer” and enthusiastic vodka-swiller Dovlatov, either.) The Ministry of Culture proposed guidelines that would prevent the screening of films “defiling the national culture, posing a threat to national unity and undermining the foundations of the constitutional order.” Daniil Dondurei, editor of Russian film magazine *Iskusstvo Kino*, commented to the press, “What is ‘national unity’? This is a completely new term, it didn’t exist in the past...In the past, all we had was [the term] anti-Soviet propaganda.” That same year, Russia had passed a law banning the use of profanity in films.<sup>346</sup>

Zviagintsev’s presence at Dovlatov Fest indicated the festival’s willingness to embrace controversial figures, and pointed to the Putin-era strategy of allowing a relatively wide range of views within officially sponsored culture. The fact that the Ministry of Culture, helmed by the pro-censorship, anti-profanity Medinskii, was still funding a cultural festival structured around Dovlatov and *Pushkin Hills*—a book that is highly critical of official writer cults, literary house museums, and censorship, and in

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<sup>345</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, “Russian Movie ‘Leviathan’ Gets Applause in Hollywood but Scorn at Home,” *New York Times*, Jan. 27, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/28/world/europe/leviathan-arussian-movie-gets-applause-in-hollywood-but-scorn-at-home.html? r=0>. Accessed Nov. 18, 2018.

<sup>346</sup> Ben Beaumont Thomas, “Russia outlaws films that ‘threaten national unity’ or ‘defile culture’.” *The Guardian*, January 19, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jan/19/russia-outlaws-film-national-unity-culture-leviathan>. Accessed Nov. 18, 2018.

favor of the full blossoming of profanity in literature, as well as extensive drinking—seemed indicative of the apparent contradictions within Russian cultural policy today. At the same time, it illustrated the ease with which the official celebration of a writer can ignore the substance of that writer’s work and the details of his biography, relying instead on a conveniently edited image. In Dovlatov’s phrasing from *Pushkin Hills*, the words at Dovlatov Fest were like empty bottles.

Since 2016, there has also been a recurring “D Day” (*Den’ D*) festival in St. Petersburg in honor of Dovlatov. (This rather alarming name appears to be a play on the American D-Day.) The 2017 festival focused on the theme of 1967 as a time of thaw and hope for Dovlatov, and included such high-profile literary figures as Vladimir Voinovich and Tatyana Tolstaya. In 2019, the festival will center around the year 1989, “the time of Dovlatov’s return to the motherland thanks to the appearance of his books in the country,” as the festival website puts it.<sup>347</sup> Lev Lur’e, a historian and journalist who co-authored a book on Dovlatov, is identified as the festival’s “ideologue.” (“Lev Lur’e’s House of Culture,” which offers St. Petersburg tours on various historical and cultural themes, is the festival’s main partner, and seems to be the chief organizer.) In the press release, Lur’e effuses:

This year will mark the thirty-year anniversary of one of the brightest years in Russian history—1989. For the first time in many years, the second culture became part of the first. Along with Pasternak, Bunin, Solzhenitsyn, Khodasevich, Berdiaev, in Russia there appeared previously forbidden works by recent immigrants—Aksenov, Vladimov, Brodsky. But among these brilliant classics of Russian literature Dovlatov’s works were brightest of all in their democratic, laconic, gently ironic qualities, and in their Chekhovian unwillingness to teach people how to live. Returning to Russia with the help of his works,

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<sup>347</sup> “D Day” main page, <https://www.dovlatovday.ru/>. Accessed on March 15, 2019.

Dovlatov immediately became a people's writer—like Pushkin, Esenin, Vysotskii.<sup>348</sup>

Here, as in the Dovlatov House website, we see an urge to restore unity to the late Soviet cultural field, dissolving the once almost impermeable boundary between dissident and official literature, as well as between classic and popular culture. The last sentence of Lur'e's statement is particularly striking, identifying the "people's writers" as Pushkin, Esenin, Vysotskii, and Dovlatov. This is an odd new pantheon. Pushkin is the father of Russian literary language, the classic to end all classics; Esenin is the tragic suicide who appeals to the *blatnoi*, or gangster, sensibility<sup>349</sup>; Vysotskii is the bard of alcoholism, drug addiction, and the fictive Gulag, occupying a gray zone between official and unofficial; and Dovlatov is the beloved satirist of late-Soviet *byt*. In Lur'e's list, as in the list offered by Dovlatov House's website, we see a deconstruction of the binary opposition between dissident and official. This enables the dismantlement of the opposition between the post-Soviet present and the Soviet past, and the development of a comforting sense of historical continuity and cultural wholeness.<sup>350</sup>

Recent years have seen a crop of films about Dovlatov, testaments to his enshrinement as a Russian cultural hero. The first was *The End of a Beautiful Era*

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<sup>348</sup> "Festival' "Den' D" vozvrashchaetsia v Peterburg s obsuzhdeniem perestroika," <https://www.dovlatovday.ru/single-post/Фестиваль-«День-Д»-возвращается-в-Петербург-с-обсуждением-перестройки>. Accessed March 15, 2019.

<sup>349</sup> When I conducted research on contemporary *blatnaia pesnia* in Russia and Ukraine, Esenin came up over and over as a kind of patron saint of Russian criminal song.

<sup>350</sup> For a discussion of a related phenomenon in connection to Socialist Realism, see Mark Lipovetsky, "Post-Sots: Transformations of Socialist Realism in the Popular Culture of the Recent Period," *Slavic and East European Journal*, 48, no. 3 (2004), 359-60.

[*Konets Prekrasnoi Epokhi*], a 2015 Stanislav Govorukhin film based on some of Dovlatov's stories in *The Compromise. The End of a Beautiful Era*, which takes its title from a 1969 Brodsky poem which clearly meant the phrase ironically, was filmed in a black-and-white style meant to evoke the films of the Thaw period, and it moved the action of Dovlatov's stories from the mid-70s to the mid-60s; clearly Thaw nostalgia was central to the project. Though the film won numerous Russian film prizes, it was criticized for its infidelity to Dovlatov's satire and for its uncritical nostalgia about the Soviet 1960s.<sup>351</sup>

The next Dovlatov film was more successful: Aleksei German Jr.'s 2018 *Dovlatov*, which smuggles nostalgia for the late-Soviet era in through a depiction of the struggles of writers during this period. While *The End of a Beautiful Era* did not make it abroad, *Dovlatov* was one of the rare Russian films that reached an international audience. It premiered at the Berlin Film Festival, received generally favorable reviews, including a long, positive review in the *New Yorker*,<sup>352</sup> and was purchased by Netflix. The film struck a delicate balance. On one hand, it offered a negative portrayal of the Soviet Union that could appeal to Western audiences and Russian liberals, even allowing

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<sup>351</sup> Larisa Maliukova, "Konets prekrasnoi epokhi? Na otkrytii 'Kinotavra'—26 trudno bylo izbavit'sia ot oshchushcheniia obshchei trevogi," *Novaia Gazeta*, June 9, 2015, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/06/10/64482-konets-prekrasnoy-epohi>, accessed March 27, 2019; Nataliia Grigor'eva, "Nachalo 'Kinotavra' i 'Konets prekrasnoi epokhi,'" *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, June 8, 2015, [http://www.ng.ru/cinematograph/2015-06-08/100\\_kinotavr0806.html](http://www.ng.ru/cinematograph/2015-06-08/100_kinotavr0806.html), accessed on March 25, 2019; and Anton Dolin, "'Konets prekrasnoi epokhi': kak Govorukhin s Dovlatovym posporil," *Radio Vesti*, September 30, 2015, <https://radiovesti.ru/brand/61178/episode/1425039/>, accessed on March 25, 2019.

<sup>352</sup> Joshua Yaffa, "A Russian Writer's Lessons For Being A Nobody While Being Yourself," *New Yorker*, Nov. 15, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-nobody-while-being-yourself>. Accessed on March 16, 2019.



interpretation as a between-the-lines criticism of Putin's Russia. On the other, it provided a mild, ambivalent nostalgia and celebration of Russian endurance and creativity that could appeal to the broader Russian public.

Set over a few days in early November 1971, *Dovlatov* is self-consciously artistic, with artfully washed-out cinematography and the quiet slowness of an art-house film. While it focuses on the suffering of young late-Soviet artists, it does not resist the temptation to reimagine their outfits as the kind of artfully mismatched, willfully unflattering thrift-shop chic that will be familiar to anyone who has visited the hipper parts of Brooklyn or Moscow. (This achievement was recognized at the Berlin festival, where *Dovlatov* won an award for costume and production design.) The film has the over-determined feeling of many biopics. Dovlatov is tormented by his inability to have his work published, by the writer's block that seems to be caused in part by his constant financial and professional difficulties, by the question of whether or not to give in to pressure to write political hackwork. But he has faith in his talent, and so does everyone around him, including his friend Joseph Brodsky. We, the audience, know that he will persevere, escape the USSR, and become famous.



*Figure 14: Dovlatov at a typical Soviet party. Still from Dovlatov.*

Brodsky and Dovlatov cross paths repeatedly over the course of the film, with Brodsky dispensing prophetic tidbits: “I think we are the last generation that can save Russian literature,” or “I had a dream that we wouldn’t live much longer.” The film implies that Brodsky and Dovlatov are literary peers and kindred spirits; it exaggerates the closeness of their relationship and ignores the fact that Brodsky achieved a type of high literary prestige out of reach for Dovlatov. Since Brodsky’s fame is cemented forever by his 1987 Nobel Prize, this amounts to a major boosting of Dovlatov’s reputation. The film further associates Dovlatov with Russian émigré writer all-stars by highlighting his interactions with an illicit bookseller in search of a copy of Nabokov’s *Lolita*. German Jr. seems to have no reservations in his praise for Dovlatov: he told *Novaia Gazeta* that Dovlatov is “a hero of our time,” and that “Dovlatov is close to some

of Shakespeare's sonnets," the latter remark a rather absurd amplification of Brodsky's comment that Dovlatov's stories were written like poems.<sup>353</sup>

The movie stresses the idea that neither Brodsky nor Dovlatov want to leave the Soviet Union. Brodsky tells Dovlatov about his repeated meetings with authorities and the threats to arrest him. In the last scene between the two writers, Brodsky says matter-of-factly, "I don't want to leave. I know I won't be able to come back." Title cards remind us that when he was forced to leave under threat of arrest, he was never able to return or to see his parents again. Leaving the Soviet Union is a tragedy, though a necessary one. Near the end of the film, another set of title cards inform us, "After his death, Dovlatov would become a favorite writer for millions of his compatriots [*sootchestvenniki*], one of the twentieth century's most prominent [*znachimyi*] Russian writers. Unfortunately, he would never know about it." A comparison of the two summaries of writerly fates suggests that Dovlatov was the more fortunate. Brodsky was recognized by the world, with his Nobel Prize; Dovlatov was recognized by his compatriots. In the world of *Dovlatov*, for a Russian writer, what counts is Russian success.

*Dovlatov* reminds the audience of the struggles of Soviet writers while subtly affirming the value of the Soviet experience. At the very end, as Dovlatov leaves an all-night literary party riding on the roof of a white Beetle, we hear him say in voiceover, "I thought that all the same we exist, with our worn-out coats and leaky shoes, drinking,

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<sup>353</sup> Larisa Maliukova, "Ne mog Dovlatov ne uekhat'," *Novaia Gazeta*, August 24, 2017. <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/08/25/73586-ne-mog-dovlatov-ne-uehat>. Accessed March 16, 2019.

constantly arguing, poor and sometimes talented. We were, and would be, in spite of everything, in spite of all our problems. Also, I was thinking that the only honest path was the path of mistakes, disappointments, and hopes.” This echoes the website of Dovlatov House: Soviet life was not only a source of suffering and frustration, but also of inspiration. Dovlatov is now a beloved Russian writer—and who can imagine Dovlatov’s writing without “worn-out coats and leaky shoes,” black-market clothes and drinking binges? An affluent Dovlatov is unthinkable. Dovlatov’s story, with its posthumous redemption, suggests that the Soviet Union offered the possibility of a certain kind of artistic purity through a principled rejection of political hackwork, and through the absence of capitalist models of success.

An unsuccessful actress acquaintance sympathizes with Dovlatov’s suffering but advises him to give in and write hackwork to survive. “Do you know how much courage it takes to be a nobody and still be yourself?” she asks. Her advice is misguided, but her apposite question illustrates the film’s double-edged attitude to the late Soviet writer’s predicament. On one hand, the writer is denied success, recognition, pay, even publication, for clearly political reasons. On the other hand, the absence of a material reward tests the writer’s courage and virtue, giving him the opportunity to prove that his unpublished writing is an unadulterated expression of his creative impulse. In a moment of despair late in the film, Dovlatov tells his wife, Elena, “I don’t think I’ll ever be published. So why do it? I’m not doing it for money or for any other vulgar reason. I can’t do otherwise. It’s me. A part of me. When you grovel, you lose something inside you, and one day it will disappear forever.” Through the course of the film, we see Dovlatov’s refusal to grovel (somewhat overplayed relative to Dovlatov’s real-life career,

which did involve attempts to survive through hackwork) as a testament to the purity of his artistic purpose. This is a familiar image of the dissident writer, and one with a profound appeal for Russians and non-Russians alike, which helps account for *Dovlatov*'s success among foreign viewers. It depends in part on the inaccurate idea that Dovlatov never compromised, which German Jr. suggested during his appearance at Dovlatov Fest. The Dovlatov myth is edited, like the image of any beloved writer.

Though he valorized what he portrayed (not entirely accurately) as Dovlatov's refusal to succumb to the pressures of the censors, in interviews for *Dovlatov* German Jr. highlighted positive as well as negative effects of Soviet censorship. Perhaps censorship contributed to Dovlatov's greatness, as it did for other artists of the period. At a press conference after the film's Berlin premiere, German said that the film was as much about a historical period as it was about Dovlatov, explaining, "I'm in awe of this period and of these people — their bravery and commitment to their work... This was a period of solidarity, of genuinely strong relationships. In Russia, this was a period when one's calling to art was not about fame or money, but about speaking the truth... the 1970s were more potent and people had more courage." Ignoring the irony, satire, and linguistic games and experiments that were popular during the 1970s, he continued, "There was more honesty and a clearer understanding of what is real and what is artifice."<sup>354</sup> For German, apparently, this was a period of greater purity and authenticity. Perhaps this has to do with its association with his childhood, an epoch that people often remember as a

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<sup>354</sup> Anya Harrison, "Dovlatov: Alexei German Jr brings Russia's favourite downtrodden literary hero to the screen," *Calvert Journal*, March 7, 2018. <https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/9737/dovlatov-alexei-german-jr>. Accessed March 16, 2019.

simpler, happier time. He told *Variety* that the film was based in part on his own childhood memories of Leningrad and on the experiences of his father and his friends, whose lives were often “destroyed,” though they were not dissidents, only people who “wanted to talk and write about anything they wanted to.” Like those promoting *Dovlatov House*, he rejected a simple dichotomy between dissidents and conformists, emphasizing the gray zone. He stressed the creative potential in censorship, saying, “The more the state pushes, the more creative people become.”

German Jr. pointed out the contrast with contemporary Russia, where “you can easily be published...you can write anything on the internet,” though he suggested that this might change soon: “Maybe that is just for the time being, but for now there is no censorship.”<sup>355</sup> While current Russian censorship is far more limited than in the Soviet era, it certainly exists. German may have had strong incentives to mince his words: *Dovlatov* was financed by the Russian Ministry of Culture and received support from Nikita Mikhalkov, an intimate of Putin’s. German Jr. resisted journalists’ attempts to connect *Dovlatov* to contemporary Russia, saying, “the West’s understanding of Russia is totally primitive.”<sup>356</sup>

For me, the most striking aspect of *Dovlatov* was its humorlessness. The film is sprinkled with scenes and lines from *Dovlatov*’s work, including an episode about buying Finnish socks, as in the story from *The Suitcase*. But what was hilarious in *Dovlatov*’s writing is delivered in monotone in the film, and I never even smiled. In the title role,

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<sup>355</sup> Leo Barraclough, “Russian Director of Netflix’s ‘Dovlatov’ on Dreaming About Putin, Memories of Soviet Times,” *Variety*, Feb. 26, 2018. <https://variety.com/2018/film/global/berlin-film-festival-russia-netflix-dovlatov-putin-soviet-union-1202710437/>. Accessed March 16, 2019.

<sup>356</sup> Harrison, “Dovlatov.”

Milan Marić is big and handsome and bears a marked resemblance to the writer, but he does not display the slightest affinity for comic acting. (Perhaps this is the director's doing.) It is impossible to imagine Dovlatov without the Soviet Union, but it is also impossible to imagine him without a vigorous sense of humor. The movie's depiction of Dovlatov's drinking—which Dovlatov himself portrayed via his autobiographical protagonists as borderline suicidal—is very mild, one or two scenes of marked tipsiness. The film shies away from real squalor in a way that Dovlatov never did, and in a way that Dovlatov House did not do, either.

The playing down of Soviet alcoholism and the humorlessness are both symptomatic of a desire to sanitize the Soviet past. In *Dovlatov*, 1971 Leningrad is poor but surprisingly in tune with 2018 fashion, and the tribulations of young writers are a process of tempering rather than an exercise in absurdity and sadism. The film shows that some artists died as an indirect result of censorship, but in the end it suggests that whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. *Dovlatov* is by no means a rousingly inspirational biopic in the American style, but its ultimately hopeful message is incompatible with Dovlatov's tendency to laugh at everything he could, and it is also at odds with his deeply non-didactic tendencies.

*Dovlatov* is typical of a certain type of respectable, mainstream contemporary Russian culture; it bears some resemblance to the films of Andrei Zviagintsev, among others. It is beautifully filmed and designed, competently acted, in keeping with the highest international production standards. Despite its Soviet themes, this is a film that can compete in the global marketplace. Though made with government support, it does not bear any of the hallmarks of political propaganda; in fact, it offers the possibility of a

“between-the-lines” reading critical of renewed Russian censorship. Though German Jr., like Zviagintsev in reference to *Leviathan*, vigorously rejects an anti-Putin reading, whether sincerely or out of concern for his career, the availability of such a reading helped make it possible for *Dovlatov*, like *Leviathan*, to appeal to international audiences at a time of intense anti-Putin sentiment.

Director Anna Matison’s 2018 film *The Sanctuary* [*Zapovednik*] is of a different ilk, clearly aimed at an exclusively Russian public. The film stars Matison’s husband Sergei Bezrukov, a commercially successful actor and one of Putin’s “authorized representatives” [*doverennye litsa*] in the 2018 presidential elections.<sup>357</sup> One of Bezrukov’s earliest high-profile roles was in the 2002 gangster miniseries *Brigada*, but he also has a penchant for associating himself with popular Russian literary and cultural figures. He played poet Sergei Esenin in the 2005 miniseries *Esenin* and, in heavy make-up, bard Vladimir Vysotskii in the 2011 film *Vysotskii: Thank You For Being Alive*. He played d’Anthès in a 2002 film called *Aleksandr Pushkin* and graduated to Pushkin himself in the 2006 film *Pushkin: The Last Duel*. His choice of roles reflects contemporary Russia’s simultaneous fetishization of the classic and Soviet dissident culture heroes, while demonstrating an exceptionally empty use of their images.

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<sup>357</sup> “V Ukraine knigu Dovlatova zapretili iz-za predisloviia, v ktorom upominaetsia Bezrukov,” *KP v Ukraine*, February 1, 2019. <https://kp.ua/culture/629840-v-ukrayne-knyhu-dovlatova-zapretyly-yz-za-predyslovyia-v-kotorom-upomynaetsia-bezrukov>. Accessed March 16, 2019.

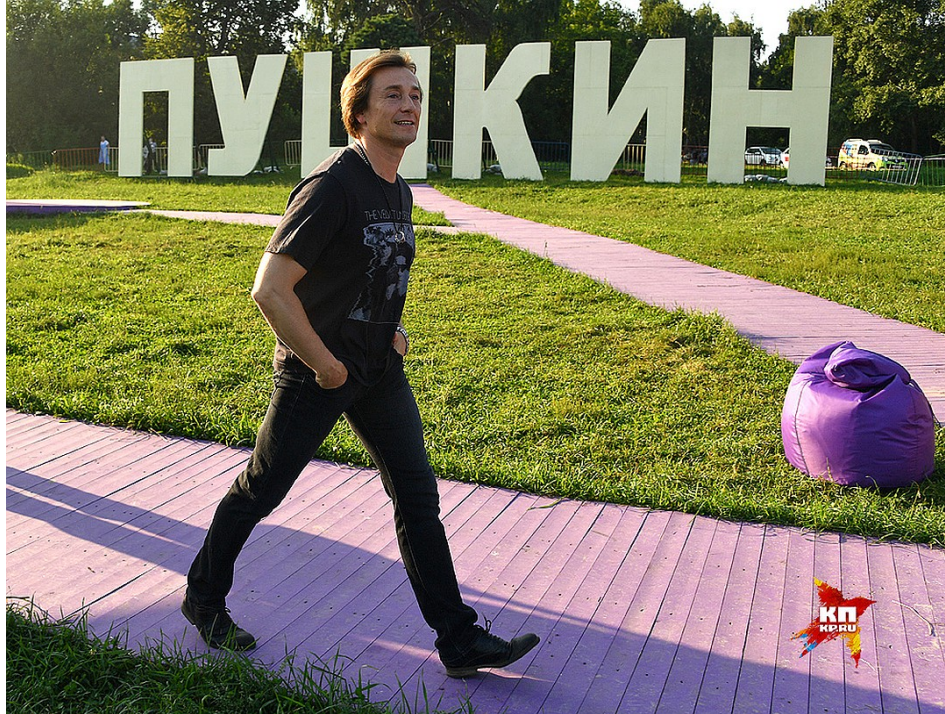




*Figure 15: Bezrukov as Esenin and Pushkin*

As its title suggests, *The Sanctuary* is based on Dovlatov's novella about Pushkin Hills. The filmmakers take the liberty of setting the story in the present, however, and of making the protagonist, Konstantin, a rock musician rather than a writer. One might think that these changes would sap Dovlatov's premise of any meaning, but Matison and Bezrukov (who has a sideline as a rock guitarist in real life) forge boldly ahead. Konstantin has money problems, marital problems, and musician's block, and eventually decides to leave Leningrad, where he lives in a rather Soviet apartment, with a washing machine and wi-fi but few other signs of renovation, to go to Mikhailovskoe in hope of earning some money.

At first, this journey seems like a trip into the past; he wears big modern headphones on the bus ride, but his vehicle is a Soviet-style bus rolling through wheat fields. Just as in *Pushkin Hills*, the bus stops at a dismal and distinctly Soviet "buffet" where there is precious little to eat. As I can attest based on my own experience at Pushkin Hills, the town really is a kind of Soviet time capsule, and this episode could be realistic. In *Pushkin Hills*, I felt that I had traveled back in time to the Soviet Union.



*Figure 16: Bezrukov in The Sanctuary*

But any thoughts of realism are dispelled when Konstantin arrives at Mikhailovskoe itself, where he is offered a job as a tour guide during “Pushkinworld” (the name is always in English rather than Russian), an explicitly international festival. This theme park space is half new Gorky Park, half Disney World. We see Chinese tourists using their smartphones to translate the giant Cyrillic “PUSHKIN” on the lawn (see above); beside it is an enormous grape-colored top hat that evokes Willy Wonka more than Pushkin. Bikini babes read Pushkin as they sunbathe, and teenagers take selfies with a purple-hatted Pushkin impersonator. All the park’s visitors wear matching Pop Art-style Pushkin t-shirts. Konstantin has repeated interactions with a vapid blonde American television presenter who explains, in bad, heavily accented Russian, that her mother is Russian and they emigrated to the United States when she was five. She brings

along an elaborate mermaid costume. Konstantin explains to her that Pushkin's *rusalka* did not have a fish tail, but nevertheless she wears it as she presents her program from the top of an oak tree wrapped in a chain, in reference to Pushkin's *Ruslan and Liudmila*. (This tree and its chain are the source of much humor in Dovlatov's novella; Geichenko really did wrap the oak in a chain, one of his most memorably kitschy improvements to the Sanctuary.) This is a Pushkin-branded entertainment product with explicitly international appeal; rather than Pushkin being cast as a uniquely Russian treasure whose genius can only be grasped by Russians, he is an international celebrity who appeals even to tourists who cannot decipher his name in Cyrillic. The character of the American presenter, who quotes Pushkin in English translation, seems to gesture towards the idea that Russian culture is a powerful magnet that can draw émigrés back into its orbit even many years after their departure, and even when they are long estranged from their mother tongue. (This might also connect to the concept of Dovlatov's own posthumous "repatriation," an important aspect of his myth in Russia today.) But in this Pushkin Sanctuary, Pushkin's actual writing is of rather little importance.

Konstantin wanders around the Sanctuary in a Velvet Underground t-shirt and Harley Davidson hat; unlike Dovlatov's well-read protagonist, he knows very little about Pushkin's life, and makes almost no effort to learn anything in preparation for his tours. He is clearly a product of globalized culture, which has little time for literature—even if this culture still recognizes literary figures as marketable. But the mystical powers of Mikhailovskoe—hymned by Semen Geichenko, mocked by Dovlatov—work their magic on Konstantin. After a drunken night-time ride through the lush forest in a horse-drawn cart, Konstantin is inspired to write his first song in five years, to his great joy. A fellow

tour guide mentions Pushkin's Boldino autumn—perhaps Konstantin is on the brink of a similar experience! He starts jogging around the local lakes and shadowboxing in his decrepit rented room. “Every person has the right to sing a song based on Pushkin's verses,” his boss, Galina, tells him, and soon he is performing before hundreds of screaming fans, singing a guitar-hero rendition of the opening lines of *Evgenii Onegin*, with “my good acquaintance” [*dobryi moi priatel'*, the words used to refer to Onegin] as his rocking refrain. Now tourists want selfie-stick portraits with him rather than with the Pushkin impersonator—who makes the wise decision to join Konstantin's band.

Though Konstantin does not know much about Pushkin, he identifies with his artistic struggles. In one climactic moment, he recites Pushkin's 1825 poem “I remember the magic moment” [*Ia pomniu chudnoe mgnoven'e*] during a tour that includes his estranged wife, Tania, who plans to emigrate to Canada with their daughter. (This, too, is a feature of Dovlatov's novella, though his family emigrated to the US.) As in *Dovlatov*, Tania tries to persuade her husband to come along, asking what keeps him in Russia: “the Hermitage, the Neva, birches?” Dovlatov's alter-ego, Alikhanov, had a clear answer: he was a Russian writer and did not want to be estranged from his native language. As a musician, Konstantin cannot claim this argument. Instead, he tells Tania that “everyone” in Russia needs him. When he receives an anachronistic telegram announcing his wife's imminent departure, as in Dovlatov's book, he rushes to Leningrad; while Alikhanov took a bus, Konstantin rides a recently repaired motorcycle. His family leaves without him, but we feel sure that they will meet again. In this film's universe, it seems more likely that Tania will dislike Canada and return to Russia than that Konstantin will follow her.



*Figure 17: Pushkin selfies. Still from The Sanctuary.*

*Dovlatov* evidenced a marked strain of nostalgia for the late Soviet period, which German portrayed as a crucible of artistic creativity and integrity. The film was striking in its failure to convey Dovlatov's signature humor, but Dovlatov's figure was at the center of the story. The writer and his artistic struggles remained preeminent, even if his biography had been strategically edited and some of his spirit lost. In *The Sanctuary*, the writer Dovlatov has been mostly erased. Some of his lines and many of his plot points from *Pushkin Hills* have been preserved, but his late Soviet writer hero, Alikhanov, has been replaced by a post-Soviet rock musician. Meanwhile, Pushkin himself has become a celebrity, a floating signifier of Russian greatness and creative inspiration, more than a specifically literary figure. In *The Sanctuary*, Pushkin's image and his name are of much greater significance than his work itself.



*Figure 18: Konstantin confronts a replica of the head from Pushkin's Ruslan and Liudmila in The Sanctuary.*

Perhaps the greatest sign of this is the fact that “Pushkinworld” has become an international tourist attraction that appeals to people who do not know a word of Russian. As in contemporary Russian culture more broadly, there is a tension between the desire to establish Russian uniqueness and self-sufficiency and the desire to prove that Russia can compete globally—whether culturally, economically, or politically. However, as in representations of the Sanctuary throughout its history, the return to the Pskov countryside, to the classics, to the past, is a way of drawing strength from a quasi-mystical Russian essence. Even in a film that shows very little meaningful interest in either Pushkin or Dovlatov as anything other than a cultural signifier, the ultimate Russian celebrity, the Sanctuary retains its symbolic power.

The narratives presented at Mikhailovskoe and at Dovlatov House, which functions as a sort of post-Soviet annex to the Sanctuary, privilege continuity over rupture, emphasizing what has endured through the imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods rather than what has been lost. While Mikhailovskoe emphasizes the Russian Golden Age and Dovlatov House the late Soviet period, both museums focus on social unity rather than opposition. Mikhailovskoe presents a picture of almost idyllic harmony between an elite family and their servants and between people and nature, along with a soothing ethnographic element; Dovlatov House stresses what unites late Soviet writers—a shared historical experience—rather than dividing them into the familiar categories of official or dissident writers. Despite their differences, and despite the fact that Dovlatov House is to some extent a parody of Mikhailovskoe, the two museums ultimately serve to affirm a shared, enduring Russian identity, in keeping with the European tradition of the literary house museum as a site of collective memory and national identity. In both cases, Russian identity is celebrated in large part through celebration of the Pskov region, with its natural beauty and long history of cultural creation, foreign invasion, and resurrection.

Dovlatov, a censored writer who was hounded out of the Soviet Union, has now become a semi-iconic writer for Putin-era Russia, with a festival in his name initiated by a politician who was implicated in the vicious beating of a journalist. This is painfully ironic, but it is also in keeping with the logic of much of Russian official culture under Putin, which continues the tradition, satirized in *Pushkin Hills*, of using literature and literary tourism to reinforce national narratives. At the same time, the government harasses and represses living writers (now journalists much more often than fiction

writers or poets). Dovlatov House, and celebration of Dovlatov more generally, has become a way of commemorating late Soviet literature and the late Soviet period, enshrining both as objects of nostalgia. Though Dovlatov abhors, in *Pushkin Hills*, the focus on material objects demonstrated at Dovlatov House, as well as the very institution of the literary house museum, the nostalgia at Dovlatov House is measured and not idealized, informed by an intimate understanding of Dovlatov's writing and biography. Most Dovlatov commemoration and new Dovlatov-related cultural products, however, are less nuanced, offering a less ambivalent variety of nostalgia, as in the film *Dovlatov*. Even as they enshrine Dovlatov as a cultural hero, they strip him of the satire that constitutes the essence of his work. Their use of Dovlatov as a kind of empty signifier mirrors the increasingly empty use of Pushkin as a cultural symbol, as is also evident in the film *The Sanctuary*. The critics of the 1999 jubilee would surely be revolted by Matison's treatment of Pushkin as an anodyne global superstar; *The Sanctuary* makes the official bicentenary celebrations look sophisticated.



**Conclusion**  
**From Pushkin Street to Dovlatov House:**  
**The Russian Literary Cult in the Twenty-First Century**

*Tashkent's Pushkin Street*

In June 2017, during the run-up to the Russian presidential election, the frequently incarcerated opposition politician Aleksei Naval'nyi appeared on socialite-turned-journalist Kseniia Sobchak's show on the independent Russian TV channel Rain [*Dozhd'*]. Both Naval'nyi and Sobchak were running for president, though neither had the slightest chance of winning in a rigged system.

In a jab at Naval'nyi's known ethno-nationalist leadings, Sobchak asked him whether he envisioned Russia as a primarily ethnically Russian country or as a multiethnic one. "No matter how you view the Soviet Union from a political standpoint," she observed, "there was one factor which objectively united us all...Soviet citizens all knew who Pushkin was, they all grew up on the same literature. Now, if you go to Tatarstan or a bit farther, abroad, to Uzbekistan, or other CIS countries, of course you won't have this cohesiveness [*tselostnost'*]." <sup>358</sup>

"Of course," Naval'nyi replied, "in Uzbekistan no one knows Pushkin."

This offhand remark triggered a wave of protest on Uzbek social media. Videos of Uzbeks—many of them adorable children—reciting Pushkin went viral. One particularly

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<sup>358</sup> "Interv'iu Sobchak s Naval'nym," TV Rain, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LudRtGloFOA>. Accessed March 28, 2019. The exchange begins around 58:00.

incensed Uzbek man declared on Facebook, “We speak Russian better than people in some Russian-speaking regions,” calling Naval’nyi and Sobchak “animals.”<sup>359</sup>

For Sobchak, who was born in 1981, Pushkin stands not for a uniquely Russian identity, but for the unity that once existed among the multiethnic peoples of the Soviet Union. She identifies the standardized, Pushkin-centric Soviet literary education as a means of bringing together diverse groups: loving Pushkin can make you want to join the club, or it can give you a sense of fellowship with other members. This is a recognizable, idealistic version of the Soviet perspective on nationalities, and of the Soviet-style Pushkin cult. Naval’nyi, by contrast, clearly has a much less flexible idea of Russianness. He states that he identifies as an ethnic Russian [*russkii*, which signifies ethnicity<sup>360</sup>], like, he says, the overwhelming majority of Russian citizens. When Sobchak asks whether he would like to establish a “common cultural background” for contemporary Russia, he retorts that Russia still has a unified culture, with students in Tatarstan or Chechnya studying Pushkin despite their non-Russian ethnicity, and with Russian the country’s sole official language. Uzbeks, on the other hand, have nearly forgotten Russian and know nothing of Pushkin.

Naval’nyi uses Pushkin as shorthand for the authority of the Russian government and membership in the Russian state. His remark suggests that once your country is no longer Russian territory, you stop knowing Pushkin. This is a distinctly post-Soviet version of the Pushkin cult, one that stresses exclusion over inclusion: casual though

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<sup>359</sup> “Why a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russian Poet is Going Viral on Facebook,” BBC, June 29, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-40383837>. Accessed on March 28, 2019.

<sup>360</sup> The alternative to *russkii* is *rossiiskii*, the adjective denoting Russian citizenship.

Naval'nyi's remark was, it revealed his troublingly ethnocentric political orientation. His statement was also blatantly incorrect, of course: older citizens of former Soviet states received a Soviet, Pushkin-centric, largely Russian-language education. Naval'nyi's remark also demonstrated the one-sided nature of knowledge between the former peoples of the Soviet Union. "As little children," one Uzbek man said in a video response, "we learn about all your writers, but you know absolutely nothing about us." He pointed out that he had grown up on Tashkent's Pushkin Street.<sup>361</sup>

The echoes of the Soviet Pushkin cult in Sobchak's remarks in the television debate are obvious. The Pushkin jubilees of 1937 and 1949, for example, put heavy emphasis on the affection for Pushkin in the non-Russian Soviet republics and in other countries of the Eastern Bloc, celebrating the unity, achieved via Pushkin, of these disparate groups. (This approach pre-dated the Soviet Union, as I have shown: during the imperial period, too, the study and appreciation of Pushkin was used to establish unity among the peoples of the Russian Empire, though in that case Pushkin was used in the effort to spread *Russian* literacy; the emphasis on Pushkin in translation was a Soviet innovation.) In the Soviet Union, and in Sobchak's interpretation, Pushkin was cast as a force that transcended native language, ethnicity, or national identity; this was just one side of the Pushkin cult, but it was an important one. Learn Pushkin, embrace the classics of Russian high culture, and you could prove that you were "civilized," literate, worthy of respect.

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<sup>361</sup> "Nobody in Uzbekistan knows who Pushkin is?" *Meduza*, June 15, 2017. <https://meduza.io/en/shapito/2017/06/15/nobody-in-uzbekistan-knows-who-pushkin-is>. Accessed March 28, 2019.

The indignant Uzbek response to Naval’nyi’s offhand comment showed that this claim to belonging through Pushkin was not only something that was imposed from the top down, or invented by *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*. Historian Yuri Slezkine has written about how, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many Jews in the Russian Empire sought to assimilate into Russian culture and thereby gain admission to the political, economic, and cultural mainstream by mastering Russian and its “national high culture.” A central aspect of this process was what Slezkine calls “an eager conversion to the Pushkin faith,” a relocation to what he refers to, metaphorically, as “Pushkin Street.” (The Uzbek protester made Slezkine’s metaphor literal.) Jews memorized Pushkin’s work and cultivated an avid appreciation of his oeuvre. Pushkin also became the medium through which Jewish children proved their knowledge of Russian history: Slezkine cites accounts in Isaak Babel’s story “First Love” and children’s writer Samuil Marshak’s memoirs of answering *gymnasium* exam questions about Peter the Great by quoting Pushkin’s poem *Poltava*. Despite avant-garde and radical rejections of Pushkin in the 1910s, Jewish revolutionaries fighting in the Russian Civil War continued to identify with Pushkin, their ticket to inclusion in an emancipatory project.<sup>362</sup> Poet Eduard Bagritskii wrote in his 1924 poem “About Pushkin” [*O Pushkine*],

Я мстил за Пушкина под Перекопом,  
Я Пушкина через Урал пронес,  
Я с Пушкиным шатался по окопам,  
Покрытый вшами, голоден и бос.

I took revenge for Pushkin just outside Perekop [in Crimea],  
I carried Pushkin across the Urals,

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<sup>362</sup> Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 127, 135, 131-132, 172.

I crawled with Pushkin through the trenches,  
Covered in lice, starving, and barefoot.<sup>363</sup>

The Uzbek protesters were furious in part because they took knowledge of Pushkin to be a sign of being educated and civilized in general. Calling Naval'nyi and Sobchak “animals” reflected the sense that to be accused of not knowing Pushkin is to be called an animal; indeed, earlier in his political career, Naval'nyi did make statements comparing Caucasian migrants to cockroaches and flies, and Georgians to rodents.<sup>364</sup> Some Uzbeks who wished to cast off the Russian imperial legacy, however, countered that their compatriots should not be so eager to conform to Russian expectations, and ought to study Uzbek literature and history instead.<sup>365</sup> Some Uzbeks would rather not live on Pushkin Street any longer.

### *Pushkin marks the spot*

In recent decades, Russia has used Pushkin to mark the reaches of its influence worldwide. In 2009, the Russian ambassador to Serbia opened a new Pushkin monument in Belgrade's Cyril and Methodius Park. The statue was a gift from the Russian Writer's Union. Bronze Pushkin stood between monuments of Cyril and Methodius, fathers of the Cyrillic script, and Vuk Karadžić, who reformed the Serbian language and pioneered the Romantic nationalist-inspired study of Serbian folklore. During the opening ceremony,

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<sup>363</sup> Quoted and discussed in Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, 172. The translation is mine. From [https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/О\\_Пушкине\\_\(Багрицкий\)](https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/О_Пушкине_(Багрицкий)). Last accessed on May 6, 2019.

<sup>364</sup> Tony Wood, “There is no alternative,” *London Review of Books*, February 23, 2012, Oleg Kashin, “Will Russia's Only Opposition Leader Become the Next Putin?” *New York Times*, July 3, 2017.

<sup>365</sup> “Why a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russian Poet is Going Viral on Facebook.”

the Pushkin statue was presented as a sign of the close bond between Russia and Serbia, on the linguistic, cultural, and political levels<sup>366</sup>--a bond that NATO, a shared enemy of Serbia and Russia, has helped to strengthen. That same year, an identical Pushkin statue, also presumably a Russian gift, was unveiled in Asmara, Eritrea, in honor of Pushkin's supposed Eritrean heritage,<sup>367</sup> and a third copy of the statue was erected in Seoul in 2013, unveiled by Putin himself. The monument was placed on the premises of a Lotte Hotel, a South Korean luxury chain that operates in Russia.<sup>368</sup> The sculpture, by Nikolai Kuznetsov-Muromskii, is striking for Pushkin's fairly modern dress—no frock coat or top hat—and for the enormous size of the quill in his right hand. It almost looks like a knife or a small sword; it certainly evokes the old criminal slang term for knife, “quill” [*pero*].

The world's population of Pushkin facsimiles continues to grow. The 1999 jubilee prompted the erection of Pushkin monuments in Vienna, Brussels, Oslo, Paris, and Odessa, among other places. The post-Soviet years have also seen Pushkin monuments (many of them identical busts by Russian sculptor Grigorii Pototskii) placed in Hemer, Germany (1994), Rome and Cyprus (2000), Baku (2001), Ethiopia, Mexico, and

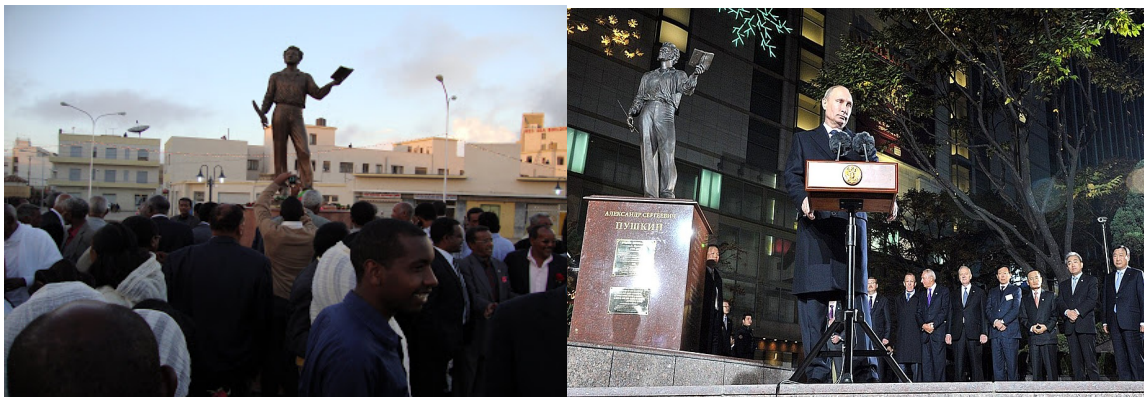
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<sup>366</sup> “Spomenik Puškinu u Beogradu,” *RTS*, Oct. 19, 2009.  
<http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/16/kultura/238961/spomenik-puskinu-u-beogradu-.html>. Accessed March 31, 2019.

<sup>367</sup> “Alexander Pushkin Monument erected in Asmara, Eritrea,” *Madote*, Nov. 28, 2009.  
<http://www.madote.com/2010/06/alexander-pushkin-monument-erected-in.html>, accessed March 31, 2019. Ethiopia and Eritrea, which seceded from Ethiopia in 1991, dispute their claim to Pushkin, based on the idea that Gannibal, Pushkin's great-grandfather, was born in Loggo Sarda, now part of Eritrea.

<sup>368</sup> “Unveiling of a monument to Alexander Pushkin,” November 13, 2013,  
<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19615>. Accessed March 31, 2019.

Montenegro (2002), Canada (Montreal in 2002 and Quebec in 2004), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2008), China (Ningbo in 2008 and Heihe in 2015), Istanbul (2009), the Philippines (2010), Greece (Rhodes in 2011 and Delphi in 2014), Egypt (Alexandria in 2011 and Cairo in 2017), Spain (2015), Slovenia (2017), and Bulgaria (2018).<sup>369</sup> With a few exceptions, this list of places reflects the areas in which Russia hopes to maintain strong ties, most notably the Orthodox Black Sea region, Turkey, and China.



*Figure 19: Pushkin in Eritrea and South Korea*<sup>370</sup>

The imperial-era Pushkin cult promoted the idea of unity among the peoples of the Russian Empire, and the Soviet version promoted Pushkin as an agent of the friendship of the peoples of the Soviet Union. Today, the Pushkin cult uses the poet as a marker of the friendship of like-minded governments worldwide, as Putin pursues his project of creating a “multipolar” world that will correct for American hegemony. There

<sup>369</sup> “Pamiatniki A.S. Pushkinu,” [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Памятники\\_А.\\_С.\\_Пушкину](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Памятники_А._С._Пушкину). Accessed March 31, 2019. “V Granade otкрыli pamiatnik Pushkinu,” *Ispaniia po-russki*, September 19, 2015, <https://espanarusa.com/ru/news/article/561070>. Accessed May 12, 2019.

<sup>370</sup> Eritrea photo is from “Alexander Pushkin Monument erected in Asmara, Eritrea,” *Madote*; South Korea photo is from “Unveiling of a monument to Alexander Pushkin,” [kremlin.ru](http://kremlin.ru).

is, presumably, no expectation that Greeks or South Koreans will learn Russian in order to memorize Pushkin's poems, or that they will convert to the Pushkin faith. Neither is there an expectation that these countries will celebrate Pushkin's work in translation. This version of Pushkin is not a gatekeeper to entrance to high Russian culture and Russian national identity, as he was in the imperial and Soviet periods, or someone who unites many peoples through love of his poetry, but a kind of placeholder marking political and economic cooperation between Russia and friendly countries.

### *Pushkinopad*

For post-Soviet countries, rejecting Pushkin can also be a way of rejecting Russia. The contributors to the 1999 collection *Pushkin's Overcoat* regretted that with the demise of Soviet censorship, anti-Pushkin iconoclasm had lost its sting. But in 2017, the specter of anti-Pushkin iconoclasm in Ukraine was taken badly by online supporters of the so-called "Russian Spring" (a disingenuous name for the separatist uprising in eastern Ukraine). One Twitter user lamented the fact that in Chernigiv, a Pushkin bust from 1900 had been stolen from its plinth, lamenting, "The monument survived the First World War, revolution, civil war, but it didn't survive the barbarity of Maidan."<sup>371</sup> His picture of an empty plinth echoed the many empty plinths left by *Leninopad* ["Leninfall"], the removal of Lenin monuments around Ukraine. This was a spurious comparison; the Pushkin bust had been stolen, not knocked down and smashed to bits like the Lenins in Kyiv, Dnipro,

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<sup>371</sup> @borisenkodmitr, Twitter, Dec. 31, 2017. <https://twitter.com/borisenkodmitr/status/947414417003761664>. Accessed March 28, 2019.



and other Ukrainian cities.<sup>372</sup> The bust was soon found by local police, and has since, apparently, been returned to its place.<sup>373</sup> Nevertheless, the post, which received a healthy 603 retweets, showed that anti-Pushkin iconoclasm has not lost all its power to shock. Today, it rouses outrage when it is interpreted as a form of “Russophobia” and as a manifestation of the desire of post-Soviet states to break away from Russia.



*Figure 20: Pushkin’s empty plinth in Chernigiv, as posted on Twitter.*

It is true, however, that some Ukrainians have rejected Pushkin simply because he is Russian (never mind that he had African blood). A translator friend recently told me about a young Ukrainian writer who refused to be published by the UK publisher Pushkin

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<sup>372</sup> On Ukraine’s post-Maidan Leninopad, see Sophie Pinkham, “Leninopad,” *n+1*, Issue 24: *New Age*, Winter 2016.

<sup>373</sup> “U Chernihovi znaishli vykradeni pohruddia Kotsiubyns’koho i Pushkina,” *Radio Svoboda*, January 4, 2018. “Pamiatnik Pushkinu (Chernigov),” Wikipedia, [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Памятник\\_Пушкину\\_\(Чернигов\)](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Памятник_Пушкину_(Чернигов)). Accessed on March 28, 2019.

Press because of their name. Meanwhile, the remnants of the Soviet-era Pushkin cult in Ukraine are withering away. When I visited the Pushkin museum in Kyiv in May 2017, the staff members were visibly surprised, and rather annoyed, to have a visitor; they were hosting a party that had nothing to do with Pushkin. Ukraine, of course, has its own national poet-hero, Taras Shevchenko, who has his own cult; his word and image figured prominently in the Maidan protests and their aftermath.<sup>374</sup> The Pushkin myth is disappearing from Ukraine, but a nineteenth-century poet still stands at the center of the latest iteration of the national idea. The power of Shevchenko's image is demonstrated by a story I heard recently from a friend who works in Severodonetsk, in Ukraine-controlled Luhansk: a man who had at first fervently supported the eastern Ukrainian separatists later painted his garage door with a huge Shevchenko portrait, to ward off accusations of anti-Ukrainian sentiment.

### *Putin and Pushkin*

Within Russia, the government and its affiliates have continued to use Pushkin for sinister purposes in recent years, continuing the long tradition of the abuse of his image for political ends. The “Russia—My History” multimedia exhibit, which can be seen in numerous Russian cities, has attracted millions of visitors. Masterminded by the powerful Episcopate Egorevskii Tikhon, who is Chairman of the Patriarchal Council on Culture and has close ties to Putin, the exhibit pretends to trace the formation of the latest iteration of Russian identity. In keeping with Episcopate Tikhon's views—which are much more

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<sup>374</sup> On uses of Shevchenko in the Maidan protests and their aftermath, see Sophie Pinkham, *Black Square: Adventures in Post-Soviet Ukraine* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2016).

extreme and right-wing than Putin's—it is virulently nationalist and anti-Western. Some of its most contentious (and inadvertently comical) claims include a statement that the West waged the first “information war in the European press” against Ivan the Terrible, and a suggestion that the Decembrists were foreign agents taken in by “Masonic lies.” The exhibit uses out-of-context quotations to invoke the authority of a range of Russian heroes, including Pushkin, of course. Pushkin and Putin quotes and portraits hang side by side. Putin announces, “Spiritual unity is so lasting that it is not subject to any governmental actions. Whatever power there is over people, there can be none stronger than the power of the Lord,” while Pushkin chimes in with, “Not for anything in the world would I wish to have a different fatherland or to have a history other than that of our ancestors.”<sup>375</sup> This second quotation is one beloved of Russian nationalists; it comes from a letter Pushkin wrote (in French) to Chaadaev in 1836, though he did not send it.<sup>376</sup> Pushkin is cast in the role of passionate patriot, while Putin becomes an ardent religious believer.

This kind of nakedly nationalistic, disingenuous use of Pushkin in official rhetoric is reminiscent of those aspects of the 1999 Pushkin jubilee that caused the greatest disgust in the press and among the intelligentsia. It might also help explain why Dovlatov

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<sup>375</sup> Lindsay Ceballos, “Exhibition Review: “Russia — My History” at Moscow’s VDNKh,” NYU Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia, Sept. 19, 2018. <http://jordanrussiacenter.org/news/exhibition-review-russia-my-history-at-moscows-vdnkh/>. Accessed March 28, 2019. See also Marlene Laruelle, “The Russian Orthodox Church’s Conquest of the History Market,” PONARS Eurasia, June 7, 2018. <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/node/9807>. Accessed March 28, 2019.

<sup>376</sup> Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin, “P.Ia. Chaadaevu,” *Sobranie sochinenii v 10 tomakh*, vol. 10, October 19, 1837. [https://rvb.ru/pushkin/01text/10letters/1831\\_37/01text/1836/1928\\_740.htm](https://rvb.ru/pushkin/01text/10letters/1831_37/01text/1836/1928_740.htm). Accessed March 28, 2019.

has become an increasingly promising subject of a new literary cult. Pushkin's life and work, of course, included humor, playfulness, rebelliousness, cosmopolitanism, and other aspects that are studiously ignored in presentations like the "Russia—My History" exhibit. However, Pushkin's occasional expressions of national pride (for example, "To the Slanderers of Russia," a favorite Pushkin poem of the Putin era) and, most of all, his long-established position as the Russian national poet make him readily available as a tool of nationalist propaganda. Dovlatov's insistent irony and "low" subjects (alcoholics, black marketeers, sex-crazed women, prison guards) and his emigration to the hated United States, where he achieved his first literary success, make him a much less promising instrument of straightforward jingoism, and therefore contribute to his broad popularity. When he is used for official or quasi-official purposes, as in Dovlatov Fest, he serves a subtler, more ambiguous purpose, reconciling Soviet and post-Soviet realities. Most of his patriotic aura is the result of his association with Pushkin and Mikhailovskoe.

The solemn patriot is not the only Pushkin in today's Russia, however. Russian culture-makers have given Pushkin a number of playful makeovers to bring him into the twenty-first century. For example, a Russian artist named Aleksei Sergienko recently showed a series of paintings called "New Pushkin," imagining the poet in the modern world: taking a selfie in front of a painting of birch trees, showing off his chiseled abs on a Crimean beach, getting an award from Putin, going on a talk show.<sup>377</sup> As in Matison's film version of *The Sanctuary*, this is a vision of Pushkin as a celebrity of contemporary

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<sup>377</sup> "Sovremennyi Pushkin v kartinakh Alekseia Sergienko," *MOIARUSSIA*, Sept. 28, 2015. <https://moiarussia.ru/sovremennyj-pushkin-v-kartinah-alekseya-sergienko/>. Accessed March 28, 2019. I learned about Sergienko from Emily Wang, "Our Pushkin?" NYU Jordan Center for the Study of Russia, Oct. 18, 2018. <http://jordanrussiacenter.org/news/our-pushkin/>. Accessed March 28, 2019.

Russia’s “creative class,” someone who types on a laptop that has a red star in place of an Apple logo, uses his smartphone to document his sexy vacation in annexed Crimea, and engages in the self-conscious, ironic use of the old symbols of Russia and its famous “soul” on global social media platforms.



*Figure 21: Putin and Pushkin: a painting by Aleksei Sergienko*

Sergienko’s paintings show that, as in 1999, Russians still wonder what Pushkin would think and do if he were alive today—which books he would have liked, what political views he would have held. Sergienko told a Russian journalist that he had the idea of painting Pushkin and began to do traditional portraits, but felt unsatisfied. “I decided that just re-painting [*pererisovyvanie*] somebody’s portraits of Pushkin was a meaningless activity, and as a result I had the idea of drawing Pushkin as if he lived in

our time.” (Sergienko would probably be unsympathetic to Prigov’s claim that transcribing the classics is the peak of literary achievement.) He made it clear that he was more interested in Pushkin’s life than in his art: “Everyone knows his poems, but few people knew about what he was like as a person. He was very eccentric: he had an interesting life, had a healthy way of life—he swam all year round, went around all day with a heavy steel cane. Many of his contemporaries couldn’t even lift such a cane, it was like a barbell!”<sup>378</sup> In this new variation on his myth, Pushkin sounds like an early extreme athlete.

This humorous use of Pushkin in contemporary settings bears a superficial resemblance to the Conceptualist uses of Pushkin that I discussed in Chapter 2, and also to the 1999 jubilee articles that imagined how Pushkin would weigh in on contemporary Russian literature. But the effect of Sergienko’s paintings is the opposite of these older uses of Pushkin. The Conceptualists were explicitly challenging the Pushkin cult and its crippling effect on living writers; especially before the end of the Soviet Union, their project was largely iconoclastic and was subject to official censorship. The 1999 jubilee articles that imagined Pushkin in the present day were intensely critical of the contemporary status quo: they had Pushkin denounce the current literary scene as a miserable “fleamarket” or fantasized about President Pushkin, someone more honorable, intelligent, and just than any real-life Russian politician. Sergienko’s paintings, on the other hand, express a striking comfort with the current realities. He did not choose to depict Pushkin being arrested at a political protest, for example (to be fair, this might

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<sup>378</sup> Pushkin’s cane was indeed very heavy. The traditional explanation is that he carried it in order to be prepared to duel with sabers.

have caused Sergienko himself political problems). His reimaginings of Pushkin are comical, but in a way that offers no challenge to the status quo, that has no iconoclastic aspect. His Pushkin is entirely at ease with the affluent, metropolitan elite's experience of Putin-era Russia: he even gets a prize from Putin himself. This Pushkin takes pleasure in Russia's latest geopolitical conquest, Crimea; perhaps as he sunbathes he is thinking fond thoughts about all the Slavic rivers joining in the Russian sea, as in a line from "To the Slanderers of Russia." Sergienko's work exhibits the ironic, soft nationalism that characterizes so much of Russian culture today, combined with a casual internationalism—Moscow hipsters look like hipsters everywhere, and so does Sergienko's cardigan-clad Pushkin—that might seem paradoxical at first glance, but that constitutes a hallmark of culture in Russia's capital cities today.

All of these examples show that Pushkin remains a potent and versatile political and cultural symbol. He is imagined as a fun international celebrity, as in Matison's film *The Sanctuary*, and as an ally of xenophobic nationalists like Episcopo Tikhon, as in the "Russia—My History" exhibit. He can be a hipster untroubled by the thought of receiving government accolades or enjoying occupied Crimea, as in Sergienko's paintings, or he can represent membership in a Russian society that is increasingly imagined along ethnic lines, as he does for Naval'nyi. The Soviet vision of Pushkin evokes nostalgia for people like Sobchak and the protesting Uzbeks, who view knowledge of Pushkin as badge of worthiness, of civilization, of equality. For those eager to break away from Russian influence, on the other hand, Pushkin is a symbol of imperialist oppression, as he is for some Ukrainians. Finally, in the international sphere, Russia uses Pushkin monuments as pledges of friendship and cooperation.

Comparison of today's Pushkin cult with previous iterations, however, reveals a dramatically diminished emphasis on Pushkin's literary works. Of course, state-sponsored Pushkin cults have always involved a highly selective approach to his oeuvre; but imperial and Soviet-era Pushkin celebrations always involved very large doses of his writing, "textological monuments," scores of new scholarly works. As late as 1999, one of the more memorable jubilee-related events was the mass recitation of *Evgenii Onegin*. Today, Pushkin's work appears most often in tiny snippets torn from context, as in the "Russia—My History" exhibit or Matison's film *The Sanctuary*. Pushkin's poetry is receding from view. Now it is the image of Pushkin, the Pushkin brand, that counts: anxieties during the 1999 jubilee about Pushkin being treated as a commercially advertised consumer product may have come true. So have some of the Conceptualists' jokes. In the late Soviet years, we recall, Prigov wrote:

In all the villages and insignificant corners  
I would put his busts everywhere  
And I would eradicate his poems  
After all, they diminish his image

The overwhelming emphasis on the image of the cultural hero rather than his (or her, though culture heroes are still very rarely women) cultural achievements helps explain Dovlatov's rise to cultural heroic status. Many connoisseurs of Russian literature scorn Dovlatov's writing, which they consider to be of negligible literary value. While the Pushkin cult has often caused offense to literati who feel protective of their own idea of the revered Pushkin, the Dovlatov cult offends or irritates these same people because they do not consider Dovlatov to merit a literary cult, or even the edition of his "Collected Works" [*sobranie sochinenii*], which was released not long after his death.



But literary commemoration is largely about papering over historical ruptures, and as a recently minted cultural hero, the image of Dovlatov is nicely suited to this task. If the metaphorical Pushkin Street was the place where one gained membership to the club of great Russian culture, the metaphorical Dovlatov House is a place where Russians who did not identify either as avid dissidents or as avid Communists can come to terms with their bittersweet memories of the late Soviet Union. Best of all, Dovlatov's house is within easy walking distance of Pushkin's.

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