

Dynamic Conflict in Alexander Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* and

*The Bronze Horseman*¹

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

In conceiving *Boris Godunov* - his tragedy about the interregnum between the Rurik and Romanov dynasties, known as the Time of Troubles (1598-1613) - A. S. Pushkin was influenced not only by Shakespearian drama, but also by N. M. Karamzin's monolithic *Istoriia gosudarstva Rossiiskogo/ History of the Russian State* (1816-26). Becoming acquainted as early as 1815 whilst still a pupil at the Imperial Lyceum at Tsarskoe Selo near St Petersburg, Pushkin closely familiarized himself with Karamzin's epic work which was to serve as a great inspiration to him. Indeed, he dedicated *Boris Godunov* to this luminary of Russian letters.

Russia's foremost poetic talent of the early nineteenth century, Pushkin was to turn to intensive historical research as his maturity increased, as had Karamzin

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

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

(1766-1826), the leading sentimentalist of the eighteenth century. For the latter, the poetic charm of distance was of utmost importance, for he chronicled Russian political history and the growth of tsardom up to the rise of the Romanov dynasty in 1613. Pushkin, however, *commenced* with the reign of Tsar Boris Godunov (1551-1605), preferring to document the life of Russia's more recent past. In this respect, Jurij Striedter reaches the following assumption:

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

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

In his study of Karamzin's *History* - which reached twelve tomes at the time of the latter's death – Pushkin was entranced by volumes ten and eleven which provided him with a survey of Russian history from the sixteenth to the beginning of the seventeenth century and spanned the epoch of Boris Godunov. Indeed, he himself confessed to Prince Peter Viazemsky (1792-1878), a leading contemporary poet, “Ty khochesh *plana*? Voz'mi konets X-go i ves' odinnadtsatyi tom, vot sebe i *plan*”⁴ (“Do you want the *plan*? Take the end of volume 10 and the whole of 11 - that will serve as a *plan*”).⁵ However, in his rejection of the cyclical philosophy of Russia's elegiac poet, E. A. Baratynsky (1800-44) and of the Romantics - who tended to discard the notion of progress – Pushkin developed the concept of history as a *dynamic* process bearing no simple repetition of events. It is his skilful use of historicisms (historical words and expressions) which enabled him to apprehend the cogwheels of contemporary affairs and their relationship to the past, as well as to achieve a sense of historical interdependence and a subtle consciousness of the inner links, or connections between these two time periods.

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

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

⁵ Translations into English are those of the author, unless indicated otherwise.

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

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

⁶ Pushkin, 5: 532.

⁷ Dolinin, 293.

⁸ Pushkin, 11: 181 and 425.

⁹ Dolinin, 306. See also Evdokhimova, 43.

Godunov does not fall *in spite of* his sensible reforms, but rather *because of* them”.¹⁰

As Dolinin contends, Pushkin dissociates himself from the French school of historical thought to which Cousin, Guizot, Mignet, Thierry, and Thiers belonged.¹¹ He departs from the deterministic method of depicting history designed by François Guizot (1787-1884), the French historian and statesman, which emphasizes purely causal connections between historical events. Although Guizot held an “unshakeable belief in Providence”, he underestimated “the accidental in history”.¹² Thus, Pushkin questions the application of the notion of clear, historical progress to a Russian environment by asserting, “Providence is not algebra. The human mind [...] cannot foresee chance – that powerful and instantaneous instrument of Providence”.¹³

The impact of haphazard events on Pushkin’s historical imagination has been ascribed to the influence of the *History of the Russian Empire Under Peter the Great* (1756) by Voltaire (1694-1778), the famous philosopher and historian of the French Enlightenment.¹⁴ In this respect, Pushkin pleads for Russian history - with its non-linear combination of progressive and regressive events - to be treated as distinctive:

In his famous critique of Chaadaev’s views, Pushkin claimed that Russia, albeit separated from the rest of Europe, had its own peculiar historical mission [...] and that its unique history was decreed by God.¹⁵

Indeed, he himself recognizes the significance of “sluchaia – moshchnogo, mgnovennogo orudiia provideniia” (“chance as the mighty, momentary instrument of Providence”).¹⁶

Bearing in mind the role of *rational* ideas and principles, Pushkin recognizes and documents the power of the *irrational* (that is, historical coincidence) which refers to the often unexpected, unpredictable development of events and the role of

¹⁰ Striedter, 298.

¹¹ See Dolinin, 292.

¹² Evdokhimova, 36 & 38.

¹³ Pushkin, 11: 127, cited in Evdokhimova, 52-53.

¹⁴ See Evdokhimova, 50.

¹⁵ Dolinin, 307. See also Evdokhimova, 31-32.

¹⁶ Pushkin, 11: 127. See also Dolinin, 297.

chance. Dolinin links it to Providence (that is, belief in protection from God, or nature as spiritual forces) by contending: “Chance in history can be read as an annunciation and manifestation of Providence”.¹⁷ He differentiates between the differing approaches of Karamzin and Pushkin to Providence in the following way:

In contrast to Karamzin, Pushkin would never claim that it is possible to grasp some intelligible providential message in the turmoil of Russian history. For him, the foreseeing guardianship of Providence over Russia is revealed only through unpredictable, random occurrences, through breaking historical laws rather than following them. Chance deviations from historical patterns and repetitions serve as indecipherable signs of an unfathomable order that cannot be comprehended but should be intuited and believed.¹⁸

Indeed, it is the combination of these two opposing forces inherent in the elements of the rational and the irrational (that is, unforeseeable Providence, or chance) - which precipitates much of the conflict of *Boris Godunov* in its reflection of the history of “a unique nation with its own ‘semi-manifest destiny’ decreed by inscrutable Providence”.¹⁹

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

История предстает как собрание любопытных психологических парадоксов, как арена, где сталкиваются носители отвлеченных моральных и аморальных качеств, извечных человеческих страстей и переживаний.²⁰

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

¹⁷ See Dolinin, 304. See also 298.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 307.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 308.

²⁰ I. M. Toibin (1976) *Pushkin. Tvorchestvo 1830-kh godov i voprosy istorizma*. Voronezh, 41.

In Pushkin's tragedy we observe the interaction of the rational and the irrational. There are *both* analytical - and yet illogical - sides to Tsar Boris's character. He appears to have a guilty conscience for a crime which he may *not* have committed, though he is blamed by the *narod*, or Russian people for regicide for ostensibly ordering the assassination of Tsarevich Dmitry in 1591. Advocating benevolence, his declarations indicate a shrewd turn of mind:

Да правлю я во славе свой народ,

Да буду благ и праведен, как ты.²¹

And grant that I shall lead my people greatly,

Shall be benevolent and just, as you are.²²

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

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

Баба /с ребенком/

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

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

Первый

Право любо!

²¹ Scene 4: "Kremlevskie palaty"/ "Palace in the Kremlin," in Pushkin, 7: 15.

²² Antony Wood's translation in Chester Dunning (2006) *The Uncensored Boris Godunov: The Case for Pushkin's Original Comedy*. London: The U of Wisconsin P, 269.

Баба /с ребенком/
 Ну, что ж? Как надо плакать,
 Так и затих! Вот я тебя! Вот бука!
 Плачь, баловень!
 /Бросает его об землю. Ребенок пищит/²³

Woman
(with an infant)
 Stop crying! Stop crying! Here comes the bogeyman,
 The bogeyman will get you! No more crying, now!...

Another
 A sight to see!...

Woman
(with the infant)
 Now what's this?
 Just when you should be crying you go all quiet!
 You'll catch it now! Here comes the bogeyman...
 Now cry, you brat!
*(Throws the infant to the
 ground; it yells.)*²⁴

Subject to the duality of the volatile whims of fluctuating loyalties,²⁵ the apathetic *narod* is both unappreciative and immoral, as exemplified by the following quotations. Compare the discourteousness of:

²³ Scene 3: "Devich'e pole. Novodevichii monastyr'" / "Maiden's Field. Novodevichy Convent" in Pushkin, 12-13.

²⁴ Dunning, 265.

Вот черни суд: ищи-ж ея любви.²⁶

The rabble's judgement who would seek its love!²⁷

with the ingratitude of:

Нет, милости не чувствует народ:

Твори добро – не скажет он спасибо,

Граб и казни – тебе не будет хуже.²⁸

No, mercy the people never feel or notice:

Do them good – they'll never thank you for it,

Rob, execute – they'll not think worse of you.²⁹

Given the unpredictable, inconsistent, and irrational behaviour of the people, the current ending of *Boris Godunov* - whereby Pushkin amended their final cheer to a deadly silence - is particularly intriguing. This finale - when the "narod v uzhasе molchit" ("the people grow silent in horror") and then "bezmolstvuet" ("keep their silence") – has been ascribed either to represent a refusal to endorse the Pretender, or a passive submission to fate, or else active accusation.³⁰ It has been described by Tony Briggs as both "a taunt directed at the autocracy" and as "a sharp reminder of the political preoccupations of the play".³¹ Yet, it is plausible that Pushkin's alterations were influenced by artistic, or censorship considerations, rather than by a complete reversal in implication.³²

²⁵ See B. M. Engel'gardt (1916) "Istorizm Pushkina (k voprosu o kharaktere pushkinskogo ob'ektivizma)," in *Pushkinist. Istoriko-literaturnyi sbornik*, ed. S. A. Vengerov, vol. 2. Petrograd, 1-158 (68); and also Evdokhimova, *Pushkin's Historical Imagination*, 58-59.

²⁶ Scene 8: "Tsarskie palaty"/ "The Tsar's Palace," in Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 7: 27.

²⁷ Dunning, 295.

²⁸ Scene 22: "Moskva. Tsarskie palaty"/ "Moscow. The Tsar's Palace," in Pushkin, 7: 89.

²⁹ Dunning, 429.

³⁰ Evdokhimova, 60. See also B. M. Gasparov (1992) "Epilog: Mednyi vsadnik," in *Poeticheskii iazyk Pushkina kak fakt istorii russkogo literaturnogo iazyka*, Wiener Slawistischer Almanach, sonderband 27, Wien, 287-319 (297).

³¹ A. D. P. Briggs (1983) "The Limited Success of Pushkin's Drama," in *Alexander Pushkin: A Critical Study*. Beckenham: Croom Helm, 157-86 (160).

³² See Evdokhimova, 25 & 61.

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

[...] If the people believe that the authentic living tsarevich has appeared, the very same person whom Boris Godunov had wanted to kill, it would seem to follow that Boris is not a murderer. But in the folk consciousness, as Pushkin shows it, there coexist, in utter defiance of logic, two mutually irreconcilable ideas. For if the Tsarevich Dmitry were alive and were truly the tsarevich and not a pretender, then Boris did not kill him, and was not a regicide, and in fact was not a criminal at all. If, on the other hand, Boris were a murderer and a criminal, then the person calling himself the tsarevich must be a pretender.³³

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

Pushkin, in contrast to Karamzin, did not seek logic and consistency in the popular consciousness. He understood that a faith in miracles released the people from the tedious necessity of seeking a rational explanation of events.³⁴

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

In this opposition between the Europeanized Russian consciousness of the "Russian European" and the traditions and customs of the people, Pushkin revealed the universal and perhaps chief conflict in the spiritual life of the Russian nation in general. [...] The people have been living in the traditional hope of a miracle; they are apparently incapable of taking a

³³ I. Z. Serman (1986) "Paradoxes of the Popular Mind in Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*", *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 64:1 (January): 25-39 (35). For an analysis of the role of divine retribution in Pushkin's *History of Pugachev*, see Dolinin, 300.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

sober view of themselves and their own situation. Precisely this constitutes the prophetic significance of Pushkin's tragedy, and its sense of history.³⁵

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

Therefore, in evaluating the various clashes between the forces of certainty and chance, Pushkin's tragedy explores tensions between elements of historical determinacy and indeterminacy, for "Pushkin does not deny causality but argues powerfully against determinism by focusing on the dynamics of chance".³⁶ Boris Godunov and the Pretender represent two quite different concepts of history, for the rational calculations of the former exclude "everything accidental", whereas the latter relies on chance and good fortune in his improvising "disregard for historical laws and causality".³⁷ Yet, the Pretender lives on false success, for his reliance on popular opinion and good luck will inevitably lead to his downfall, as "there are no winners in Pushkin's play. History defeats equally those who attempt to calculate it as algebra and those who refuse to see historical patterns in it".³⁸

A two-fold approach towards historical conflict is also found in *The Bronze Horseman* which is a masterpiece of duality as well. It reflects the two separate, contradictory traditions of interpreting the significance of the founding of St Petersburg in 1703. The first variant of this myth is discovered in oral poetry, folklore, popular sayings, and in the prophecies of the Old Believers. In these sources, conceived as a "window to the West", St Petersburg is referred to as an *unnatural* and *unrussian* phenomenon. Born of a satanic anti-Christ by will of fate, it is perceived as the centre of evil. Recorded on 8 February 1718 by Tsarevich Alexei and first published by N. Ustinov, this legend predicted the inevitable fall of Russia's new capital.³⁹

In contrast, the second school of thought views St Petersburg as a symbol of good and creation – that is, as "a cosmogonic myth" in Evdokhimova's

³⁵ Ibid., 38-39.

³⁶ Evdokhimova, 65.

³⁷ Ibid., 56. See also 62.

³⁸ Ibid., 65.

³⁹ See N. Ustrialov (1859) *Istoriia tsarstvovaniia Petra Velikogo*, vol. 6. St Petersburg, 457.

phraseology.⁴⁰ Crafted from divine inspiration and foresight, it is seen as the beginning of a Golden Age, for it is “born as a result of the transformation of unorganized chaos into organized cosmos” to assume the “sacral center of the world”.⁴¹ Found both in official and in literary works, this version considers Peter’s capital – constructed from enduring materials, such as granite, stone, and bronze - representative of the eternal, indestructible power of the Russian state. Initiated by the archbishop and statesman, Feofan Prokopovich (1681-1736) and by the poet and playwright, Alexander Sumarokov (1717-77), this tradition was continued by the diplomat and man of letters, Prince A. D. Kantemir (1708-44) in his *Petriada* (1730).

This interpretation of St Petersburg also appears in the Classical odes of Vasily K. Trediakovsky (1703-68) – for example, in his “Pokhvala Izherskoi zemle i tsarstvuiushchemu gradu Sanktpeterburgu” (“Praise to the land of Izhersk and to the reigning city of St Petersburg”) /1752/ - and also in those of Mikhail V. Lomonosov (1711-65), Russia’s great polymath, scholar, and scientist. It is based upon the adulation of Peter the Great, Russia’s westernizing tsar, who is perceived as a superhuman personality, a hero, a titan, a demigod, as we discover from a survey of the traditional poetry of the power of the State and its bearer, the odic literature of eighteenth-century Russia.⁴² However, in *The Bronze Horseman* Pushkin does *not* attempt to restore the ode but to recreate a new one *sui generis* by combining and developing conventional themes which hitherto arose *independently*.

Musing on Peter the Great’s bronze horseman and on the disaster-prone foundation, on swampland, of his new capital, St Petersburg, *Mednyi vsadnik* was indeed inspired by the odes of M. Lomonosov, G. R. Derzhavin (1743-1816) (to whom Pushkin recited his examination poem in the Tsarskoe Selo Lyceum in 1815), D. Khvostov, S. Bobrov, and K. Batiushkov (1787-1855). With its linguistic and stylistic contrasts, it may be seen as a dialogue with the eighteenth-century odic tradition which Pushkin admired and rejuvenated.⁴³ However, he also desired to liberate modern Russian literature by incorporating universal themes, for example,

⁴⁰ Evdokhimova, 211. See also Gasparov, 287.

⁴¹ Evdokhimova, 212. See Gasparov, 292.

⁴² See L. Pumpianskii (1939) “*Mednyi vsadnik* i poeticheskaia traditsiia XVIII veka,” in *Vremennik Pushkinskoi komissii*, vol. 4-5. Moscow-Leningrad, 91-124 (92).

⁴³ Dolinin, 292. See also Gasparov, 288.

the conflict between the State and the individual which is lacking in the odic conventions.

Furthermore, as he did in *Boris Godunov*, Pushkin uses a measured blend of church slavonicisms and colloquial terminology in *The Bronze Horseman*. In doing so, he combines thematic socio-political and moral conflict with parallel linguistic contrast. One of the ways in which church slavonicisms are employed in *Mednyi vsadnik* is for the purpose of irony in the narrator's portrayal of the Bronze Horseman. After all, it is the stark reality of the latter's existence which has undermined the social standing of Evgeny who has failed to change his status to perform the transition of 'initiation'.⁴⁴

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

Евгений взрогнул. Проянились
 В нем страшно мысли. Он узнал
 И место, где потоп играл,
 Где волны хищные толпились,
 Бунтуя злобно вокруг него,
 И львов, и площадь, и того,
 Кто неподвижно возвышался
 Во мраке медною главой,
 Того чьей волей роковой
 Под морем город основался...
 Ужасен он в окрестной мгле!
 Какая дума на челе!
 Какая сила в нем сокрыта!
 А в сем коне какой огонь!⁴⁵

Yevgeny shuddered. His thoughts became terribly clear within him. He recognized the place where the flood had played, where the rapacious

⁴⁴ Evdokhimova, 221: Evgeny's name comes from the Greek, meaning 'well-born'. See also 222-24.

⁴⁵ Part Two, lines 145-58, in Pushkin, 5: 147.

waves had crowded, angrily rioting around him, and also the lions, and the square, and him who motionlessly held his bronze head aloft in the darkness, him by whose fateful will the city was founded by the sea... Terrible was he in the surrounding gloom! What thought was on his brow! What strength was hidden within him! And in that steed what fire!⁴⁶

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

Итак, домой пришед, Евгений
 Стряхнул шинель, разделся, лег,
 Но долго он заснуть не мог
 В волнение разных размышлений.
 О чем же думал он? О том,
 Что был он беден, что трудом
 Он должен был себе доставить
 И независимость и честь;
 Что мог бы бог ему прибавить
 Ума и денег. Что ведь есть
 Такие прадные счастливыцы,
 Ума не дальнего, ленивцы,
 Которым жизнь куда легла!⁴⁷

And so, having come home, Yevgeny tossed aside his cloak, undressed, lay down. But for a long time he was not able to fall asleep, in the turmoil of his diverse thoughts. What, then, did he think about? About the fact that he was poor, that by toil he had to win for himself both independence and honour; that God might have granted him more brains and money; that after all there are lazy lucky folk, of limited brain, idlers, for whom life is oh so easy...⁴⁸

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

⁴⁶ John Fennel (2001) *Pushkin: Selected Verse*. London: Bristol Classical P, 252.

⁴⁷ Part One, lines 27-39, in Pushkin, 5: 139.

⁴⁸ Fennel, 239.

- (i) the age of Peter the Great (that is, when St Petersburg was constructed);
- (ii) the time of the Flood which occurred over a hundred years later, in 1824;
- (iii) his own era (nine years afterwards).

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

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

В 'петербургской повести', будучи естественным следствием происшедшего, безумие в сцене бунта предстает и как функция неразрешенного противоречия. В следующем затем эпизоде оживления статуи эта функция передана фантастике.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ E. A. Todd (1968) "K izucheniiu Mednogo vsadnika", *Uchenye zapiski Latviiskogo gos. Universiteta: Pushkinskii sbornik*, 106: 92-113 (112).

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

On another plane, the collision of the two epochs – of the Petrine era and of Evgeny’s own time – is brought together in the symbol of the Bronze Horseman which has been described as being “the equivalent of the ‘world pillar’, or the ‘world tree’”.⁵⁰ Commonly referred to as a “thunder-stone”, it possesses the traits of the mythological, Slavic storm-god, as Svetlana Evdokhimova reveals. Furthermore, this god is compared to the idol of Perun who, as the legend goes, being “a rider on a horse or chariot [...] strikes the serpent-like enemy with his weapon” in a duel.⁵¹

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

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

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

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

[Pushkin:] ‘Without the slightest doubt, Your Majesty. All my friends were in the plot. It would not have been possible for me to desert them. Only my absence saved me, and thank God it did.’⁵²

The historical conflict between Peter’s *unnaturally rational* and Evgeny’s *irrationally natural* frame of mind is heightened by the recurring clash between the forward-looking, cultural and architectural achievements of the Europeanizing Peter the Great, on the one hand, and the heritage of a backward and, in many ways,

⁵⁰ V. N. Toporov, ‘Drevo mirovoe’ (1980), *Mify narodov mira*, vol. 1. Moscow, cited in Evdokhimova, 213.

⁵¹ V. V. Ivanov & V. N. Toporov (1982) ‘Perun’, in *Mify narodov mira*, vol. 2. Moscow: Sovetskaya entsiklopediya, 307, cited in Evdokhimova, 214.

⁵² Cited in Tatiana Wolff (1998) *Pushkin on Literature*. London: The Athlone P, 179.

uncivilized past, on the other. Russia's afflictions are reflected in Pushkin's description of the Baltic swamps and in the dire poverty of certain quarters of St Petersburg, including the quarter in which his fiancée, Parasha lives.⁵³ The irony of our return to the imagery of the introduction at the very end of *The Bronze Horseman* is that the many thousands of lives lost during the building of St Petersburg - in an attempt to reclaim the marshland from nature - might have all been in vain. Despite the advances of civilization and the "taming" of the environment, the elements are still able to take their toll upon human life. In actual fact, Peter the Great's magnificent achievements appear to have resulted in a worsening of the tragic plight of the city's impoverished inhabitants. The Tsar failed to foresee the Flood's danger to an ever-growing, more populous capital. Depicted as being war-like, this deluge reflects the earlier-mentioned theme of Perun, as observed by Svetlana Evdokhimova.⁵⁴ Thus, suffering as a direct consequence of the Tsar's actions, Evgeny is traumatized in his inability to defend himself and to protect Parasha's livelihood. His idle passivity is transformed into active revolt in the culmination of the irrational and illogical enlivenment of the Bronze Horseman - an event which precipitates Evgeny's insanity.

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

⁵³ The Christian name 'Paraskeva' (Parasha) is an equivalent of the pagan 'Mokosh', associated with water (Evdokhimova, 216).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 215.

unable to impose order on a chaotic world without unleashing unpredictable, irrational, and, indeed revolutionary forces.⁵⁵

In the tumultuous historical conflict of Pushkin's works, *either* divine retribution is procured by the *narod* in *Boris Godunov* and by Evgeny in *The Bronze Horseman*, *or else* insanity will ensue. In this respect, Pushkin's own profound fear of madness - a common theme in nineteenth-century Russian literature⁵⁶ - is expressed in the poem, "Ne dai mne Bog soiti s uma"/ "God grant that I go not mad" (1833). Linked to his criticism of the abstract reasoning of the Enlightenment, his psychosis is signified by the conflict between the clash of the forces of creation and destruction. This clash is evident in the natural cycle of events in his poems, "Obval"/ "The Avalanche" (1829) and "Osen (otryvok)"/ "Autumn (an excerpt)" (1833). It is also the product of an individual's unsuccessful attempt to liberate the spirit, as is the case with Evgeny. In Part One of *The Bronze Horseman* Pushkin raises the question:

Он это видит? Иль вся наша
И жизнь ничто как сон пустой,
Насмешка неба над землёй?⁵⁷
(lines 152-53)

Or is he dreaming this? Or is all our life nothing but an empty dream,
heaven's mockery at earth?⁵⁸

In this struggle for survival, either one loses one's way and goes mad, like Evgeny in *The Bronze Horseman*, or one conquers, like the paranoid Boris Godunov, the imaginative Peter the Great, and Pushkin himself who expressed his love for the heartbeat of life in verses composed in 1830-36:

⁵⁵ In his article, 'On the Nobility', Pushkin declares: Pierre I est tout à la fois Robespierre et Napoleon (La Révolution incarnée)" ('Peter I is both Robespierre and Napoleon combined [The Revolution incarnated'] (Pushkin, 8: 146, cited, with translation, in Evdokhimova, 44). See also Gasparov, 311.

⁵⁶ Madness is portrayed, for example, in Alexander Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit* (1833) (in the character of Chatsky); Nikolai V. Gogol's *Diary of a Madman* (1835); Fyodor M. Dostoyevsky's *The Double* (1846), *Crime and Punishment* (1866) (re Raskol'nikov), and *The Idiot* (1869) (re Myshkin); and in Leo Tolstoy's *Memoirs of a Madman* (1884).

⁵⁷ Pushkin, 5: 142.

⁵⁸ Fennel, 244.

О нет, мне жизнь не надоела,
Я жить люблю, я жить хочу.⁵⁹

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

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

Но не хочу, о други, умирать;
Я жить хочу, чтоб мыслить и страдать.⁶⁰

But, O my friends, I do not wish to die; I wish to live, in order to think and suffer.⁶¹

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⁵⁹ Ibid., 3, Pt 1: 447.

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⁶¹ Fennel, 61.

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