

## Psychological Perceptiveness in Pushkin's Poetry and Prose

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### *Abstract*

This is the first of five papers celebrating the psychological complexity of nineteenth century Russian novels authored by Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin, Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol, Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky, and Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev. Using biography, letters, narratives, and literary criticism, the life and writings of each author will be reviewed as they contribute to the understanding of the human mind and the apperception of the human condition. More subtly than the case study, more fully than the clinical anecdote, more profoundly than the apt example, these novels animate sterile, empirical findings and add dimension to the flatness all too prevalent among psychological description. Herein, Pushkin's tempestuous upbringing, cavalier belligerence, and eccentric oddities show that the Russian author, as much as his work, sustains and rewards close psychological study.

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## *Introduction and Background*

Philosophy bifurcated into the sciences and humanities. The sciences and humanities then branched into mature disciplines such as biology, physics, and archaeology. These then further divided into sub-disciplines such as molecular biology, astrophysics, and paleoarchaeology. Division and subdivision were symptomatic of reductionism, the process of breaking down complex phenomena into comprehensible component parts.<sup>26</sup> With divided labor came astonishing success. Reductionism is the stuff of experimentation, of taking messy realities and controlling them, one by one, in an artificial environment where the contributions of each variable can be systematically studied.<sup>27</sup> Through reductive experimental science, extraneous variables and confounds, benighted superstition and illusion, mistaken assumption and error, all alike were exposed to light, and the truth prevailed. Yet, there was a price for such success.<sup>28</sup> The best minds were sequestered within their respective specialties, learning more and more about less and less.<sup>29</sup> This became apparent as a profound problem by the time Snow<sup>30</sup> wrote his essay on *The*

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<sup>26</sup> T. Brown and L. Smith, *Reductionism and the Development of Knowledge*. (New York: Psychology Press, 2003); F. Dumont, *A history of personality psychology: Theory, science, and research from Hellenism to the twenty-first century*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> E. Agazzi, *The Problem of Reductionism in Science: (Colloquium of the Swiss Society of Logic and Philosophy of Science, Zürich, May 18–19, 1990) (Vol. 18)*. (Springer Science & Business Media.)

<sup>28</sup> T. Lee, *Questioning nineteenth-century assumptions about knowledge, I: Determinism* (Vol. 3). (SUNY Press, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> M. Garland, *Cambridge before Darwin: the ideal of a liberal education, 1800–1860*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980); T. S. Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions*. (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> Snow, C. P. *The two cultures* (Cambridge University Press, 1959/2012).

*Two Cultures*, which marked the first and most fundamental of breaks between the sciences and humanities. There are then professors of science that have read little more than a bit of Dickens, and professors of humanities who don't know the second law of thermodynamics.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps more than any other discipline, psychology falls on the fault line of this rift with a foot tenuously planted on each side of the divide. With this awkward straddle being an unsustainable position, psychology, given its status as a social science, is naturally progressing away from indulgence in such ideographic topics as psychobiography and case studies. Instead, psychology is actualizing nomothetic trends exemplified early on by dustbowl empiricism and behaviorism. Much more than in the recent past, peer reviewed journal articles are now likely to be written by five, six, and seven or more authors. They are, furthermore, likely to include vast samples, found conclusions on complex statistics, and introduce technical terms and specialized knowledge that come from interfacing with cognitive neuroscience, genetics and behavioral genetics, evolutionary biology, behavioral ecology, behavioral economics, and comparative zoology. Unarguably, this is all for the best. Reductionism is the natural and necessary means by which psychology differentiated itself from philosophy, and the means by which it continues to mature. Absent these trends, we would have no improvement in explanatory power. So one should not counsel against reducing complex realities into parts that can be controlled and studied. Likewise, one should not discourage the student to avoid narrowly

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<sup>31</sup> C. Snow, *The two cultures* (Cambridge University Press, 1959/2012).

specializing or developing a recondite research program. Also, above all else, one should in no way lament the empirical rigor that psychology continues to assume.

Nevertheless, one should recognize costs of reductionism. The cost of the above-described specialization is sterility; specifically, sterility in the depiction of ideation, relational dynamics, and social psychological phenomena. There are some stopgaps routinely used to counter the sterility of reductionism. For example, there is the case study and the clinical anecdote, which serve as mainstays against the two-dimensionality of the psychological construct and the characterological profile. Companion volumes to the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*,<sup>32</sup> such as a recently edited collection of cases by Barnhill,<sup>33</sup> are illustrative of this important effort. Perhaps even more effectually, narrative psychologists integrate psychological concepts and constructs within the context of the larger life story as they, for example, study redemptive themes,<sup>34</sup> temporal perspective,<sup>35</sup> and therapeutic progress.<sup>36</sup> Finally, there are the theoretically promising, but unfortunately moribund, sub-disciplines of *psychobiography* and *psychohistory*, variously practiced and

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<sup>32</sup> J. Barnhill, *DSM-5 Clinical Cases*. (American Psychiatric Publishers, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>34</sup> D. McAdams, *The redemptive self: Stories Americans live by* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>35</sup> J. Adler and D. McAdams, "Time, culture, and stories of the self." *Psychological Inquiry* (2007), 97-99.

<sup>36</sup> J. Adler, L. Skalina and D. McAdams, "The narrative reconstruction of psychotherapy and psychological health." *Psychotherapy Research* (2008), 719-734.

championed by Freud,<sup>37</sup> Erikson,<sup>38</sup> Schultz,<sup>39</sup> Runyan,<sup>40</sup> Zucker,<sup>41</sup> and Brody,<sup>42</sup> who only partially succeeded in their efforts to holistically study persons and lives.

Notwithstanding such contributions, character types often lie prostrate, breathless and lifeless while psychological internality remains remote, inchoate, and ineffable.

*Method: Purpose of the Present Study*

It is the contention of the present work that the psychological complexity of Russian literature can and should be used to assuage the empirical sterility and two-dimensional unreality of social science data. When science is soft, art is instructive. What cannot be controlled empirically or reduced sufficiently might still be apprehended artistically and depicted instructively. Animation, breath, and life, to some measure, can be found in the novel; most particularly the novel of Russian extraction. Just as Freud<sup>43</sup> looked to Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* to illustrate fraternal rivalry and

<sup>37</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1964).

<sup>38</sup> Erik Erikson, *Young man Luther: A study in psychoanalysis and history* (WW Norton & Company, 1993).

<sup>39</sup> W. Schultz, *Handbook of psychobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>40</sup> W. Runyan, *Life histories and psychobiography: Explorations in theory and method* (Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>41</sup> R. Zucker, Henry Murray's legacy: An epilogue. *Studying Persons and Lives* (1990), 335-340.

<sup>42</sup> E. Brody, Life Histories and Psychobiography: Explorations in Theory and Method. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 174 (1986), 127-128.

<sup>43</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Dostoevsky and parricide* (The Brothers Karamazov and the Critics, 1928), 41-55.

fratricidal impulse, modern students of the mind can look to the Russian canon at large to teach the otherwise inexpressible, and understand what is unquantifiable. And so, the objective of the present study is to convince readers of the utility of Russian literature; of its ability to serve as one useful counterweight to the necessary evils of reductionism. Its audience is the psychology student who would not think to add classic Russian novels to his reading list, and the experienced academic whose understanding and powers of illustration in the lecture hall might benefit from familiarity with the canonical Russian author.

So with the objective stated and the audience identified, it only remains to specify method: First, it is necessary to explain why, above all other times and nations, the literature of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia is an extremely heavy counterweight against reductionism. Second, because the Russian novelist is as uniquely instructive as his novel, the life of Pushkin will be reviewed. Among other lessons, Pushkin's life is instructive of ambivalence and conflict in terms of heritage and station. His biography also demonstrates the tension generated by mismatch between 19<sup>th</sup> century high Russian culture and Pushkin's poor hygiene, incontinence, indecorousness, and unconventionality. Third, selections from *The Queen of Spades*, *Dubrovskii*, and *The Blizzard* are used as examples of how psychological phenomena, such as obsessionality, overweening pride, and the fight-flight response, are expertly depicted by Pushkin.

Every so often in Western European history comes an efflorescent explosion, a saccadic leap forward by which time can be marked. As these punctuated disequilibria are separated in time, so they are in space, such that they are associated with, though not confined to, a particular region. Thus there is the Renaissance in Italy, the Protestant Reformation in Germany, the Scientific Revolution in England, and the Political Revolution in America. Nineteenth century Russia, in its eruption of literary talent, is one of those times and places. Vladimir Nabokov<sup>44</sup> deems this abrupt nineteenth century eruption of literary masterpieces a miraculous flow of esthetic values:

I calculated once that the acknowledged best in the way of Russian fiction and poetry which had been produced since the beginning of the last century runs to about 23,000 pages of ordinary print. It is evident that neither French nor English literature can be so compactly handled. They sprawl over many more centuries; the number of masterpieces is formidable. This brings me to my first point. If we exclude one medieval masterpiece, the beautifully commodious thing about Russian prose is that it is all contained in the amphora of one round century—with an additional little cream jug provided for whatever surplus may have accumulated since. One century, the nineteenth, had been sufficient for a country with practically no literary tradition of its own to create a literature which in artistic worth, in wide-spread influence, in everything except bulk, equals the glorious

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<sup>44</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Timeless discussions of Chekhov, Dostoevski, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Gorki, and Gogol* (New York: Harcourt, 1981), 1-2.

output of England or France, although their production of permanent masterpieces had begun so much earlier.

One can look for the source of the fount in Elizabethan era plays, the eighteenth century English Novel, or specifically in the works of Scott, Goethe, Chateaubriand, Byron, or in Russia's own Petrine era and its westernization. While more or less inspired by these and other influences, nineteenth century Russian literature, taken as a whole, is an irreducible, almost emergent phenomenon. The triumph is recognized by the West, and specifically by other Western European authors:

Henry James referred to Turgenev as "*le premier romancier de son temps*;" George Moore, who admired Tolstoy's "solidity of specification," referred to Anna Karenina as the world's greatest novel; Robert Louis Stevenson interpreted Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment as a room, "a house of life," into which a reader could enter, and be "tortured and purified"; Galsworthy sought "spiritual truth" in the writings of Turgenev and Tolstoy; and Arnold Bennett compiled a list of the twelve greatest novels in the world, a list on which every item came from the pen of a Russian author.<sup>45</sup>

Above all else, the psychological complexity of Russian writings is the foundational element of its distinctive greatness. There was something about the time, balanced as it was between serfdom and emancipation, medievalism and

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<sup>45</sup> M. Jones and R. Miller, *The Cambridge companion to the classic Russian novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), xi.



modernism, religion and science, that called forth greatness and provided a most meaningful context in which to explore themes such as nature and nurture, order and anarchy, faith and nihilism. At the urgent behest of Peter the Great, Russia spent the transitional time between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries inculcating modernization and westernization from the top down, while in the nineteenth century it began to alternatively assimilate and reject this modernization and westernization from the bottom up.<sup>46</sup> Catherine the Great embodies this ambivalence as when she invited Diderot's attentions only to reject the institution of his ideas,<sup>47</sup> denied Russian mercenaries the opportunity to aid England in suppressing the American rebels and then became reactionary in the aftermath of the French Revolution,<sup>48</sup> and called a senate into being only to deny it power.<sup>49</sup> "Russia, and its literature, has always been conscious of being torn between East and West, where 'East' has ranged from Constantinople to the Tatar hordes, and 'West' has incorporated the whole of Europe and its cultural Progeny."<sup>50</sup> Progress was pitted against identity. The question was how to change, grow, and compete without becoming something different altogether. From all these sources came unprecedented literary dynamism.

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<sup>46</sup> R. Massie, *Peter the Great: his life and world* (Random House, 2012).

<sup>47</sup> P. Blom, *A Wicked Company: The Forgotten Radicalism of the European Enlightenment* (Basic Books, 2013).

<sup>48</sup> R. Massie, *Catherine the Great: Portrait of a woman* (Random House, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> J. Alexander, *Catherine the Great: life and legend* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>50</sup> M. Jones and R. Miller, *The Cambridge companion to the classic Russian novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), xii.

John Bayley, in his introduction to Pushkin's collected prose, celebrates Pushkin and relates him to four authors who follow him: Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev and Tolstoy. Of course, there were Great Russian writers that came before, such as Nikolay Mikhailovich Karamzin, Mikhail Lermontov, and Nikolai Karamzin, and great Russian writers that came after, such as Anton Chekhov, Maxim Gorky and Nabokov Solzhenitsyn, but these five authors collected by Bayley represent a sort of epicenter of the Russian literary efflorescence, and each of these five authors warrants separate treatment, as their life and work foster the appreciation of mind and mankind. By way of chronology, Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin, born June 6, 1799 into an aristocratic Moscow household, and so on the precipice of the nineteenth century, is rightly the first subject.

### *The Person of Pushkin*

The Great Russian writers, certainly true of the five herein mentioned, were invariably eccentric extremes with Gogol "shrieking back to the house" after touching a caterpillar,<sup>51</sup> Tolstoy renouncing his ties to family, class, and estate,<sup>52</sup> and Dostoyevsky indulging in fanatical excesses of religious enthusiasm.<sup>53</sup> While one might strain to see Turgenev as an exception to this rule by ignoring his living in a ménage,<sup>54</sup> no

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<sup>51</sup> V. Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (New York: New Directions, 1959), 7.

<sup>52</sup> I. Medzhibovskaya, *Tolstoy and the religious culture of his time: A biography of a long conversion, 1845-1885* (Lexington Books, 2009).

<sup>53</sup> P. Jones and M. Jones, *Dostoevsky and the dynamics of religious experience* (Anthem Press, 2005).

<sup>54</sup> V. S. Pritchett, *The gentle barbarian: the life and work of Turgenev* (A&C Black, 2011).

degree of bias can cause Pushkin to be perceived as an exception.

As fictionalized in *The Blackamoor of Peter the Great*, Pushkin's maternal great-grandfather, purportedly of royal lineage, was, when just a boy,<sup>55</sup> purchased from slavery, and presented to Tsar Peter the Great by whose beneficence and patronage he rose to become General Abram Petrovich Gannibal, "a cavalier of the orders of St. Anne and Alexander Nevsky."<sup>56</sup> Though it can be risky to relate "a writer's creative psychology and biography," it is less so with Pushkin because he himself explicitly makes such connections, especially with reference to his African descent.<sup>57</sup> In reaction to being called, as he was by some few coarse contemporaries, a swarthy, ape-like poet, one senses occasional inferiority, but that inferiority is most often overwhelmed by defiant pride. The resulting ambivalence caused him to lash out at impertinent persons who made disparaging remarks, only to then refer to himself as an "ugly descendant of negroes." This ambivalence is best captured in his reaction to the similitude that his child bore to him: "...imagine, my wife has been maladroit enough to give birth to a little lithograph of me. I am in despair at it, in spite of all my self-conceit."<sup>58</sup>

Pushkin was not only different because of his "exotic mother," a granddaughter of Abram Gannibal known as "the

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<sup>55</sup> C. Emerson, *The Cambridge introduction to Russian literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>56</sup> T. J. Binyon, "Prose Fiction." In *Pushkin: A biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 4.

<sup>57</sup> I. Reyfman, "Prose Fiction" In In A. Kahn (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Pushkin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 93.

<sup>58</sup> T. J. Binyon, *Pushkin: A biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 379.

beautiful Creole,” but by virtue of his paternal lineage, which though of ancient nobility, had been “impoverished and marginalized.”<sup>59</sup>

The Pushkin clan stayed close to power up to the end of the sixteenth century, falling from grace under the Romanovs, whose dynasty dates from the early seventeenth century. Several ancestors were conspirators and mutineers and offered in particular under Peter the Great. By 1799, the year of the poet’s birth, the Pushkin family had lost all their influence and most of their fortune.<sup>60</sup>

Growing older, encountering prejudice, and experiencing setbacks, Pushkin began to identify with his fallen ancestors: “They were persecuted. And I am persecuted.”<sup>61</sup> So both Pushkin’s maternal and paternal lineage justified a sense of pride and dignity, but these emotions were alloyed by the supposed taint of African ancestry on one side, and the loss of power and place on the other. Pushkin’s pedigree, and the hypersensitive pride and internal confusion that it imposed, recalls Erik Erikson and Eriksonian identity theory.<sup>62</sup> Specifically, Pushkin’s angry ambivalence is recapitulated in Erikson’s reaction to being at once a German and a Dane and

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<sup>59</sup> C. Emerson, *The Cambridge introduction to Russian literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 102.

<sup>60</sup> D. Bethea and S. Davydov, *The Cambridge companion to Pushkin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> E. H. Erikson, *Identity youth and crisis* (New York: Norton and Company, Inc., 1968).

a Jew and a Gentile.<sup>63</sup> It then seems that Pushkin and Erikson shared a basic insecurity concerning their origins, and likewise shared the capacity to turn that insecurity to productive account.

More directly, his ancestry, by way of his parents, was also marked by extremity. Capricious and frivolous, Pushkin's mother was absorbed in appearances, but what is more, she was a despot whose maternal affection was drowned in arbitrary tyranny, as evidenced by, for example, not speaking to her son for weeks or months when angry. Irresolute and henpecked, Pushkin's father expressed disturbing mood lability, vacillating from impassioned rages to "lachrymose emotional outbursts."<sup>64</sup> As his father had done before him, Pushkin paid scant attention to the education, rearing, and well-being of his children. Indeed, recapitulating both forms of parental caprice, Pushkin was described thus by his academic and moral supervisor, Martyn Piletsky: "Pride and vanity, which can make him shy, a sensibility of heart, ardent outbursts of temper, frivolity and an especial volubility combined with wit are his chief qualities."<sup>65</sup> The thin-skinned pride, paired with the ungovernable temper that he inherited, genetically and environmentally, from his parents, induced him to hostilities so frequent that a friend's wife supposed he duelled every day. He approached these duels with a spirit of nonchalance too reckless to be thought manufactured bravado or extreme élan. One only has to consider his arrival at an affair of honor with a hat full of

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<sup>63</sup> L. J. Friedman, *Identity's architect: A biography of Erik H. Erikson* (New York: Scribner, 1999).

<sup>64</sup> T. J. Binyon, *Pushkin: A biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 11.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

cherries instead of a second, only to be fired upon and then to throw away his own shot. Few defy statistical odds, and so it was with Pushkin. At the age of thirty-seven, still having a young supple mind, just having attained a vast store of generative historical knowledge, and perhaps having only recently entered his literary prime, fell in a “fatal duel with a wretched adventurer from royalist France.”<sup>66</sup>

In his life, as in his death, he displayed mercurial impulsivity, being blown like a dandelion seed aloft on the winds of external occurrences and internal passions. Indeed, he possessed what some have deemed animalistic passions, in addition to expressing militant atheism and displaying crude, low, ungoverned behaviors that contrasted markedly with the orthodox piety of the aged Tolstoy and the paroled Dostoyevsky. He was said to snort like a stallion when touching a female hand. His animalism extended to his physical appearance, most marked by his “extraordinarily long, claw-like fingernails,” which, like his person, were often unabashedly dirty. Though of the nobility by rank and wealth, he expressed little of the polish characteristic of that class. Pushkin was wont to use indecent language and hiss at actresses in the theatre, gamble compulsively, and behave promiscuously. From this last vice, Pushkin reaped gonorrhea and syphilis. One will find this outcome more or less inevitable after reading Pushkin’s infamous Don Juan List, noting names of women, often married, whom he lusted after, obsessed over, consummated relationships with, or even

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<sup>66</sup> V. Nabokov, *Timeless discussions of Chekhov, Dostoevski, Tolstoy, Turgenyev, Gorki, and Gogol* (New York: Harcourt, 1981).

begot children by.<sup>67</sup> Admitting it to be a caricature, his able biographer<sup>68</sup> nonetheless provides the following informative summation of this vein of Pushkin's character:

“Beginning while still at the Lycee, he later, in society, abandoned himself to every kind of debauchery and spent days and nights in an uninterrupted succession of bacchanals and orgies, with the most noted and inveterate rakes of the time. It is astonishing how his health and his very talent could withstand such a way of life, with which were naturally associated frequent venereal sicknesses, bringing him at times to the brink of the grave [. . . ] Eternally without a copeck, eternally in debt, sometimes even without a decent frock-coat, with endless scandals, frequent duels, closely acquainted with every tavern-keeper, whore and trollop, Pushkin represented a type of the filthiest depravity.”

One gets a sense of his true eccentricity from reading the writings of anyone with whom he cohabitated, for however long. One such complaint records his practicing marksmanship by shooting wax bullets at the wall of his bedroom, while sitting nude in his bed. The writer goes on to note that,

“This was extremely inconvenient, for I had come on business, had work to do, got up and went to bed early; but some nights he did not sleep at all, wrote, moved about noisily, declaimed, and recited his verse in a loud

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<sup>67</sup> D. Bethea and S. Davydov, *The Cambridge companion to Pushkin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>68</sup> T. J. Binyon, *Pushkin: A biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 68.

voice. In summer he would disrobe completely and perform in the room all his nocturnal evolutions in the full nudity of his natural form.”<sup>69</sup>

Nor did he confine his nakedness to his quarters. Most starkly, his utter disregard for decorum is illustrated by his wearing transparent muslin pants without undergarments to a formal dinner. The scandalized young ladies had to be precipitously ushered out, while the rest of the company attempted to act as normal while ignoring the unimaginably idiosyncratic Pushkin and his salient *faux pas*.

Some wondered how Pushkin’s genius could survive his lifestyle. Confounding them, it did. In fact, so meteorically did he rise and so young did he die, that his debauchery hardly had a chance to impede his productivity. “Scarcely out of his teens, Pushkin was already celebrated as Russia’s supreme poet.”<sup>70</sup> Through all the “duels of honor and games of chance”<sup>71</sup> survived a deep and philosophically rich thinker after his own fashion. Pushkin grappled with “individual isolation” and “existential doubt” that appears to be specifically an outgrowth of his reading of Pascal’s *Pensées*, and generally an outgrowth of his atheistic materialism. All such preoccupations which leached into his poetry, as evidenced by the following passage from *The Wanderer*:<sup>72</sup>

Who with inimical power

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<sup>69</sup> T. J. Binyon, *Pushkin: A biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 120.

<sup>70</sup> C. Emerson, *The Cambridge introduction to Russian literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 102.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 104

<sup>72</sup> A. Kahn, Pushkin’s lyric identities, in A. Kahn (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Pushkin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 36.



Summoned me from nothingness  
 Filled my soul with passion,  
 Disturbed my mind with doubt?

He could not find solace in religion<sup>73</sup> and could not even seem to shed sufficient skepticism to accept *Pascal's Wager*.<sup>74</sup>

But in vain do I surrender to a seductive fancy;  
 My mind resists, despises the hope ...  
 Nothingness awaits me beyond the grave...  
 What, nothing! No thought, not a first love!  
 I am terrified!...Once again I look at life sadly,  
 And wish to live a long time so that a dear image  
 Might long melt and flare up in my sad soul.

### *The Writings of Pushkin*

Pushkin's philosophical depth, like his past and person, is insinuated into his characters.<sup>75</sup> In *The Queen of Spades*, Pushkin, recalling his own domineering mother and henpecked father, writes, "My late grandfather, as far as I remember, played the part of butler to my grandmother. He feared her like fire..." Pushkin is writing of a woman known as *la Vénus muscovite* creating a sensation in Paris in her youth; and in doing so he accurately captures the power of beauty to impress, but also to oppress. In her prime, the

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<sup>73</sup> A. Kahn, *The Cambridge Companion to Pushkin*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>74</sup> A. Kahn, Pushkin's lyric identities, in A. Kahn (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Pushkin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 39.

<sup>75</sup> A. S. Pushkin, *The collected stories* (Everyman's Library, 1999).

abject subordination that this woman is able to impose makes salient the reproductive imperative, and beauty as a signal of reproductive ability. More importantly, reminiscent of *Miss Havisham*, the Dickensian creation of *Great Expectations*, Pushkin's Venus illustrates the developmentally inappropriate investment in appearances well past the first flush of youth. One recognizes the egocentric narcissism of Cluster B personality disorders when reading that, after the passage of sixty years, this all too real fictive woman no longer had "the slightest pretensions to beauty." Nonetheless, she "adhered to all the habits of her youth...spending just as much time on, and paying just as much attention to, her toilette." A holdover from beauty long gone, this woman expects all to come before her and bow. There is no graceful transition from youth to matron, from matron to grandmother. Beauty granted power, and both, now gone, are bitterly lamented. In her aged condition, with all charms faded, *la Vénus muscovite* exercises arbitrary autocratic power over the person of her serving maid, who becomes known as the "martyr of the household." Where her beauty once gave her power over all men in her sphere, her remaining money gives her power over a select few in her pay. It is thus that she continues to affront with immature whims and contradictory orders while exuding a baseline of abject disregard and meanness:

She poured the tea and was scolded for using too much sugar; read novels aloud and was blamed for all the faults of the authors; accompanied the Countess on her rides and was held responsible for both the weather and the condition of the pavement.

Pushkin's Venus recalls the feminine expression of the erratic, emotional, and impulsive personality type. It reminds the psychologist of the Histrionic and the Borderline personalities.

Within the same novella, Pushkin is perhaps among the first to plumb the depths of obsession, including "the irrational, the violent, and the extreme," through his main character, Hermann, a Germanic officer within the Imperial Russian Army.<sup>76</sup> As noted by Rosenshield,<sup>77</sup> *The Queen of Spades* provides an intimate descent into obsession:

Three, seven, ace began to eclipse in Hermann's imagination the image of the dead old woman. Three, seven, ace didn't leave him for a moment and played continually on his lips. If he saw a young girl, he would say: 'How slender she is! A real three of hearts.' If anyone asked him the time, he would answer: "Five minutes to the seven." Every pot-bellied man he saw reminded him of the ace. Three, seven, ace haunted him in his sleep, assuming all possible forms: The three blossomed before him in a form of a magnificent flower, the seven appeared as a Gothic portal, and the ace an enormous spider. All his thoughts fused into one: to make use of the secret that had cost him so dearly.

Consequently, this novel, written in 1833 by a man who would rather die than not gamble,<sup>78</sup> prefigures Dostoyevsky's

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<sup>76</sup> G. Rosenshield, *Pushkin and the genres of madness* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), viii.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> T. J. Binyon, *Pushkin: A biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

inclination to obsessively gamble and to incorporate his gambling obsession into his writings. Still further, before Dostoyevsky begot *Crime and Punishment*'s Roskonakov, Pushkin's Hermann, in petty imitation of Napoleon, commits the "ethical equivalent of political despotism"<sup>79</sup> by divesting an old woman of her wealth in the form of her secret, taking her life in the bargain.

*Dubrovskii* is another story in which Pushkin shows himself expert at capturing characterological hauteur, while wonderfully documenting its relational implications. The hubristic pride of Kirila Petrovich Troekurov, who was accustomed to treat others with caprice and reap deference in return, spoke of himself in the third person: "I'll show him...I'll make him cry himself blind; I'll teach him what it's like to affront Troekurov!" In the narrow confines of this short story, Pushkin shows how supercilious pride, compounded by miscommunication, can result in the misuse of power and influence and catalyze cycles of revenge that recall the blood feuds of the pre-modern state. *Dubrovskii*, a man of high moral worth accustomed to plain dealing, gets the bad end of a quarrel with his quondam friend, the Machiavellian Troekurov. In pursuing the quarrel, Troekurov resists an instant and obvious strike for a deferred and oblique attack that is much more fatal: "...a man like *Dubrovskii*, a proud man of the land and of the sword, could only parry the first kind of attack, the second renders him an idiot child." The legal maneuverings and corrupt machinations of the insidiously influential Troekurov come

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<sup>79</sup> J. Børtnes, Religion. In M. V. Jones & R. F. Miller (Eds.), *The Cambridge companion to the classic Russian novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 106.

to deprive Dubrovskii of his estate, and thereafter of his reason. As contemporary psychoneuroimmunological studies do attest, a sudden stressful descent down the pecking order, such as Dubrovskii's transition from proud independent estate holder to humble dependent debtor, can wreak havoc on mind and body alike. As the corrupted court officials seize the Dubrovskii estate, the elder Dubrovskii, purple-faced with anger, dies of apoplexy. His son Vladimir, disgusted with the failure of state justice, torches his natal house, consigning the portrait of his mother and the bodies of the officials, all alike, to the flames.

Aptly and simply named *The Blizzard*, Pushkin's tale shines forth in his depiction of the best laid plans being scuttled by the most basic elements. "The rigors of a winter journey by sleigh during a blizzard," as vividly detailed by Pushkin, recall the incongruous hairlessness of man so ill-suited for "the eternal Russian struggle with cold."<sup>80</sup> It happens that Vladimir Nikolaevich, the ardent lover of Maria Gavrilovna, after arranging a clandestine matrimonial ceremony by entreating priests and collecting witnesses and coordinating with his lover, is in the end thwarted by nature. The troika and driver being reserved for his betrothed, Vladimir sets out with an unfortunate horse and a simple sleigh. The twenty-minute ride along the well-known route, in consequence of the rising wind and an obscured road, disorients Vladimir. Ebullience and bliss give way to exhaustion and despair by way of a gradual process that, in its psychological astuteness, elicits empathy while it teaches humility:

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<sup>80</sup> M. V. Jones and R. F. Miller, *The Cambridge companion to the classic Russian novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 48.

Vladimir found himself in the middle of a field, and his attempts to get back on the road were all in vain. The horse trod at random, now clambering up a pile of snow, now tumbling into a ditch; the sleigh kept turning over; all Vladimir could do was to try not to lose the right direction. It seemed to him, however, that more than half an hour had passed, yet he had still not reached the Zhadrino woods. Another ten minutes or so went by, but the woods still did not come within his view. He rode across a field intersected by deep gullies. The blizzard would not let up; the sky would not clear. The horse began to get tired, and Vladimir perspired profusely, even though he kept sinking into the snow up to his waist.

With each assessment of the hour, he is ever more seized by panic. He is now acting as an unthinking creature in the grip of panic. Like the routed soldier and the injured animal, he feels instead of thinks, and acts instead of planning. After being so limbically dominated, there is, too, the attempt to reassert cortical control, the attempt to overpower emotions with rational response:

At last Vladimir realized he was going in the wrong direction. He stopped, began to think, to recollect, to consider, and became convinced that he should have turned to the right.

After this ineffectual effort, Vladimir mounts one last spasm of emotion, one more epinephrine-induced exertion to do by sheer will what only can be done by strategic thinking:

He rode on and on, however, yet there was no sign of Zhadrino; nor was there an end to the woods. He realized with horror that he had driven into an unfamiliar forest. Despair took possession of him. He whipped the horse; the poor animal tried to break into a trot but soon gave in to fatigue, and within a quarter of an hour slowed down to a snail's pace despite every effort on the part of the unfortunate Vladimir.

He reaches a house and has a resurgence of panic, hurrying toward a guide and offering him to pay him anything asked. Though, on learning that it is near dawn, "Vladimir no longer says anything." All is now over; adrenal exhaustion sets in. As can be seen, the will of horse and horseman is spent. In the heights of his unthinking exertions, in his profuse perspiration, in his inability to master his emotions, one sees the flight/fight response in lasting and vivid detail: Anxiety gave way to fear, fear to panic, and panic to enervation. The cock crowed and the sun rose as he came to the church, finding locked doors instead of his affianced love. Pushkin ingeniously recapitulates the emotions of man in the storm. Vladimir and the storm raged together, but as the storm subsided so did Vladimir's will:

Gradually the trees thinned out, and Vladimir emerged from the forest, but there was still no sign of Zhadrino. It must have been around midnight. Tears gushed from his eyes; he drove forward haphazardly. The weather had by now grown calm, the clouds were breaking up, and a broad, flat field, covered with a white undulating carpet, stretched out before Vladimir.

### Conclusions

To *The Queen of Spades*, *Dubrovskii*, and *The Blizzard*, are added *The History of Pugachev*, *Egyptian Nights*, *The Shot*, *The Captain's Daughter*, *The Stationmaster*, and other psychologically astute novellas, and this is not to mention Pushkin's verse novel *Eugene Onegin*, his many narrative poems, his dramas and his fairytales...all this in a raucous thirty-seven years. Still further, this corpus of Pushkin is merely the beginning of the nineteenth-century Russian canon, which encompasses several authors, longer lived and more prolific, that the scholar, intellectual, student, and professor can mine for psychological revelation.

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