Alexander Pushkin

The Queen of Spades

and Other Stories

A new translation by Alan Myers

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THE QUEEN OF SPADES

AND OTHER STORIES

ALEXANDER SERGEEVICH PUSHKIN was born in Moscow in 1799 and as a schoolboy was recognized as a poetic prodigy. In 1817 he received a nominal appointment in the government service, but for the most part he led a dissipated life in the capital producing much highly polished light verse. His narrative poem, *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (publ. 1820), secured his place as the leading figure in Russian poetry. At about the same time a few seditious verses led to his banishment from the capital. During this so-called 'southern exile', he began his novel in verse, *Eugene Onegin*. As a result of further conflicts with state authorities he was condemned to a new period of exile at his family's estate of Mikhailovskoe. There he wrote some of his finest lyric poetry, and completed his verse drama *Boris Godunov*. In 1825 he was still in enforced absence from the capital when the Decembrist Revolt took place. Despite close friendships with some of the conspirators he was not implicated in the affair. In 1826 Nicholas I finally permitted him to return to Moscow, ending seven years of exile. By the end of the decade, he had turned increasingly to prose composition. In 1830, while stranded at his estate of Boldino, he completed *Eugene Onegin*, wrote a major collection of prose stories (*The Tales of Belkin*), and composed his experimental 'Little Tragedies'. In 1831 he married Natalya Goncharova. The rest of his life was plagued by financial and marital woes, by the hostility of literary and political enemies, and by the younger generation's dismissal of his recent work. His literary productivity diminished, but in 1833, he produced both his greatest prose tale, *The Queen of Spades*, and a last poetic masterpiece, *The Bronze Horseman*. In 1836 he completed his only novel-length work in prose, *The Captain's Daughter*. Enraged by anonymous letters containing attacks on his honour, he was driven in 1837 to challenge an importunate admirer of his wife to a duel. The contest took place on 27 January and two days later the poet died from his wounds.

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ALEXANDER PUSHKIN

Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin

The Queen of Spades

The Captain's Daughter

Peter the Great's Blackamoor

Translated by
ALAN MYERS

Edited with an Introduction and Notes by
ANDREW KAHN

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INTRODUCTION

In his late imitation of a poem by Horace, Alexander Pushkin predicted that his own verse would come to be widely read. In the 1820s he had enjoyed extraordinary fame as a poet. With his turn to prose in the 1830s not only had Pushkin's celebrity suffered, but he became the focus of hostile criticism. Confident as he was about the verdict of posterity, he could not have foreseen the universality of his appeal as poet and prose-writer in modern Russian culture—nor the complexity of his status. For the masses of Soviet Russia he became a set text in school and a visible presence: there is scarcely a town without its statue of Pushkin and a street bearing his name. For the Soviet authorities, particularly in the period leading up to the 1937 centenary of his death on the eve of the Stalinist Terror, the study of Pushkin's life and art became an act of cultural appropriation and means of self-legitimation for a political regime quick to capitalize on the writer's uneasy relation with his own ruler. The next step was to claim him as a truly democratic writer, and ignore the fact that he was an aristocrat proud of his class and heritage. For the Russian poetic tradition he represents what Harold Bloom calls a 'strong poet' whose verse has set a standard to imitate or to react against through a range of intertextual devices like allusion and quotation. In Russian literature his life has come to embody the tragic fate of the poet in a country where, at least until now, the moral authority of the writer carried weight and personal risk. Consciously or unconsciously, Russian poets, from Lermontov in the early nineteenth century to Mandelshtam a century later, seem to have assimilated parts of Pushkin's life into their own *cursus honorum*. It is hard to think of a great Russian poet who has not expressed an autobiographical anxiety of influence about living under the spell or shadow of Pushkin's life.

Pushkin's career from 1820 till his death in 1837 spans what is widely known as the Golden Age of Russian Literature. Of the older generation of pre-Romantic poets, Konstantin Batyushkov (1787–1855) and Vasily Zhukovsky (1783–1852) stand out,

the former for his elegies in the Italian style and imitations of the Greek Anthology, the latter for his famous translations of Gray's 'Elegy written in a Country Churchyard', quasi-mystical Ossianic lyrics, and rousing ballads. From Pushkin's immediate contemporaries the idylls and pastoral verse of Anton Delvig (1798–1831), the philosophical and narrative poems of Evgeny Baratynsky (1800–44), and the songs of Nikolai Yazykov (1803–47) all still deserve to be read. Against this constellation of major and minor poetic talents, most of them little known to Western readers, Pushkin's star shone brightest. From almost the moment when Pushkin fell in a duel in January 1837 he became a mythic figure in Russian culture. His own contemporaries referred to him as the 'sun' of Russian poetry. It is true that his immediate posthumous reputation suffered as literature with a more overtly ideological tone enjoyed a vogue, but the conscious repudiation of Pushkin that occurs from time to time by writers of various political and literary inclinations in itself testifies to his canonical position: the utilitarian critics of the 1860s could not forgive his aestheticism, and in the early twentieth century the Futurists coped best with their predecessor by denying his value altogether.

Pushkin had declared that prose demands 'thought, thought, and more thought', but even before he turned to prose his diverse accomplishments gave ample evidence of a keen intellect. For his contemporaries he was above all the master of the lyric poem, verse that is famous for its formal perfection and its reticent lyric persona, and infamous for its resistance to translation. The English-language equivalent of his lyric talent exists only in a desert-island dream of the technical brilliance, wit, and incisiveness of a Ben Jonson combined with a Keatsian sensuous apprehension of the physical world. In the 1820s his lyric genius was in full spate and earned him a loyal audience even at a distance. The poet had been sent into exile in 1820 for writing politically incautious verse and for incendiary comments in public. The immediate cause of his punishment was the 'Ode. Liberty' (1817), which circulated anonymously and caused an enormous stir. In the best tradition of Enlightenment political philosophy, but with the menacing example of the French Revolution as a backdrop, it reminded Alexander I that he too was

subject to the law, and that tyrants could expect to meet the fate of his father, Paul I, who had been assassinated in 1801. Initially Alexander wished to exile Pushkin to Siberia, but in the end, owing to the intercession of friends at court, the poet was sent to southern Russia for a period of four years, beginning in Kishinev and Odessa. Although never directly involved in any plots against the government, Pushkin liked to live dangerously and continued to maintain links with men of liberal political sympathies. In 1824, as punishment for a blasphemous correspondence, he was sent to his family's estate at Mikhailovskoye where he lived in isolation until the new Tsar, Nicholas I, pardoned him and recalled him to the capital in 1826. Their initial interview after Pushkin's return marked the beginning of an uneasy relationship, in which the Tsar acted as the poet's personal censor. In the narrative poems of his southern exile Pushkin had reduced with elegant economy the Byronic narrative to its bare essentials: exotic scenic description and characterization were pared away, laying bare stark emotional and philosophical contrasts. In *The Gypsies* (1824), drama and psychology make a riveting vehicle for Pushkin's deconstruction of the romantic reception of Rousseau and his idealized vision of man in a state of nature. *Boris Godunov* (1825), modelled on the example of Shakespeare's historical plays, is a technical *tour de force*, drawing the reader into the very pell-mell of history through a kaleidoscopic succession of scenes and superb study of the psychology of the ruler; it also embodies Pushkin's early thoughts on his philosophy of history, thoughts that would eventually seek expression in the prose works of his final years. By the late 1820s he had also demonstrated a superb gift for realism and social satire in *Eugene Onegin*, a novel, but one composed in verse. As he pointed out to a friend, 'there's a diabolical difference'.

By the late 1820s, out of economic necessity and a natural inventiveness—he is often described as Protean—Pushkin began to turn to fiction and history. With the rise of the reading public and growing circulation of newspapers and journals, the demand for fiction increased in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The notion of the professional writer became conceptually viable for the first time in Russia, even if it still was

economically tenuous.[1] But the public that had lionized his poetic creations cold-shouldered his prose. Their preferences lay with the work of writers such as Faddei Bulgarin, who interlarded a verbose style with tendentious patriotic sentiment years after the Napoleonic campaigns. Pushkin's inability to achieve a commerical success on the scale of his rivals only aggravated the wound that his financial reliance on the Tsar caused his sense of professionalism and personal pride. Far from repudiating verse, Pushkin wrote many of his greatest poems in the last years of his life, but he desisted from publishing works that were written in something like the private language of a man beset by problems who found an outlet in the pure and independent realm of language and art. When Evgeny Baratynsky, another great poet of the age, read through these poems in manuscript not long after Pushkin's death he was stunned by the compression of a whole range of philosophical argument and ideas that Pushkin had only hinted at in his earlier poems.

It would be strained to counterpose Pushkin the poet and Pushkin the prose-writer. In both spheres Pushkin is one of the great artists of literary transformation who assimilates, parodies, reduces, and reinvents. Great writers are great readers, and Pushkin's originality begins in his appropriation and recombination of literature. The energies and traits that characterize his lyric gift also define his performance as a writer of prose. While clarity and sparseness are the terms most often applied to his descriptive style, part of Pushkin's great talent as a stylist was his chameleon-like powers of imitation. Leaving aside their formal differences, what sets the lyric and prosaic branches of his creation apart is the observation that while a single impulse to refine his models animated both the poet and the prose-writer, great separate themes can be traced through each aspect. Poems begin in feeling, and his lyric talent was a nuanced instrument of intense yet elegant expression that examined the poetic speaker's inner state and his relation to the world. In his fiction the same impulse to rework literary conventions and genres combines with a talent for elaborating plots out of ancedote that regularly

[1] See William Mills Todd, III, *Fiction and Society in the Age of Pushkin: Ideology, Institutions, and Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986).

dramatizes the force that engages his wit and curiosity, and makes Pushkin's world go round—namely, chance.

Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin

Pushkin spent the autum of 1830 on his family's estate at Boldino near Moscow. This period, often called the first Autumn at Boldino, saw a creative outpouring of spectacular versatility. Lyric poems, narrative poems, dramas, and prose flowed unstintingly from his pen, among them *The Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin*. In the late 1820s Prince Peter Vyazemsky (1792–1878), a critic of impeccable taste and rare humour (at least when compared to the more celebrated but dour Vissarion Belinsky) had lamented that 'Mirth, genuine and infectious cheerfulness very rarely are to be met with in our literature'. As Vyazemsky but few others recognized at the time, *The Tales of Belkin* marked a singular advance for these very qualities in Russian literature. Their critical reception was unenthusiastic; and at least initially in some cases spectacularly literal-minded, as numerous readers fell for the ruse of the publisher's letters and believed in the actual existence of Belkin. Belinsky, of course, was not taken in by a device that had been widely popular since the eighteenth century, but he none the less found the stories frivolous and too artificial to satisfy his growing conviction that the purpose of literature was not to comment on literature, but to explore life. Pushkin, on the other hand, saw parody as a challenge to both the writer and the reader, and in a note written shortly before he composed *The Tales of Belkin* made its appreciation a measure of cultural achievement:

> The art of imitating the style of famous writers has in England been brought to perfection. Walter Scott was once shown verses, supposedly written by him. 'I think these are my verses,' he said laughing, 'I have been writing so many for so long that I daren't disclaim even this nonsense!' I do not think that any of our famous writers could mistake a parody . . . for his own work. This type of jest demands rare flexibility of style; a good parodist has every style at his command, and ours has barely one.

Through the great age of Russian Realism the cycle of stories, excepting the more overtly humanitarian 'The Stationmaster',

frustrated critics who saw satire as the vehicle of social instruction and political criticism, whilst having little patience for caricature and parody. Beginning in the early twentieth century, the Formalist school of criticism spearheaded a new approach to the study of literature by concentrating on its factitious quality outside its historical context. It investigated not only the relation of literature to life, but of literature to literature in texts that simultaneously cast the illusion of reality while destabilizing that reality through a complex set of devices that acknowledged the artificiality of the text. It was in that climate that the critical reception of *The Tales of Belkin* came into its own. Each of the tales can be related to distinct movements in Russian romantic and sentimental fiction. *The Tales of Belkin* are woven from a tissue of earlier works, devices, motifs, and themes, and keep history at a distance while all the same trying teasingly to pass off their story-telling as true to life.

It will be appropriate to examine in greater depth Pushkin's debt to the novels of Sir Walter Scott in the context of his historical fiction, where this influence is most apparent and significant. However, in organizing *The Tales of Belkin* Pushkin appropriated Scott's standard device of introducing his works with a fictitious history of their author, including an explanation of how they came to be published. While the topos of the adventitious manuscript long precedes Scott, he exploited it as a way of protecting his own anonymity as the author of *Waverley*. The usual preface, of which the introduction to *Old Mortality* (1816) is the classic example, establishes a hierarchy of relations between the text and a number of figures responsible for its publication. Typically, the stories, presented as historical fact, originate with a narrator who passes them on to an intermediary figure who dies before he can publish the stories he has collected. These tales in turn come into the hands of a publisher who testifies to the integrity of their collector and claims to publish them as he desired. While Pushkin borrows this structure, his version involves further complications. He inserts two more links in the chain, so that there are four stages of transmission from the original stories collected by Belkin, who passes them on to his good neighbour in Nenaradovo (needless to say,

an invented place), who in turn sends them to his relation and heir Maria Alexeyevna Trafilina. Unable to provide information on Belkin, she refers the editor to an anonymous neighbour, through whom they become the possession of the publisher A.P. Pushkin diverges from Scott in two important ways. Whereas Scott's narrator normally purports to have collected his material from a single source, Belkin identifies separate narrators for each story, giving their rank or status and initials. In shoring up their realistic effect Scott usually gives ample factual evidence concerning the publisher. Here little is said about A.P., whose identity most readers had no trouble guessing, as the clear intention is to limit his role as the mere agent of their publication. The fun of the literary mystification lay in persuading the reader of Belkin's existence, and this was best corroborated by an independent figure who supplies much biographical information:

> Ivan Petrovich left a good many manuscripts behind him, some of which are in my possession, though some have been put by his housekeeper to sundry domestic uses. For example, last winter all the windows in her wing of the house were sealed up with the first part of an unfinished novel of his. The tales mentioned above were his first efforts, I do believe. They are, as Ivan Petrovich used to say, for the most part true, and heard from various people. The proper names, however, are almost all invented, and the names of villages and hamlets borrowed from those hereabouts, which is why my village gets mentioned somewhere too. There was no sort of malice intended, it was just lack of imagination. (pp. 5–6)

Readers nowadays are all-too familiar with legal disclaimers that head works of fiction, typically reminding one that characters, names, and events bear no resemblance to real persons and incidents. Although he is writing to the publisher, his criticism of Belkin is intended for Pushkin's audience, presenting precisely the type of naïve reader the work so easily runs rings around. Belkin's neighbour has not acquired the modern reader's almost instinctive wariness of unreliable authors and narrators. For her the author's comments on his own fiction are entirely believable, but she never makes clear precisely what he meant in denigrating his own imagination. What proportion of truth and fiction are mixed together? Are the stories no more than gossip ('malicious

ulterior motive'), second-hand tales lightly disguised? Did Belkin transcribe his sources more or less verbatim, applying no artifice of his own? Or is it more likely that 'heard from varous people' refers only to the germ of each tale, and that Belkin's neighbour lacked the imagination to mistrust the playful author's modest pose and grasp his sophisticated talent for parody?

The impossibility of answering these questions with absolute certainly is what makes this work so beguiling. There have been critics who, taking Belkin at his word when he purports to be reproducing five true stories of individual narrators, have attempted through close textual analysis to filter out Belkin's own narrative voice and show its distinctness from the original teller of the tale. But in the end the entire text belongs to Belkin, and efforts to discriminate between an original account and Belkin's reworking becomes a hopelessly subjective and unreliable operation. Its results are unreliable above all because we lack the information and authorial sanction that are necessary to resolve the fundamental question before the reader: is Belkin an intentional parodist? Three possibilities confront us: whether (1) Belkin retells closely what he has heard, in which case his original narrators reveal a wide range of talent; or (2) fashions a story out of the original tale by clumsily applying techniques from contemporary fiction, sometimes with loss of control of his material; or (3) knowingly mimics a style because he is good at playing at being a 'bad' writer. *The Tales of Belkin* keep the reader perpetually guessing at the relative status of fiction and truth, sincerity and mockery in the text, and engaged by the possibility that a story is enjoyable because it is clever at being an inferior work, or because the failed pretension at literariness offers its own amusements. In the end, therefore, the point of the two extra-literary 'documents' at the beginning is that they raise the problem of how difficult it is without external guidance to judge the intention and effect of skilful pastiche. In 1834 the more discerning recognized that Belkin's endearing ambiguity was A.P.'s ruse, designed to give enjoyment to that small portion of the reading public equipped with the knowledge and irony and sense of play of the Pushkinian reader. Those readers who failed to see A.P. as a password for Pushkinian irony and spiritedness took it all literally, and felt empowered as story-tellers while they had

in fact been entirely gulled. If anyone with experiences akin to Belkin's could become an author, not everyone, however, was a worthy Pushkinian reader. In matters of sensibility Pushkin was not a democrat, but his challenges to the reading public use wit and delicacy. It would only be a decade before Lermontov, energized by the romantic cult of the writer, angered by the unappreciation and envy that in his view led to Pushkin's death, lashed out at his readership's literary unsophistication in the preface to his novel *A Hero of our Time*. And yet, for all the limitations of her letter, Trafilina reminds us that while Belkin is not exactly a realist, there is the microcosm of Russian country life behind his fiction whose true function, like all entertainment, is to relieve boredom. Where the reader faces risk is above all in deciding whether Belkin really lacked imagination or in fact let his imagination get carried away with him as he dissipated boredom by converting simple anecdotes into fictions. In these tales chance determines individual fates. But the mystification surrounding Belkin makes it difficult to know whether the strangeness of reality outdoes fiction (as Pushkin firmly believed it often did), disrupting the use of chance merely as a traditional device; or whether Belkin lets himself down as a craftsman and mismanages his plots, and thereby increases the effect of parody. Ultimately the effect is to make the truth of any interpretation the reader wishes to venture also a matter of chance.

The ambiguity is visible in 'The Shot', which may well be Pushkin's most amusing debunking of Romantic stereotypes and devices, whatever Belkin's aims. Knowingly or not, the narrator casts events according to the pattern of an unreconstructed romantic model, but it is the mismatch of plot and literary design that catches the reader's eye. Authorial irony lies in the narrator's unself-conscious approach, and in the number of clichés strewn acros his narrative. The surprising thing about 'The Shot' is that it is high on melodrama but low on action. Events and characters continually overturn the expectations of the narrator. Despite the strict code of honour, Silvio does not fight his assailant; the sang-froid of the Count unnerves him and he does not kill him; and in their final encounter he once again loses his nerve and departs, honour unavenged, and content merely to have spoiled his opponent's newly wedded bliss. Commentators

have identified keys to irony in 'The Shot' in the numerous references to the prose of Alexander Bestuzhev (1797–1837). A treasury of romantic plotting, characterization, and phraseology, his novels and stories enjoyed enormous popularity in the 1820s. Lavish description of exotic locations set the scene for lurid erotic intrigue and brave exploits, and the usual unexpected outcomes. The style of his prose is as lush as Pushkin's is sparing. Double and triple adjectives and long periodic sentences achieved amplification and exaggeration. And while the style of narration in 'The Shot' is only sporadically like Bestuzhev, it strikingly diverges from the more neutral stylistic norm Pushkin prefers. The narrator's description of Silvio, with his gloomy pallor, strange name, morose manner, air of mystery, and waspish tongue reproduces in a toned-down version the standard features of Bestvzhev's Byronic hero.

The theme of vengeance, sudden, unexpected, and bloody, was another Bestuzhev specialty. 'My revenge will be every bit as remarkable as my passion is unlimited!' declares Edwin, the hero of 'The Tournament at Reval'. In the tales 'Wenden Castle', 'The Traitor', and 'Eisen Castle', all from the 1820s, the thirst for satisfaction is linked to a treacherous love-affair. In the story 'Gedeon' the vengeful hero appears in the house of his enemy on the eve of his son's marriage; there is a clear parallel with the final meeting of Silvio and the Count soon after the latter marries. When the Countess, having turned paler than her own handkerchief, throws herself on her husband's neck and faints dead away before the final duel, her histrionics have nothing in common with Pushkin's preferred sort of heroine who, like Tatyana in *Eugene Onegin*, bears unhappiness with a certain reserve or, like Zemfira in *The Gypsies*, shows reckless bravery. And what does one make of the final shot, when bloodthirsty Silvio, his opponent at his mercy, fires at a painting instead? In their excellent analysis of the story, David Bethea and Sergei Davydov interpret this as delibering the *coup de grâce* to Romanticism, the ultimate self-reflexive act of self-destruction, not only by the Romantic hero, but of the character type. The painting is a last in a series of objects, including a playing-card and an officer's cap, all of which emblematize various aspects of Romanticism. As they observe, '[i]f in the epigraph Pushkin

pulls the hammer back, then in the concluding paragraph he pulls the trigger. Thus in addition to the prop, costume, and setting of fading romantic art, the central cliché—the protagonist—is shot through and down by the author's ironic marksmanship.'[2] And yet while the flat report of Silvio's death in Byronic circumstances, fighting on behalf of the Greek patriots, finishes off this Romantic type, even here irony reigns. For the reported death as the coda to a tale reproduces yet one more topos favoured by Bestuzhev.

While the interplay between literary models and the 'reality' of the characters' lives can be detected throughout *The Tales of Belkin*, it is most pronounced in the cluster of tales where the style, feelings, and postures of Sentimentalism are displayed and played with. Calqued on English and French models, Russian Sentimentalists fashioned a new language of sensibility and gentility that concentrated the mind and soul on individual feeling and private virtues. The Sentimentalist movement proved to be a reaction against the more public style of neoclassicism by placing its emphasis squarely on the direct communication, the heart-to-heart relationship, linking poet and reader whose moral universes flow one into another. The writer no longer cultivated the monarch, but looked inward to self-perfection while also looking outward in a show of democratic feeling to his fellow man of any status. Sincerity tinged with melancholy, ease of communication, and facile joy suffuse both sentimental poetry and prose. Like parallel movements in Britain and France, the Russian cult of sensibility finds sincerity in the lachrymose and revels in the belief that happiness is the experience of another's misfortune. As one scholar has put it, 'the Sentimental tribute of a tear exacted by the spectacle of virtue in distress was an acknowledgement at once of man's inherent goodness and of the impossibilty of his ever being able to demonstrate his goodness effectively'.[3] Foremost among the Russian Sentimentalists was the mid-career Nicholas Karamzin, who was a complex source

[2] David Bethea, and Sergei Davydov, 'Pushkin's Saturnine Cupid: The Poetics of Parody in *The Tales of Belkin*', *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, 96: 1 (1981), 8–21.

[3] R. F. Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress* (London, 1974), 29.

of inspiration to Pushkin, but a literary father to be celebrated and ultimately overcome.

Having made his mark as the author of exquisite idylls and elegies, his belief in gentle progress shattered by the French Revolution, Karamzin summed up the Sentimental movement (and delivered its death-blow) in his famous story *Poor Liza*. Written in the smooth middle style, in a syntax based on French, this tale surprised his élite readership by establishing the democracy of sensibility. Virtue, as chronicled in the love of a peasant girl for an ignoble aristocrat, depends on purity of emotions and motive rather than class. If this was news to Karamzin's readers, so was the Russian writer's expression of pessimism and disenchantment. After all, the hero, transplanted to the countryside from the city, seduces and then abandons Liza in a display of less than fine feeling. The story ends in her tragic suicide.

Parody is flexible because it encompasses any purposeful incorporation of earlier literary material in a new text, always presupposing an ironical distance on the predecessor but not necessarily implying humorous caricature. In drawing on the Sentimentalist movement's conventions of characterization and plotting, 'The Snowstorm', 'The Lady Peasant', and 'The Stationmaster' create ironic rereadings that employ a wide emotional and stylistic range. Both Maria Gavrilovna, the heroine of 'The Snowstorm', and Liza in 'The Lady Peasant' learn to experience love through their understanding of the heroines of Sentimental fiction, but the difference between them is pointed. In 'The Snowstorm' the codes of the romantic tale, with its sudden reversals and abrupt coincidences, clash with the sentimental self-image of the characters, even as history—the year is 1812—breaks in and disrupts their own plotting. Maria Gavrilovna is a literal reader who fails to distinguish between life and art. In sentimental fiction expression of feeling vouchsafes moral excellence. The heroines display their sensibility by swooning in distress and dissolving into tears. She sees herself as a heroine from Rousseau's great novel of sensibility, *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), and treats her fiancée Burmin as a St-Preux, ready to sweep her off her feet. Events overtake the literary projection she has of her life by first undoing her plans,

and then magically restoring her happiness. In this tale constancy maintained is love restored through accident and accidental displays of virtue. Is it a send-up, or does Belkin believe that fate rewards a true love?

In 'The Lady Peasant' true love begins in falsity. Like 'The Snowstorm', this tale combines elements from different modes, bringing together the theme of mistress-into-maid of comic provenance with the idealized heroine of the sentimental tale. All the wit lies in the deliberateness with which the new figures self-consciously fashion their behaviour according to literary stereotypes. Rustic virtue rewarded by marital bliss was a familiar motif in eighteenth-century culture. Liza need have looked no further than Ablesimov's popular libretto for his opera *The Miller* for an example of a peasant girl who gets her man through cunning. While it is not made clear whether Liza knew Marivaux, Pushkin certainly did, and the antics he contrives for his heroine recall Marivaux's plays, *Le Jeu de l'amour et du hasard* (The Game of Love and Chance) in particular. While these models provide the amusing conceit for this tale, it is also clear that the specific intertext invoked by Pushkin, and knowingly or unknowingly parodied by Belkin, is *Poor Liza*. Both hero and heroine of 'The Lady Peasant' function as mirror-images of their prototypes. The Liza of Karamzin's seminal tale is reborn as the minxish young lady who disguises herself as a peasant. Alexey Berestov, while sharing Erast's charms, reverses Karamzin's cynical portrait by possessing a truly noble heart, and demonstrating the sincerity and good feeling of the true sentimental hero who can feel genuine affection for a peasant girl. Pushkin adds a twist to the class barrier that separates them by invoking the theme of family discord reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet*:

The thought of an indissoluble bond quite often flashed through their minds, but they never spoke about that to each other. The reason was plain: Alexey, however much he might be attached to his sweet Akulina, was ever conscious of the distance which existed between him and the poor peasant girl; Liza, aware of the profound animosity between their fathers, did not dare to hope for their reconciliation, and besides, her vanity was secretly stirred by an obscure romantic hope of eventually seeing the Tugilovo squire at the feet of the daughter of the Priluchino blacksmith.

When Liza and Berestov assume their peasant guises, their dress and diction adhere not to observed life but rather to their literary image, glamorized and sentimentalized. Like their counterparts in the earlier story, Liza and Berestov first meet in a grove in the early morning. All the features of the landscape, from the clear sky to the singing of the birds, replicate that of the sentimental idyll. But Pushkin's narrator disrupts the comparison: while poor Liza dreams of her future lover, her *faux-naïf* imitator provokes a reticence typical of the fastidious sentimental narrator: 'She thought . . . but can anyone identify precisely what a 17-year-old lady is thinking about, alone, before six on a spring morning?' In the sentimental novel decorum requires an immediate attraction: heart speaks to heart without affectation, but with vows of eternal love. Here Alexey, while out hunting, unexpectedly comes upon Liza and surprises her. He is unaware that in point of fact he is being hunted by her. Liza repays Alexey's initial surprise by turning the tables on her suitor and reversing Karamzin's ending. Parody, once again, converts tragedy into comedy.

'The Lady Peasant' lightly mocks Karamzin's dictum that good fiction normally praises virtue and points a moral. 'The Stationmaster' with its overt pathos struck readers as more consistent with the tone and philosophy of Sentimentalism. While parody of the narrator once again forms part of the literary game it does not distract or detract from the power of the story to move the reader. The narrator's ostensibly humane tone and position —it is the only one of the Belkin tales to have an introduction— became a classic statement of philanthropy in Russian literature, imitated by Gogol in 'The Overcoat' and *Dead Souls*, and by Dostoevsky beyond him. 'The Stationmaster' is also the only tale of the collection to present, in the figure of the Prodigal Daughter, a morally problematic character whose elopement and final return have provoked and divided readers' sympathies.

Pushkin was not the first writer to treat the figure of the stationmaster. Once again his narrator takes a cue from earlier writers. Early in his celebrated *Journey from St Petersburg to Moscow*, the eighteenth-century radical writer A. N. Radishchev recorded the venality and indolence of stationmasters. In his 'The Stationmaster' (1826), the now-obscure Wilhelm Karlgof

(1799–1841) produced a picture of domestic happiness akin to the bliss in which Dunya and Samson Vyrin initially live. For that matter, the opening paragraph ironizes the source of its epigraph, Prince Vyazemsky's poem 'The Station' (1828), where mockery outdoes sympathy. While it was commonplace to grumble about their inadequacies, the sentimental narrator can find good even in an unfashionable subject and extend democratic benevolence despite the stereotype:

Is there anyone who has not cursed all stationmasters, or never had occasion to wrangle with them? Anyone who, in a moment of anger, has not demanded the fateful book in order to inscribe his useless complaint at high-handed treatment, rudeness, and inefficiency? Who does not regard them as outcasts from the human race, the equivalent of the pettifogging quill-drivers of yore, or Murom brigands at the very least? Let us be fair, however, let us try and put ourselves in their shoes and then, it may be, we will judge them much less severely. What is a stationmaster? A veritable martyr of the fourteenth grade, protected by his rank only from actual beating, and then not invariably (I refer that to my reader's conscience). . . . I will just say that the stationmaster rank has been presented to public opinion in a most misleading light. These much-maligned officials are peaceable folk, by nature accommodating, inclined to sociability, modest in their ambitions, and not overmercenary. One can extract much that is curious and instructive from their conversation (which the travelling public is wrong to ignore). As for myself, I admit to preferring their talk to the discourse of some sixth-rank official travelling on government business. (pp. 38–9)

While the narrator may claim to enjoy the speech of the stationmaster, he only gives Vyrin a brief opportunity to recount his own story before pre-empting him, often resuming the highly affective language of the introduction. Tears, heartache, sorrow, and warm-hearted friendship come easily to the narrator, well-packaged in tried and true cliché. But despite the overt appeal of A.G.N.'s rhetoric, 'The Stationmaster' is hardly a work filled with comforting Karamzinian sentiment. In 'The Shot' the events of the narrative and the manner of narrative reveal a mismatch between fact and fiction, opening a gap for Pushkin's irony. Similarly, the intrusive, retrospective narrator of 'The Stationmaster' appears to be determined to shape his anecdote according to the conventions and tone of sentimental fiction. Consider,

for example, the central image of the parable of the Prodigal Son, which has several symbolic functions. The series of prints displayed in Vyrin's home are meant to serve as emblems of Dunya's good upbringing and filial piety, and to express Vyrin's attachment as a father. More importantly, they also signal to the reader a positive ending to the story. In the end, of course, the plot reverses the expectations set up by the parable: the son is a daughter; chance rather than fraternal jealousy motivates an only child; the prodigal prospers instead of almost perishing; the parent dies, the reunion occurs at the graveside, and the tears finally shed may be expression either of remorse or grief. Allusions and resemblances in the plot to *Poor Liza* invoke another parallel to this account of the betrayal of parent by child, but there is no case to be made for poor Dunya, who is one of the first Russian heroines to violate a standard convention and not perish after her seduction. In 'The Stationmaster' Vyrin's cry of 'Oh, Dunya, Dunya' expresses paternal grief, while Karamzin's 'Oh, Liza, Liza!' is a lament for virtue and sensibility. The question is whether, in imitating Karamzin's manner, A.G.N. hears the difference. After Karamzin's narrator experienced disillusion and grief, the revival of his style of speech and sensibility would have automatically provoked suspicions of naïveté or irony. The reader enjoys the ambivalence between pastiche (where an author's style is admiringly imitated) and parody (where an author's style is invoked satirically). And ultimately it is for the reader to determine whether the mismatch of sentiment and plot represents the deliberate irony of A.G.N. or whether the irony belongs to Belkin, who enjoys exposing the clumsiness of yet another amateur writer devoid of the self-consciousness that good writers possess if they are not to become unwitting caricatures rather than able parodists.

Yet the *Tales of Belkin* are not merely a series of send-ups and jokes. It is a tribute to the charm of the cycle that while these stories may be read most profitably as distillations and parodies of literary modes and clichés, they also inspire deliberate naïveté and delight as stories, retaining the capacity to charm as individual narrative performances. Exuberant parody, together with the device of the found manuscript, only partly obscure from view another layer of sentiment and romance that can safely be

said to belong to Pushkin. If you read the *Tales of Belkin* not only for its send-up of hackneyed plots, forced coincidences, and melodramatic characters, it is possible to see Belkin's cycle as a celebration of the rather enchanted world of the gentry, and a comment on the relation between experience and literature. Nostalgia for a lost paradise of the gentry idyll is offset in Pushkin by the distancing effects of irony, but the mirage of this patriarchal world would come to enchant Gogol in *Tales on a Farm Near Dikhanka*, Turgenev in *The Hunter's Sketches* and *Nest of the Gentry*, and Slavophiles like Aksakov. Pushkin deeply regretted the lost world of the late eighteenth century, when the gentry enjoyed freedom from service to the monarch and life on the country estate brought relief from the European trappings of urban life. Through its tissue of parody and complicated structure we glimpse a lost world of fumbling but endearing gentility, of good-feeling and modest domesticity. It is a world of, in the phrase of the poet Anna Akhmatova, 'toylike dénouements', where the laws of real life are no longer valid. Death is either present only through rumour, gossip, or anecdote, or in the case of 'The Undertaker' in a dream. Bretter does not kill his enemy, Silvio vanishes, a bride abandoned at the altar finds her husband, Dunya's seduction turns into family happiness, and only now and again does history intrude. Pushkin's affection for this world, part invention, part memory of his youth and the years of exile in Mikhailovskoye, lovingly reappears in *The Captain's Daughter*, again refracted through the nostalgic vision of an elderly narrator.

The Queen of Spades

The Queen of Spades, the shortest separate work in the collection, is the only one of Pushkin's prose works to have enjoyed immediate acclaim at home and abroad from its publication in 1834. In 1836 the Russian writer A. A. Shakhovskoy, whose dramas were firmly stuck in the moralizing style of neoclassical drama, responded with a play clumsily entitled *Chrysomania, or the Passion of Money*. It is unlikely that any of its viewers were persuaded to shun the evils of the card-table. In Paris the composer Fromental Halévy and librettist Eugène Scribe, the former now remembered solely for his grand opera *La Juive*, produced

their opéra-comique *La Dame de pique* (1850). Tchaikovsky's far more celebrated opera (1890) with the same title interpreted the tale in the spirit of his own *fin-de siècle* gloom. Irony and detachment, intrinsic to Pushkin, were perhaps too subdued for the theatre and alien to the composer's streak of melancholy. In the Russia of the 1890s a heady brew of Nietzschean philosophy, revolutionary activity, and doctrines of free love had elevated passion and obsession to a philosophy of personal conduct. When Hermann shoots himself on stage, Liza having thrown herself into the Neva, Pushkin's protagonists are made to act like characters out of the pages of Dostoevsky. They live, love, and die very much in the style of the period, reinvented by Tchaikovsky for an age that reveled in sex, scandal, and suicide.

Whatever the period, with and without operatic trappings, *The Queen of Spades* remains unsurpassed in all of Russian fiction for its fusion of psychological complexity and symbolic density; and for its deadpan exposition. It is constructed with consummate artistry; and while it raises tragic questions concerning the nature of chance and the power of passion, the remorseless self-effacement of the narrator, relieved only by momentary flashes of irony, bleeds it of melodrama and even the power to provoke sympathy. Its narrative is as taut, clear, and inevitable as its use of numerological symbols, weather patterning, and stark binary oppositions is subtle and suggestive. So suggestive in fact that an improbable mass of scholarship, reflecting the influence of a wide range of critical schools, has amassed around it.[4]

Its tantalizing epigraphs left to one side, *The Queen of Spades* has none of the extrovert literary play of *The Tales of Belkin* where literature is woven from literature, and Pushkin's implied reader negotiates the conventions and registers that are subtly mixed, mocked, and parodied. Belkin's ideal readers will second-guess themselves even as they give the narrator's intentions a second guess. In this work the source of irony is the gap between the editor's assurances of sincerity and the reader's superior grasp of the literary material that Belkin charmingly and unknowingly mishandles in refashioning or embellishing the ancedotes

[4] For a survey of interpretations of the tale, see Neil Cornwell, *Pushkin's The Queen of Spades* (Bristol, 1993).

at the base of each story. By contrast, in *The Queen of Spades* it is the impassive fatality of the narrator that is the source of irony, suggesting that everything is inevitable and known when in fact the questioning reader will find much unexplained and perhaps inexplicable. Whatever certainty the narrator projects, the reader will find that speculation is the only interpretative recourse.

In the event, then, while parody constitutes the interpretative game in reading *The Tales of Belkin*, guessing at the unknown makes up the gamesmanship of solving the many questions implied in *The Queen of Spades*: Was the story of Saint-German true? When precisely does Hermann go mad? Or does the story credit an occult explanation? The 'real' events of the story are entwined with elements of the fantastic supplied in part by the gloomy setting in wintry St Petersburg—in Dostoyevsky's famous phrase, 'the most invented city in the world'—but have also been explained as the product of Hermann's hallucination and final madness. In the literature of the fantastic the uncanny defies straightforward explanation. Is this a study in obsession or a meditation on fate? Entire schools of interpretation have evolved around answers to these and other questions. In essence, as Caryl Emerson has pointed out, *The Queen of Spades* asks the reader to take a chance by impelling us to find a single interpretative code, provoking an obsession to explain without providing authority for any one model.[5] The playful reader will recognize the situation of an open text which at times offers multiple explanations, and at times refuses all certainty of meaning. To the reader, however, who bets his hand on only one explanatory model, let Hermann's be a cautionary tale on the dangers of seeing only what you believe rather than believing what you see. Much of the pleasure of the work is concentrated in the gamble of interpretation, and much of its understated portentousness lies in the implicit connection between reading fiction as though it were life, and the other way round.

The hermeneutic gamble begins with a typical piece of baiting. 'The queen of spades indicates some covert malice',

[5] See Caryl Emerson, '"The Queen of Spades" and the Open End', in David Bethea (ed.), *Pushkin Today* (Indiana, 1993), 31–7.

announces an epigraph, thus provoking a number of questions. Who or what is this figure? Who is the object of her malevolence? Why is it secret? Eventually the plot will supply answers of a kind to these particular queries. Less easy to discern, however, are the authorial intentions of the narrator. The source of this pronouncement—'The latest fortune-telling manual' is the given title—itself produces mystification. Like all works of the supernatural and of the Gothic, *The Queen of Spades* tantalizes by suggesting a a potential naturalistic explanation of the fantastic, and winks now and then at the pseudo-scientific. We are in a fiction where Mesmer and Galvani are on the tips of the beau monde's tongues almost as often as references to the devil and Casanova. While a pedantic reader will find the attribution of the epigraph inadequate, its title bears clues and irony with respect to the themes and events of the story. The status of knowledge—what the characters can reliably say about one another, what the reader knows about the characters—is continually called into question in the text. Did the Countess trick Hermann? Did Hermann really see a vision or was the apparition a hallucination? Did Lizaveta truly love him or was she, too, scheming? This process of questioning, of considering and reconsidering, of even divining intentions, begins with the epigraph. 'Latest', says the title, without offering a date for guidance. Such vagueness anticipates one curious feature of the text, namely, that despite its careful plotting of narrative time, its setting cannot be dated accurately. Furthermore, and ironically, given the usual Gothic association of occult knowledge with antiquity, it is to be wondered why 'the latest' work would be more authoritative. Finally, and relatedly, if the dictum refers to a card-game, why is it not drawn from a manual on card-playing? Here the epigraph anticipates the confusion between winning at cards and mastering chance through an occult power that possesses Hermann.

Even an examination of Pushkin's sources reveals that all is far from clear-cut. Obverse strategies of frankness organize the prose in these two works. Just as the Belkin stories advertise their sources and subtexts because the work's message depends on the recognition of parody, in *The Queen of Spades* obfuscation hides the origins of Pushkin's inspiration and makes its enigmas

reader-proof. The indeterminacy principle permeates every layer of the work and bedevils scholarly attempts to ascertain sources and their interrelation. No one story can be singled out as the source; various details and themes were common to a number of works known to him.[6] But whatever elements each contributed, Pushkin's story exceeds a mere recombination. His literary models are 'so many tiny building blocks, whose individual shape could not influence the eventual configuration'.[7] His fascination with gambling expressed more than an idiosyncratic passion. Consider, if only briefly, characterization. It is a tenet of modern literary criticism that the pursuit of real-life models for characters and episodes in literary works is only partially instructive. The genetic material of literary personages is complex, blending prototype, literary type, and then the writer's own vision. But it is also true that blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction is a topos of the Romantic period. To this the creation of the Old Countess bears witness. Pushkin confessed that he modelled her on the Princess Natalia Golitsyna. Born in 1741, she was a fixture at court, but in fact, unlike her fictional incarnation, had never been celebrated for her beauty. Indeed, her nickname was 'Princesse Moustache', and her reputation was as a living codex of manners and etiquette. It was in fact one of her daughters who had enjoyed a reputation for her beauty. Already the historical prototype has been complicated by the conflation of two figures. Yet the Countess's curmudgeonly character, her sniping at her servants, seemed to owe much more to another

[6] It is likely that the title is taken from the short novel *Spader Dame* by the Swedish writer Clas Johan Livijn; it was published in a German translation by Baron de La Motte-Fouqué as *Pique-Dame: Berichte aus dem Irrenhause in Briefen* in 1826. E. T. A. Hoffman's novel *Die Elixiere des Teufels* features a hero who hallucinates about a queen of hearts that looks like his lady-love, while his story 'Spielerglück' (1820) shares a number of details with Pushkin's story. In Karl Gottlieb Samuel Huen's novella 'Der Hollandische Jude', the hero discovers a sure way of winning at card-games, and bets on the trey and the seven. References to Napoleon, to Mephistopheles, Mesmerism, and Swedenborg occur in Balzac's story 'La Peau de chagrin', another tale of gambling that probably only served as an anti-model. Finally, the calculating attitude that Hermann and Liza display toward love may owe something to Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, which Pushkin was known to admire.

[7] Paul Debreczeny, *The Other Pushkin* (Stanford, 1983), 209.

famous dowager who captivated Pushkin with tales of life at court in the eighteenth century, Natalia Kirillovna Zagrizhskaya. But none of these figures is known to have supplied Pushkin with the anecdote of St Germain that injects the uncanny into this tale.

Pushkin had an acute sense for the arbitrariness of fate, and the story is possibly his most powerful treatment of the hazards of chance. Having staked and lost the copyright to more than one of his works at the card-table, Pushkin was well acquainted with the mentality of the gambler. 'The passion for playing is the strongest of passions', he commented to a friend. Reality fed the attraction of gambling as the subject for a plot. When Pushkin wrote *The Queen of Spades* in 1833, card-playing had achieved a status and significance that is well-described by his friend Prince P. A. Vyazemsky:

> There is nowhere else that cards have entered into such usage: in Russian life cards are one of the unavoidable and indisputable elements . . . Passionate gamblers were everywhere all the time. Writers of drama displayed this passion on the stage with all its fatal consequences. The most intelligent people got caught up in it . . . Such gaming, a sort of battle for life and death, has its turbulence, its drama, its poetry. Whether this passion, this poetry is good and beneficial is another question.

Turbulence, drama, and poetry were precisely what was missing from life in Russia of this period. Inspired by their travels during the Napoleonic campaigns and fired by victory, the gentry élite conceived a vision of a new Russia ruled on the English model, where legislature and monarch heeded a consitution and code of laws. A more radical element also envisioned agrarian reform leading to the emancipation of the serfs. Fired by these ideals, several hundred men conspired to unseat Nicholas I during his coronation on 14 December 1825; the rebellion ended in a fiasco, and set the repressive tone that would endure till the end of Nicholas I's reign in 1855. The failure of the Decembrists blotted out hopes for reform. Russia entered what one of Pushkin's contemporaries called an Iron Age, where everything became subjected to the stultifying official policy of Nicholas I's state: Autocracy, Nation, and Orthodoxy. The world of Nicholas I's Russia, where the liberal élite were quickly superfluous after the failed Decembrist revolution, left nothing to chance; for

aristocrats deprived of political influence, with nothing to lose but their hearts and fortunes (witness the behaviour of Pavel Petrovich Kirsanov in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*), the notion of risk and tempting fate becomes much more exciting. In essence, gambling, as Vyazemsky makes clear, represented a type of counter-culture, an emancipation of spirit. The Russian aristocracy inherited from the French aristocracy the attitude toward gambling not only as an aristocratic *jeu d'esprit* but also as an expression of Enlightenment confidence in reason's power to demystify and conquer chance. In his book on the duel, another aristocratic pastime dedicated to tempting fate, V. G. Kiernan noted that 'A man had to be able to hazard his fortune on a turn of the cards as coolly as his forefather risked their lives on the field of battle. Card-tables at Versailles, where millions of livres were yearly staked, offered a new tournament ground for blood to show its quality.'[8]

This spirit of defiant recklessness comes through in the banter and anecdotes of Tomsky, Narumov, and the others in the brilliant first chapter where the quick pace of the dialogue confers drama and speed. Gossip and conversation also provide an elegant economy of characterization. Pushkin is indirect about the story's hero, who seems the odd man out in this company. He begins to establish Hermann's character through juxtaposition of his values with those of the other gamblers. In fact, Tomsky makes a point of establishing Hermann's alienness by chalking up the oddness of Hermann's conduct to his Germanic ancestry (although we later learn that Hermann is at the very least a first-generation Russian). The fact that he is an engineer rather than an officer also sets him apart socially from the company he keeps. Underlying the organization of the scene is a mood of contrast: between the values of the eighteenth century and those of the present; the brilliant Parisian salon of the anecdote and the gloomy Petersburg night; the passion of the beautiful Countess and Hermann's reason; her rank in society and Hermann's status as an outsider. While the reader will have to account for several motivations on Hermann's part, at least at the outset the link between social ambition and gambling as a means of moving

[8] V. G. Kiernan, *The Duel in European History* (Oxford, 1988), 154.

upwards—utility contravening the aristocratic ethos of the salon—is implicit. In a recent study of the culture of gambling in France and its literary representations, Thomas Kavanagh has noted that the hero of the eighteenth-century novel typically espouses two positions: on the one hand, his vocabulary is that of determinism, espousing confidence in the determinism of much Enlightenment thought; on the other hand, he recognizes that within that predictability 'the chance event may at any moment redefine the individual's place within the world's apparently ordered sequences of cause and effect'.[9]

At least initially, Hermann resists the temptation to gamble. The rule he has set himself—'Not to sacrifice the necessary in the hope of acquiring the superfluous'—has neither the *élan* of the aristocrat nor the willingness of the eighteenth-century hero to hazard chance in the confidence that a measure of predictability is discernible in the world. What makes Hermann gamble? In the second chapter, the narrator's potted biography of Hermann not only refines Tomsky's remark but gives the key to Hermann's character:

> Hermann was the son of a Russianized German, who had left him a small sum of money. Firmly convinced of the necessity of consolidating his independence, Hermann had not laid a finger even on the interest, preferring to live solely on his pay, and denying himself the smallest extravagance. As he was reserved and keenly ambitious, however, his comrades rarely had an opportunity to make fun of his excessive thrift. He was a man of strong emotions and possessed an ardent imagination, but his steadiness preserved him from the usual errors of youth. For example, though he had the soul of a gambler, he never picked up a card, calculating that his finances did not permit him (as he used to put it) 'to sacrifice the necessary in the hope of acquiring the superfluous'—and yet he would sit up all night at the card tables, trembling feverishly, as he followed the shifting fortunes of the play.
>
> The story of the three cards played on his imagination . . . (p. 80)

Shortly thereafter Tomsky once again provides further clues to Hermann's character when he calls him 'a genuinely Romantic personality [who] has the profile of Napoleon, and the soul of

[9] Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance: The Novel and the Culture of Gambling in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: 1993), 108.

Mephistopheles.' Tomsky speaks here in terms of literary cliché, although the remark is calculated to appeal to Liza's sense of danger, fed no doubt by her appetite for fiction of the period where the dangerous criminal hero, like Julien Sorel of Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* (one putative model for Hermann), took on the world. Like Tatyana in *Eugene Onegin*, the sensibility of the Pushkinian heroine can be deciphered on the basis of her reading: the novels of Richardson and the poems of Byron had encouraged a dangerous fascination with the 'man without values and religion', to quote the epigraph to Chapter 4. The narrator confirms this when he notes that 'thanks to the latest novels, her imagination was both daunted and enchanted by this type—actually quite hackneyed by now'.

Yet Tomsky's remark is also aimed at the reader. For Pushkin, and for his entire generation, Napoleon represented the magnificent success of an upstart who combined calculation, a belief in his own star, and a willingness to take risk to the limit. He is an engineer who believes that it is possible to make life conform to one's will by pronouncing a magic formula. In the end, of course, fate mocked Napoleon and his own ambition subverted him. Both Napoleon and Hermann, therefore, enjoy Pyrrhic victories: Napoleon found himself the conqueror of a devastated Moscow, just as Hermann possesses a magical combination of the cards that no longer works. Tomsky likens Hermann to Mephistopheles for superficial reasons: his dark, brooding appearance, his gloomy silences and predatory skulking have a diabolical aura. But for the reader the comparison introduces an occult element in the story that begins with the tale of the three cards. What seizes Hermann's imagination is his conviction that, like Mephistopheles, he can penetrate the secrets of nature and thus overpower chance as embodied in the card-game.

The impossibility of reviving the secret is symbolized in the physical contrast of his own youthful passion and the decay of the Countess. There is method to his madness, of course. He wishes to gain the secret at any cost, and therefore if he can win the Countess's heart he will win the secret, and what could be more flattering to an old lady than a proposal of marriage from a young man? When he finds himself in the Countess's mansion he faces two doors, one leading to her boudoir, the other to

Liza's room, symbols of the choices he must make in life between fortune and love. But this house of cards rests on the false premiss that Saint Germain's success—was it just an anecdote? Was it accident? Did the Countess blurt out any three cards to placate Chaplitsky?—could be repeated. For Tomsky, the eighteenth century, the period of reckless abandon, is a source of fascination that survives only in an anecdote. It would be simplistic to contend that Pushkin condemns Hermann to failure merely because he is an outsider socially and culturally. Hermann is doomed because his obsession blinds him to the obvious fact that the secret of the cards belongs to an era that cannot be revived, and to the fact that the Parisian Venus of yesteryear is now an old, yellowed woman.

It is no ordinary zeal that fires Hermann's resolutions. His ambition, his controlled imagination, his self-discipline reflect a determination not just to lead a rational life, but to eradicate chance altogether. Behind Hermann's attitude to fate stands Pushkin's own sense of mystery. Whether or not it was possible to predict the course of events, to impose one's will on life, and make it conform to one's own ambition, as Napoleon did, was a philosophical question that intrigued Pushkin. In a famous poem of 1828 he interrogated fate by asking why it had given him 'the accidental gift of life'. In the end Pushkin found in the study of history the most satisfactory mode for such inquiry, and his sense of the arbitrariness of events and the role of accident rather than providence in individual lives as well as the lives of nations became a principle.

In Hermann he provided one set of answers to these questions. Upon hearing the anecdote of the three cards Hermann, quite irrationally, believes that he has hit upon a foolproof method of securing his fortune. That Hermann overhears the anecdote in the first place is ironical and indicative, since no amount of planning can totally predetermine the course of a life. What interests Pushkin is less the psychology of the gambler than the snares and delusions that, set entirely by chance, obliterate will and self-awareness. Writing in the early twentieth century, the critic and philosopher M. O. Gershenzon saw the *The Queen of Spades* as a study in the sudden, irreversible advent of a destructive passion:

Tomsky's portrayal, the situation in which he relates his anecdote, and the very nature of his story, all of these, as it were, strip away one layer after another from reality in order to leave only the shadow of reality. And this shadow turned out to be sufficient to act on Hermann like a spark thrown into a powder-keg. It is as though Pushkin wanted to say: we all go about prepared any minute for a drama; our soul, saturated with passion, greedily seeks in this world some food for its passion—so greedily that even the shadow of a thing is capable of tempting it; and then it instantaneously flares up and burns out in tortured happiness, one soul more slowly, another straightaway like Hermann. Such is the law of the human spirit.

Peter the Great's Blackamoor and The Captain's Daughter

From the late 1820s until his death in 1837 Pushkin continually pondered the figure of Peter the Great and the consequences of his programme of Westernization for Russian history. Having been pardoned by Nicholas I in 1827, Pushkin composed the poem 'Stanzas', in which Peter serves as an exemplary figure as much for his clemency toward his enemies as for the revolution in statecraft that he achieved. Because Nicholas I had taken a hard line with the Decembrists, in some circles the poem was read as a statement of capitulating and even toadying. But its message is much more ambivalent, and a correct reading, while acknowledging the poet's attempt to flatter Nicholas I by a comparison with his great-grandfather, recognizes that Pushkin is in fact setting up Peter as a model for emulation and thus issuing a challenge to the Tsar. In the narrative poem *Poltava* (1828), commemorating Peter's decisive victory over Charles XII of Sweden in 1709, the poet accords Peter the treatment of an Olympian and creates out of him a mythic figure. There is an arc stretching from this vision of Peter to Pushkin's final treatment of him in his great narrative poem *The Bronze Horseman* (1836). While the narrator in this last work pays tribute to the beauty of St Petersburg, the famous equestrian statue of the Emperor that comes to life, terrorizing a pathetic clerk, embodies the abstract power of the state and the ineluctable and even crushing force of History. In 1832 Pushkin had told his friend the lexicographer Vladimir Dal of his intention to devote himself to the study of the Petrine period, commenting on the vast amount of archival material requiring mastery. At his death