FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION:
The Case of Puškin

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Freedom of Expression

When the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) entered into force in the USSR in 1976, human rights had seemingly at last been conferred on Soviet citizens. Article 19 of the ICCPR with its guarantee, albeit conditional, of the freedom of expression thus seemed to reverse centuries of Tsarist and Soviet censorship. Perlina has distinguished among no less than 6 different periods of censorship from 1702 onwards. Today the average Russian citizen may feel that a decade of post-Soviet liberalism has reduced censorship of the media, press and literature to a situation not significantly different from many other countries. It may therefore be appropriate to recall the lack of freedom of expression suffered by Russia's national poet Alexandr Puškin (1799-1837).

A rebellious voice of reason: 1817-1826

During his early years from 1817 until mid-1826 Puškin saw the role of the poet, and his own role, as a rebellious voice of reason in the face of unenlightened tsarist autocracy. After leaving the Imperial Lyceum in 1817 and joining The Foreign Ministry he led a boisterous life in St. Petersburg, becoming famous for his libertarian verses. Poems like "Vol'nost'. Oda" (1817), "K Čadaėvu" (1818) and "Derevnja" (1819) were perceived by the authorities as inflammatory. Thus "Vol'nost'. Oda" called for freedom through a social contract to establish laws placed above both rulers and the
ruled. Sentences like: “Vladyla! vam venec i tron / Daet Zakon — a ne priroda” were seen as subversive. This poem was not printed until after Puškin’s death, but was widely circulated and read. Petr Jakovlevič Čadave (1794-1856) was a close friend of Puškin. In the poem “K Čadave” which remained unpublished until 1856, Puškin wrote about the dismantling of tsarist autocracy: “Rossijja vsprjanet oto sna / I na obломkah samovlast’ja / Napisut naši imen”. In the same spirit of rebelliousness “Derevnja”, while celebrating the beauty of the countryside, also deployed the miserable plight of the enslaved serf. Here we are for instance told that: “Zdes’ barstvo dikoë, bez čuvstva, bez zakona / Prisvoilo sebe nasilstvennoj lozoj / I trud, i sobstvennost’, i vremja zemlede’ca / [...] / Uvižu l’, o druz’ja! narod neugnetennyj / I rabstvo, padšee po maniju carja / I nad otečestvom svobody prosveščennoj / Vzojdet li nakonec prekrasnej zarja?”

The last 27 lines from which I have quoted above were not published during Puškin’s lifetime but were widely circulated and read. All 3 poems fuelled the Decembrist 1825 revolt. After its suppression an investigative commission was set up. It found evidence that while the exiled Puškin did not belong to the two secret Decembrist societies, his libertarian verses had stimulated incendiary sentiment. 5 army officers were executed in July 1826 and over a hundred were exiled, many of them Puškin’s friends. In particular the poem “Kínžal” (1821), written during Puškin’s southern exile, carried connotations of political assassination. It was not printed during Puškin’s lifetime but it was cited by some of the army officers who were executed.4 Here we are e.g. told that: “Vežde ego najdet udar neždannyj tvojo / Na suše, na morjach, vo chreme, pod šatrami / Za potaennymi zamkami / Na lože sna, v sem’e rodnoj”.

On the strength of such poems it is clear that Puškin’s early conception of the poet was both that of a rebel and enlightener who called for political freedom, including freedom of expression, through legal and political reforms. Having completed “Ruslan i Ljudmila” (1820), he was sent into exile. He travelled with the

Raevskij family in the Caucasus and in the Crimea before settling in Kišeine 1820-23. Here he completed the Byronic verse tales “Kavkazskij plen mixing” (1820) and “Bachchisarajskij fontana” (1821-23), as well as the blasphemous poem “Gavriiliada” (1821). In 1823 he began work on his opus magnum, the novel in verse Evgenij Onegin (1823-31). After an interlude in Odessa from where he was expelled, he was confined for 2 years 1824-26 to his mother’s family estate Michajlovskoe near Pskov. Puškin was thus absent from St. Petersburg during the events of December 1825. At Michajlovskoe he completed his 3rd Byronic verse tale “Cigan” (1824) and the historical drama “Boris Godunov” (1825). Though an aristocrat with additional income from the sales of his books, Puškin’s finances at this time were apparently not the best. Thus in a letter dated June-August 1825 to the poet Ryleev (1795-1826) (among the Decembrist conspirators hanged in July 1826) Puškin noted that whereas writers abroad wrote for money, all Russian writers — except Puškin — wrote for vanity.5 This might suggest that Puškin depended on his income from writing.

In mid-1826 he also wrote chapter 6 of Evgenij Onegin entitled “Duel”. The friendship between Onegin and Lenskij is terminated by their quarrel about Ol’ga. In stanzas 28-29 Onegin kills his friend Lenskij in a duel. The fate of Lenskij is probably also an oblique commentary on the human cost of the failed Decembrist uprising. Puškin’s conception of the poet’s role in Evgenij Onegin is therefore essentially tragic. The poet’s considerable qualities count for little in the face of stronger, destructive forces. Lenskij’s fate also proved to be a self-fulfilling prophecy: Having let Lenskij die in a duel in January 1821, Puškin was himself killed in a January duel in 1837.

Puškin’s early libertarian verses 1817-20 thus illustrate his opposition to the tsarist regime and to the prevailing lack of political freedom. The role of the poet, which is simultaneously Puškin’s view of his own role as a poet, is essentially that of an inspired and rebellious enlightener, a voice advocating legal and political reform, including the freedom of expression. Languishing in exile from
1820, Puškin came under the influence of Byronic pessimism, alienation from society, unhappiness in love and despair for the future. This was compounded by the failed December 1825 revolt. In consequence he developed a far less portentous conception of the poet's role, as we see in the fate bestowed on Lenskij in Evgenij Onegin. The message he seemed to be conveying around 1826 was that society had little place for rebellious poet-enlighteners. Political freedom, including the freedom of expression, was simply not possible.

_Prophet in a straitjacket: 1826-1837_

In May/June 1826 Puškin requested reprieve from exile and in September 1826 he was allowed to return to Moscow and St. Petersburg by the new tsar Nicholas I. A precondition for his return was that he abandon his opposition to the regime. The tsar now became Puškin's personal censor, a task he quickly delegated to Count Benckendorff, chief of the 3rd Section of the tsar's private chancery and de facto head of the security police. A more subdued Puškin returned but now the censorship allowed more of his work to be published.

On the occasion of his return he wrote in December 1826 the poem "Stansy" to Nicholas I. In it he showed surprising diplomatic skill by comparing the new tsar favourably with Peter the Great. He also in this poem begged for clemency for the convicted Decembrist rebels. After its publication in 1828 Puškin was increasingly seen, even among some of his friends, to have forsaken his former liberalism. It did not help that he in the poem "Arion", written in July 1827 one year after the execution of the 5 army officers, expressed his sympathy for their cause by describing a shipwreck with himself as the only survivor continuing his poetic fight for freedom: "Liš' ja, tainstvennyj pevec / Na bereg vybrošen grozoju / Ja gynn požnie poju". Accusations of servility moved him to write in 1828 the poem "Druž'jam" in which he rebutted these charges.

Puškin grew restless under the constant surveillance and harassment of Count Benckendorff. From 1828 he was isolated, surviving liberals spurned him and he failed in gaining the trust of official St. Petersburg. While his former preoccupation with liberty, despotism and freedom of expression remained intact, the conditions of his return meant that political resentment had to be veiled e.g. in exotic settings, as is reflected in the poem "Ančar". It was written in 1828 but first published 4 years later in 1832, in Severnye cvety.7 Into his work the themes of memories of bygone days, lost opportunities, death and transience as a condition of life became more pronounced. This is expressed in the poem "Brožu li ja vdol' ulic šumných", written in 1829 and published in Literaturnaja gazeta 1830:2.8 It did not help matters that he was a compulsive gambler and frequent loser as well as a "womanizer". Inevitably the constrictions he felt had bearings on his conception of the role of the poet, and on his own role. This is well reflected in several of his poems 1826-28, e.g. "Prorok" (1826), first published in Moskovskij vestnik 1828:3.9 It is among Puškin's best known poems and its Biblical connotations and meaning have recently been convincingly analyzed by Erik Egeberg.10

In the poem "Poët", written and published in 182711 the divinely inspired poet is impervious to the crowd and does not bend his proud head at the feet of the people's idol: "K nogam narodnogo kumira / Ne klonit gordoj golovy". As in "Prorok" the poet's role is religiously sanctified and therefore the poet is elevated above not only ordinary people, but also — one has the impression — above despots like the autocratic tsar.

The consequences of the prophet-poet's mission are developed further in the poem "Poët i tolpa" (1828). It first appeared the following year in Moskovskij vestnik 1829:1 under the title "Čern" but Puškin altered the title in 1836.12 Puškin here addresses the relationship between the poet and society. As the Latin epigraph suggests ("Procul este, profani" 'Begone, uninitiated') Puškin here projects a confrontation between the poet and the crowd. The elevated poet-prophet's condescending view of the mob can be traced
back to *Ars poetica* by Horace (65 B.C.E. - 8 C.E.). The crowd is indifferent to the poet's melodious message: "Začem on tak zvučno poet? / [...] Začem serdca volnuet, mučit?" The crowd views the poet's message as futile, like the wind; it serves no purpose. Answering his detractors the poet abuses the crowd's narrow interests: "Molči, bessmyslenyy narod / Podenščik, rab nuždy, zabot! / Nesnosen mne tvoj ropot derzkij / Ty červ' zemli, ne syn nebes". The mob is swayed by the poet and inclined to believe in his prophetic dimensions. They frankly admit their vices and request that the poet use his gift to improve their ways: "Ty možeš', bližněgo ljubja / Davat' nam smelye uroki / A my poslušaem tebja". But the poet is adamant: "Dovol'no s vas, rabov bezumných!". He reminds them that previously whips, dungeons and axes have been well employed to correct their transgressions. Poetry is not moral street sweeping, the poet is destined for higher ideals altogether: "My roždeny dlja vdochov'nya / Dlja zvukov sladkich i moliv".

This poem in particular was adduced in evidence by Puškin's critics from 1840 onwards as an epitome of his (useless) *l'art pour l'art*. Although several of Puškin's adolescent poems like "Zukovskomu" (1818) could also be criticized of this, he was not then perceived as an exponent of *l'art pour l'art*. The growing influence of utilitarianism towards the middle of the 1800s, however, effected that “Poet i tolpa" was unfairly seen by the radical critics, especially by Pisarev, as typical of Puškin's entire output.13

**Marriage**

As the 1820s came to a close Puškin sought to overcome some of his personal difficulties by contemplating marriage. Among Puškin scholars the "Don Juan list" Puškin wrote down in November 1829 of the more than thirty women he had been in love with is well known.14 This might tempt one into arguing that the role of the poet in Puškin included the seduction of women. This "Don Juan" hypothesis which would apply especially to his love poetry is inter-
esting but beyond my present scope. In January 1829 Puškin met the 16-year old Nataľja Gončarova at a ball.15 They were engaged in May 1830 and married in May 1831. Marriage seemed initially to have a good effect on Puškin: during the autumn of 1830 at his paternal family estate at Boldino near Nižni Novgorod he wrote the final chapters of *Eugeni Onegin*, most of the so-called "little tragedies" as well as *Povesti Belkina* (1830) plus some 30 short poems.16 Yet happiness proved elusive. The impoverished and dissipated bachelor Puškin’s marriage to the socially ambitious and beautiful Nataľja Gončarova, to quote one of his many biographers, “began as a farce and ended as a tragedy".17 They had 4 children together and their married life was spent mainly in the capital St. Petersburg.

**Last years**

In 1831 Puškin patriotically defended Russia during the Polish uprising, in the poem “Klevennikam Rossi" written and printed in 1831.18 In reward Nicholas I appointed him to the civil service as a historiographer. As the 1830s unfolded Puškin pursued his interests in history, especially the history of revolutions and conflicts. He was allowed to visit Orenburg and Kazan' to collect material for a history of Pujaćev. It would be appropriate to say that Puškin at this time personified the poet as an enlightener. Yet he was also a salaried court chronicler of past events. In a sense he sought an outlet for insufficient freedom of expression by seeking refuge in the past. In 1833 Puškin was elected to the Russian Academy. Late the same year at Boldino he completed *Mednyj vsadnik* in which the achievement of Peter the Great in founding St. Petersburg is contrasted with the human cost involved. At Boldino he also completed *Istorija Pujaćev* (1833) which he further developed in *Kapitanskaja dočka* (1836).

The modest salary he received as a court historiographer, though useful, was far from commensurate with the cost of financing his wife's increasingly ambitious social life. In December 1833
Puškin was appointed to the junior position of Kammerjunker (gentleman-in-waiting), which he deeply resented. This slight seemed a ploy to gravitate his wife towards court circles. From 1834 Puškin’s household was enlarged and his financial burdens increased by the arrival of Natal’ja’s two sisters Ekaterina and Alexandra. Puškin’s requests to resign in 1834 and 1835 were met by threats to close the state archives to him, which would preclude him from pursuing his historical writings. Puškin’s dejected frame of mind at this time was reflected in the poem “Osen’” (1833), which was only published posthumously. In this melancholy celebration of nature’s autumnal cycle poetic inspiration appears at the end of the poem as a saviour and revigorates the poet. The poet sails off like a ship but where to?: “Plyvet. Kuda ż nam plyt?”

Another poem reflecting not only Puškin’s desultoriness, but even his despair at this time is “Ne daj mne Bog sojti s uma”, written in 1833 but long unprinted and neglected in Russian and Soviet works. By addressing the topic of insanity at this time Puškin was also commenting on his own difficulties. The fact that Puškin, who had written the blasphemous “Gavriliiada” (1821) now sought recourse to God is emblematic of the extent of his despair at this time. The insanity theme appeared at roughly the same time also in Mednyj vsadnik (1833) where poor Evgenij imagines the equestrian statue pursuing him through the streets and also in Pikovaja dama (1833) where Herman eventually goes mad. As an expression of despair “Ne daj mne Bog sojti s uma” anticipates the fate of Puškin’s close friend, the philosopher Čadaev. His Filosofičeskie pis’ma written in 1829 and surely known to Puškin, were only published from 1836 onwards. This caused an uproar: Čadaev was declared officially insane and placed under house arrest with daily medical supervision in the USSR thus had antecedents, as Geir Kjetsaa has reminded us of.

As the mid-1830s approached Puškin’s position became ever more untenable. Proud of his aristocratic lineage which on his mother’s side went back 600 years — longer than the Romanovs — he remained financially dependent on the tsar and was treated condescendingly by the nouveaux riches. Following the tsar’s refusal in early 1835 to let Puškin publish a literary journal, Puškin in 3 letters written in French to Count Benckendorff in April, June and July 1835 complained about the dire straits of his finances. Instead of his annual gratuity of 5000 roubles he asked the tsar for an interest-free 10-year loan of 100,000 roubles, claiming that since marrying he had accumulated debts of 60,000 roubles.

Puškin had by now de facto become a prophet in a straitjacket. Increasingly he was being regarded as obsolete, a voice of the past. Some relief was offered through 1836 with the publication of Kapitanskaja dočka (1836) and the tsar’s delayed permission to start publishing the literary quarterly Sovremennik in which politics were to be banned. But the journal only added to Puškin’s economic plight. His wife Natal’ja, who in May 1836 gave birth to their fourth child, was back at court from July, engrossed in her infatuation with Georges d’Anthès, whose shocking cynicism is sampled in a recent Puškin biography. All this prompted Puškin’s ill-fated duel in January 1837 when he re-enacted Lenski’s death.

It is against this background we should judge his Horatian farewell poem “Exegi monumentum”. It was written in August 1836 only half a year before his death and appeared post-humously. Most Puškin scholars view it as his aesthetic testimony. It is inspired by Horace whose odes had been translated into Russian by Lomonosov (1711-65) and adapted by Deržavin (1743-1816). In Ars poetica Horace propounded the vatic ideal, according to which the poet has a two-fold nature: he is both a craftsman and an inspired visionary. Horace further argued that poetry should benefit the state (“utilis urbi”) but he also expressed contempt for the evil mob (“malignus vulgus”) and believed that his art was only for the elect. A poet can only be eternally remembered if he creates monumental poetry.

Puškin’s Horatian farewell poem summarizes his vision of his achievements as a poet, and what he anticipates he will be remembered for. His work is compared to nothing less than a monument,
not erected by human hands, which still is higher than Alexander's column. The public foot path leading to Puškin's monument will be well-trodden. His work will long outlive his mortal body and he will be read and quoted in every language in the great Russian empire: "I dolgo budu tem ljubezen ja narodu / Čto čuvstva dobrye ja liroj probuždal / Čto v moj žestokij vek vossavljal ja Svobodu / I milost' k padšim prizyval".

Perhaps, therefore, one of the greatest compliments we today can pay Puškin is to acknowledge his continued relevance by stressing his plight for greater freedom, including the freedom of expression, under a repressive regime.

Conclusion

I have argued that much of Puškin's life and work was influenced by the lack of political freedom, including the freedom of expression. In his early work 1817 to mid-1826 Puškin stressed the poet's and his own role as an enlightener, a rebellious voice of reason advocating legal and political reform in the face of repressive tsarist autocracy. After his 6-year exile and his return to the capital in September 1826 the poet, and Puškin himself, acquired a prophetic dimension. Yet the precondition of his return, his private life and proximity to court as well as the prevailing absence of freedom of expression, all reduced him to a prophet in a straitjacket.

Bibliography


— Pis'ma poslednych let 1834-1837. Leningrad 1969, pp. 188-91.

1. This article is based on my trial lecture (appointed topic) on 18 June 1999 at The University of Oslo ("The Role of the Poet in Puškin") in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree doctor philosophiae.
7. Ibid. p. 569.
8. Ibid. p. 571.
9. Ibid. p. 566.