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Pushkin's Turn to Folklore

Michael Wachtel

Abstract: The present paper seeks to establish precisely what Pushkin knew about folklore, when he knew it, and how he made use of it in his work. By basing the discussion on textual evidence, the author attempts to correct misconceptions that have been repeated so frequently that few have questioned them. Central among these is the role of the Pushkin family's nanny Arina Rodionovna, who is commonly viewed as the essential figure in Pushkin's relationship to folk culture. Particular emphasis is placed on Pushkin's debt to Alexander Vostokov and the development of the poetic form that he called the "Russian meter" (now known as the *taktovik*). Pushkin's interactions with the "folk poet" Fedor Slepushkin are also investigated. The conclusions concern not only specific folkloric works ("Songs of the Western Slavs," fairy tales), but also such canonic texts as *Eugene Onegin*.

Keywords: Pushkin, Folklore, Poetics, Stylization, Vostokov, Karamzin, *taktovik*

Pushkin's fascination with folklore is widely known and widely celebrated. His fairy tales, among the most beloved works of Russian literature, have been memorized by generations of Russian children. In the Soviet period, these works, taken as proof of Pushkin's closeness to "the people," figured prominently in both scholarly and popular evaluations of the poet. Given this history, it is striking how thoroughly the subject has disappeared from view in recent years. For example, in the 2005 *Pushkin Handbook*, a joint effort by leading American and Russian scholars that sought to cover all the major areas of the poet's work, not a single one of its twenty-eight chapters considers folklore, not even the lengthy chapter on "Pushkin and Romanticism."¹ One might excuse this absence by arguing that the subject had already been exhausted. However, as we will see, this is simply not the case. Much of the existing scholarship is either outdated or misleading. The purpose of the present essay is not to dispute the significance of

I would like to thank Lazar Fleishman, Gabriella Safran, and Barry Scherr for numerous suggestions and corrections that have improved this paper.

¹ David Bethea, ed., *The Pushkin Handbook* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006). Nor is there a chapter on folklore in Andrew Kahn's *Cambridge Companion to Pushkin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), though the subject surfaces sporadically in connection to drama and narrative poetry.

folklore in Pushkin's oeuvre, but to establish precisely when, why, and how Pushkin turned to it. The argument is based primarily on formal criteria, which supply—at least as a point of departure—indisputable evidence, in contrast to vague appeals to “the people,” “the Russian soul,” “patriotism,” etc., which have traditionally clouded discussions of this subject.

Early Exposure

Any unbiased look at Pushkin's early work reveals that, to the extent that folklore plays any role whatsoever, it is superficial.² For example, one of Pushkin's first poetic compositions was “Bova,” a 279-line “excerpt from a narrative poem” written in 1814, though unpublished in the poet's lifetime. The character of Prince Bova was originally Western European, but it was already firmly implanted in Russia by the eighteenth century, so Pushkin presumed it to be Russian.³ Alexander Radishchev had written a fragment of an epic on this very subject, and this would only have encouraged such an assumption. In any case, the sources of Pushkin's poem are not folkloric but transparently literary. Pushkin invokes Voltaire as his muse (as had, incidentally, Radishchev), and Pushkin's jocular tone and many of his specific motifs have been traced to the “Pucelle d'Orléans,” likewise mentioned explicitly.⁴ Voltaire's racy poem was a favorite of the young Pushkin; he also refers to it in the opening passage of “The Monk” (“Monakh”), written the same year as “Bova.”

The form of Pushkin's “Bova” is remarkable; it consists of unrhymed trochaic tetrameter with exclusively dactylic endings. This combination of trochees, unrhymed lines, and dactylic endings is unique in the metrical repertoire of the young Pushkin, and there can be no doubt that Pushkin borrowed it from Nikolai Karamzin, who in 1794 had used it in a “heroic tale” called “Ilya Muromets.”⁵ Unlike Bova, Ilya Muromets really was one of the

² Mark Azadovsky, whose superb work on Pushkin's fairy tales will be cited repeatedly in this paper, comes to essentially this same conclusion. M. K. Azadovskii, *Literatura i fol'klor: Ocherki i etiudy* (Leningrad: Goslitizdat, 1938), 10–11. See also S. Bondi, *O Pushkine: Stat'i i issledovaniia* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1978), 374.

³ In a footnote to stanza XVII of chapter 5 of *Eugene Onegin*, Pushkin cites “Bova” as an example of traditional Russian folklore.

⁴ A. S. Pushkin, *Stikhotvoreniia litseiskikh let: 1813–1817* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1994), 540–43.

⁵ One might argue that in both Karamzin and Pushkin a few of the lines have masculine endings, e.g., Там висит его пернатый шлем / Там висит его булатный меч (in Karamzin) and Опасался я без крил парить... С сатаною обитать в раю (in Pushkin), but it should be noted that such final stresses are always preceded by a stress on the antepenultima. In these infrequent instances the stress on the final syllable is probably supposed to be reduced, resulting in a continuation of the oth-

classic figures of Russian epic, and Karamzin had sought an appropriately Russian verse form for his poem. This form was sufficiently unfamiliar to most readers that Karamzin had felt it necessary to include a footnote: “As concerns the meter, it is completely Russian. Almost all of our ancient songs are written in these verses.”⁶ As we shall see, this statement was not entirely wrong, but neither was it accurate. Karamzin selected the type of folk verse that most resembled the syllabo-tonic poetry that he had been raised on. However, it was the meter of wedding songs, not of epics.⁷ The claim that “almost all” Russian folk poetry was written in this form is incorrect. Karamzin was not being dishonest, of course. He simply was not aware of the genuine state of affairs. This in itself is important because it reflects an ignorance of Russian folk poetry that Pushkin’s generation inherited.

Why did Russians know so little of their own folk poetry? To some extent this was a result of the Petrine reforms. In a letter of 17 July 1833, Pavel Kireevsky lamented to Nikolai Iazykov: “some sort of strange fate has constantly tried to erase folk tradition from our memory; especially in the last 150 years, which have perhaps destroyed as many memories as the Tatar invasion itself.”⁸ Kireevsky was hardly an unbiased observer and surely exaggerates his claims, but he was correct in recognizing a fundamental opposition of Russian literary culture to folk culture. The inception of Russian secular poetry, a direct development of Petrine westernization policies, had come at the expense of domestic traditions. As M. L. Gasparov has convincingly argued, the success of Lomonosov’s “revolution” in poetics lay in his decision to distinguish his poetry as clearly

erwise emphatic dactylic cadences. Otherwise we would have to accept that the insistent trochaic tetrameter is interrupted by occasional trochaic pentameter lines. This same phenomenon—a weakened or omitted stress on a final monosyllabic word in dactylic clausulae—can be found in genuine Russian folklore, though neither Karamzin nor Pushkin (at least at the time he wrote “Bova”) was likely aware of this.

⁶ “В рассуждении меры скажу, что она совершенно русская. Почти все наши старинные песни сочинены такими стихами.” N. M. Karamzin, *Polnoe sobranie stikhotovoreniy* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1966), 149.

⁷ See James Bailey, *Three Russian Lyric Folk Song Meters* (Columbus, OH: Slavica, 1993), 20–27, 187. As Bailey notes, this type of folk poetry was close to the trochaic meters of Russian literary versification. See also Bondi, who traces the literary use of the meter back to Sumarokov (*O Pushkine*, 377)—possibly Karamzin’s source—and likewise notes its closeness to standard syllabo-tonic verse (383).

⁸ D. V. Abasheva, *Iazykovy v istorii literatury i fol’kloristiki* (Moscow: Taganka, 2009), 236. “У нас какая-то странная судьба беспрестанно старалася их [народных преданий, MW] изгладить из памяти; особенно в последние 150 лет, разрушивших, может быть, не меньше воспоминаний, нежели самое татарское нашествие.”

as possible from anything familiar.⁹ When Lomonosov advocated iambs as ideally suited to this new poetry, Trediakovsky, after initially arguing for a reform of syllabic verse, had countered with the suggestion that trochees were more appropriate, since they were the traditional form of Russian folklore.¹⁰ (Again, as we shall see, this is not entirely accurate, but trochees were certainly closer to folkloric verse than iambs.) For Lomonosov, however, any kinship with folklore was undesirable, because—according to his neoclassical convictions—poetry needed to be elite, “the language of the gods.” An association with the common people would detract from the elevated qualities that Lomonosov sought to achieve.

After Lomonosov’s innovations, it took decades for Russian poets to raise seriously the possibility of folkloric stylization and imitation. When they did, it surely came less from an inner need than an external impulse. By the late eighteenth century European poets—under the banner of Herder in Germany and Coleridge and Wordsworth in England, not to mention the pan-European Ossianic craze—were developing an interest in folk songs and ballads, which would become an essential part of European Romanticism.¹¹

In Russia, Karamzin’s “Ilya Muromets” marked a significant step in this direction. It was widely praised and influential, making unrhymed trochees with dactylic endings the meter of choice for narrative poems for almost two decades.¹² In 1802, the poet, scholar, and folklorist Alexander Vostokov—whose own folkloric experiments, as we will see, would have an enormous influence on Pushkin—used this distinctive meter for his “Pevislad and Zora: An Ancient Tale in Five Idylls” (“Pevislad i Zora: Drevniaia

⁹ M. L. Gasparov, *Ocherk istorii russkogo stikha* (Moscow: Fortuna Ltd., 2000), 41.

¹⁰ Just as Karamzin was to do, Trediakovsky based this claim on one type of folk song. See Bailey, *Three Russian Lyric Folk Song Meters*, 208–09.

¹¹ Azadovskii (*Literatura i fol'klor*, 30–40, 47) points out the relevance of the French scholar Claude Charles Fauriel. Pushkin was acquainted with his work because Gnedich had translated it and furnished it with an introduction. As Azadovsky shows, Gnedich’s introduction directly influenced Pushkin’s conception of folklore. However, Azadovsky’s broader argument is probably overstated. In his view there was a strict dichotomy between Fauriel’s “French school,” which appreciated folklore as an expression of the national essence, and the German school, which valued its archaic and primitive qualities.

¹² For a formal comparison of Karamzin’s poem with actual folklore, see Bailey, *Three Russian Lyric Folk Song Meters*, 205–06. According to Gasparov (*Ocherk*, 120–21): “«Илья Муромец» Карамзина повлек за собою целую серию поэм в этом нетрудном и однообразном размере, и конец такой моде положил лишь Пушкин успехом 4-ст. ямба «Руслана и Людмилы»” (Karamzin’s “Ilya Muromets” brought about a whole series of narrative poems in this not difficult and monotonous meter, and only the success of the iambic tetrameter of Pushkin’s “Ruslan and Liudmila” put an end to this fashion). Cf. M. L. Gasparov, “Russkii narodnyi stikh i ego literaturnye imitatsii,” in M. L. Gasparov, *Izbrannye trudy* (Moscow: Iazyki russkoi kul'tury, 1997), 3: 101.

povest' v piati idilliakh"). In his 1817 treatise on Russian versification, Vostokov praised Karamzin's poem both for its attractive style and innovative meter, but pointed out that it was appropriate for folk songs, but not epics.¹³

In the poem proper, Karamzin begins by explicitly rejecting the work of the Greek and Roman poets in favor of a genuinely Russian theme:

Нам другие сказки надобны;
мы другие сказки слышали
от своих покойных мамушек.
Я намерен слогом древности
рассказать теперь одну из них
вам, любезные читатели,
если вы в часы свободные
удовольствие находите
в русских баснях, в русских повестях,
в смеси былей с небылицами,
в сих игрушках мирной праздности,
в сих мечтах воображения.¹⁴

We need other tales; / we heard other tales from our deceased nannies. / I intend to tell one of them in the ancient style / to you, dear readers, / if you in free hours / find pleasure in Russian fables, in Russian stories, / in the mix of truth and tall tales, / in these games of peaceful idleness, / in these dreams of the imagination.

¹³ “Цель моя была показать настоящее свойство Русского размера доселе еще никем не примеченное. Новейшие авторы употребляли некоторые виды сего размера в качестве стихов стопосложных, чему первый подал пример Н. М. Карамзин своим Ильей Муромцом. Прекрасная сия пьеса, как и все произведения того же автора, по справедливости обратила на себя общее внимание, сколько заманчивостью, столько и новостью размера, коему скоро явились многие подражатели. Сии по большой части употребляли онъ в повествовательных же стихотворениях. Но мы видели в предыдущей главе что сей размер есть песенный, который потому самому слишком короток и единозвучен для больших повествовательных сочинений” (My goal was to show the genuine character of the Russian meter, which up until now has not been noted by anyone. The most recent authors have used certain types of this meter in the form of *syllabo-tonic* verse, of which N. M. Karamzin has given an example with his *Ilya Muromets*. This beautiful piece, like all the works of this author, justifiably received attention both through its alluring quality and through the novelty of the meter, which soon had numerous imitators. These imitators mainly used the meter in narrative poems. But we have seen in the previous chapter that this meter is *lyric*, which for this very reason is too short and monotone for long narrative works”). A. Kh. Vostokov, *Opyt o russkom stikhoslozenii* (Kazan': Nasledie, 2002), 161–62. This edition is a facsimile of the original.

¹⁴ Karamzin, *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii*, 149.

Pushkin's early work is often a matter of poetic apprenticeship, so it comes as no surprise to see him following Karamzin's example. In his own introductory verses, he first rejects the singers of ancient Greece, then Virgil, then Klopstock, Milton, and Camoens before finding a suitable model in Voltaire's salacious poem about Joan of Arc. The French poet's "catechism of wit" inspires him to take up a "Russian" theme (*Bova*). Pushkin then compares himself to Radishchev, who had likewise written a "*Bova*."

Но вчера, в архивах рояся,
Отыскал я книжку славную,
Золотую, незабвенную,
Катехизис остроумия,
Словом: Жанну Орлеанскую.
Прочитал, — и в восхищении
Про Бову пою царевича.

О Вольтер! о муж единственный!
Ты, которого во Франции
Почитали богом некиим,
В Риме дьяволом, антихристом,
Обезьяною в Саксонии!
Ты, который на Радищева
Кинул было взор с улыбкою,
Будь теперь мою Музою!
Петь я тоже вознамерился,
Но сравняюсь ли с Радищевым?¹⁵

But yesterday, rummaging in archives, / I found a glorious little book, / Golden, unforgettable, / A catechism of wit, / In a word: Joan of Arc. / I read it through—and in rapture / I sing of prince Bova.
// O Voltaire! O unique man! / You who in France / Are considered a god of sorts, / In Rome a devil and an antichrist, / In Saxony a monkey! / You, who was about to / Look with a smile at Radishchev, / Be now my Muse! / I also intended to sing, / But can I compare with Radishchev?

Pushkin's treatment of the "*Bova*" material need not detain us. (In fact, all that exists of his text is the *Vorgeschichte*; the imprisoned protagonist never makes an appearance.) What deserves emphasis is that the fifteen-year-old Pushkin wrote this "folkloric" exercise not on the basis of any detailed study of folklore but by consciously following Karamzin's metrical model, with a sidelong glance at Radishchev's treatment of the

¹⁵ A. S. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v shestnadtsati tomakh* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo AN SSSR, 1937–59), 1: 63–64 (hereafter *PSS*).

plot. As usual, the formal choices make clear the genre and the overall design. For the young Pushkin, as for Karamzin himself, this distinctive verse form served to give his text a folkloric coloration. (It might be noted that Radishchev had also used unrhymed verse with a strong trochaic tendency, though with feminine rather than dactylic clausulae).¹⁶

One has to search hard to find more examples of folkloric influence or stylization in Pushkin's early verse. In 1814 Pushkin wrote a few poems on Ossianic themes, a tribute to the pan-European fascination with "northern" folklore. The fact that the Ossian phenomenon was fraudulent is of little import here, since—characteristically—Pushkin made no effort to go to the source anyway. He used French Ossianic poetry for his models. Moreover, in these poems he made no effort to create an appropriately folkloric form; all of these poems are written in rhymed iambic meters. Even in this broader context, then, "Bova" stands out as the only example of Russian folkloric stylization from the Lyceum period. Both "Bova" and the Ossianic poems are among the very first that Pushkin wrote (or, at the least, among the first that have come down to us). As Pushkin developed in his years at the Lyceum, he left folklore behind entirely, experimenting instead with more literary genres, from the solemn ode to the "light"¹⁷ elegy as well as epistles and epigrams. The fact that folklore is not represented in the last years of the Lyceum verse reflects its low status in the hierarchy of genres practiced by Pushkin and his friends.

However, there is one curious passage in the 1816 poem "Sleep" ("Son"):

Я сам не рад болтливости своей,
Но детских лет люблю воспоминанье.
Ах! умолчу ль о мамушке моей,
О прелести таинственных ночей,
Когда в чепце, в старинном одеянье,
Она, духов молитвой уклоня,
С усердием перекрестит меня
И шепотом рассказывать мне станет
О мертвцах, о подвигах Бовы...
От ужаса не шелохнусь бывало,
Едва дыша, прижмусь под одеяло,
Не чувствуя ни ног, ни головы.
Под образом простой ночник из глины

¹⁶ Gasparov considers Radishchev's "Bova" to be trochaic. See *Ocherk*, 87–88, 97. There are rhythmic irregularities in these trochees, but their significance is exaggerated in the discussion of V. A. Zapadov in his introduction to A. N. Radishchev, *Stikhotvoreniia* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1975), 39.

¹⁷ I use the word "light" (*legkii*) in the sense given to it by Batiushkov in his well-known speech of 1816 "On the Influence of Light Poetry on Language," where the language of the elegy is opposed to that of the eighteenth-century ode.

Чуть освещал глубокие морщины,
Драгой антик, прабабушкин чепец
И длинный рот, где зуба два стучало,—
Все в душу страх невольный поселяло.
Я трепетал — и тихо наконец
Томленье сна на очи упадало.
Тогда толпой с лазурной высоты
На ложе роз крылатые мечты,
Волшебники, волшебницы слетали,
Обманами мой сон обворожали.
Терялся я в порыве сладких дум;
В глухи лесной, средь муромских пустыней
Встречал лихих Полканов и Добрыней,
И в вымыслах носился юный ум... (Pushkin, *PSS*, 1: 189)

I also am not pleased by my garrulousness, / But I love the memory of my childhood years. / Oh! Can I be silent about my nanny, / About the joy of mysterious nights, / When in her nightcap and old-fashioned clothes, / She, sending ghosts away with her prayer, / Zealously crossed me / And with a whisper began to tell me / About corpses, about Bova's heroic deeds... / From horror I would not stir, / Barely breathing, holding myself tight under the blanket, / Not feeling my legs or my head. / Under the icon a simple clay nightlight / Barely illuminated her deep wrinkles, / Another ancient item, great-grandmother's bonnet, / Her long mouth, with two teeth chattering, / Everything sent an involuntary terror into my soul. / I shuddered and finally / The languor of sleep overcame me. / Then in a crowd from the azure height / Onto my bed of roses winged thoughts, / Magicians male and female descended, / They enchanted my dream with deceptions. / I was lost in a gust of sweet thoughts; / In the deep forest, amidst the wilderness of Murom / I met daring Polkans and Dobrynias, / And my young mind was carried away in fantasies.

The reference to a “nanny” (the Russian *mamushka* can be used in conjunction with anyone involved in a child’s upbringing) may simply be a *topos*. We recall that Karamzin’s “Ilya Muromets” had begun by invoking “mamushki” as the conduits of Russian folktales (“мы другие сказки слышали / от своих покойных мамушек”). If the passage in “Sleep” is autobiographical, the obvious candidate for the “mamushka” is Pushkin’s maternal grandmother Maria Alekseevna Gannibal, whose influence on the young Pushkin is attested to in his sister’s memoirs. As the editors of the most authoritative edition of the Lyceum poems note, it is highly unlikely that this is the legendary Arina Rodionovna, to be discussed below, who would have only been in her forties at this time and

was in any case not Pushkin's nanny.¹⁸ Be that as it may, the passage does make clear a familiarity, albeit cursory, with folklore. The references are all superficial: Bova, Polkan (a character in the Bova story), Dobrynia (a well-known hero of Russian epic) and the wilds of Murom, which are referenced in the poetry of Karamzin, Batiushkov, and others. Insofar as this passage tells us anything, it suggests that the young Pushkin enjoyed folklore as the source of scary tales, and that his knowledge of these tales was limited to the most famous representatives.

After the Lyceum

In the years immediately following the Lyceum, Pushkin turned to Russian folklore again, albeit occasionally and superficially. The rusalka, a “Lorelei”-type water nymph who lures men to their deaths, is a familiar figure in Slavic folklore. Pushkin’s “Rusalka”—written in 1819, but initially published in 1826 with the Romantic subtitle “Ballad” appended—relates three meetings between a rusalka and an old monk. Each time she tempts him, and after the third meeting he succumbs. What is striking here is that while the plot of Pushkin’s poem is unmistakably folkloric, the form is not. It is written in rhymed iambic tetrameter in eight-line stanzas with alternating feminine and masculine rhymes. This exact form occurs repeatedly in the Lyceum verse, in poems with no connection to folklore.¹⁹

While purportedly on a Russian folkloric subject, “Ruslan and Liudmila” draws more on Ariosto than on Russian traditions. It is written in iambic tetrameter, which as we have noted, was a bookish meter completely foreign to Russian folklore—in contrast, for example, to trochaic meters. The fact that Pushkin would write a “folkloric” poem in this form reflects a lack of interest in even the most rudimentary elements of folk versification. As works of literature, both “Rusalka” and especially “Ruslan and Liudmila” represent a much more confident and original poet, but stylistically speaking, they are a step back from “Bova,” which at least made the attempt to create an association between a folkloric subject and folk prosody—something that Pushkin would come to value highly in his mature poetry.

The same disregard for folk style can be found in the poetry of Pushkin’s southern exile. A type of amateur ethnography is essential to the genre of the “Southern Poems,” and Pushkin writes a few interpolated lyrics intended to lend a folkloric coloration—albeit not Russian—to his work. However, the “Circassian Song” in *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* (*Kavkazskii plennik*) and the “Tatar Song” of *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai* (*Bakhchisarai-skii fontan*) are simply a few consistently rhymed iambic stanzas inserted

¹⁸ Pushkin, *Stikhotvoreniia litseiskikh let*, 621.

¹⁹ See Tomashevsky’s catalogue for the other poems. B. V. Tomashevskii, “Strofika Pushkina,” *Pushkin: Issledovaniia i materialy* 2 (1958): 159–60.

into the broader freely rhymed iambic context. There is nothing folkloric about them beyond the fact that they describe the activities of a particular ethnic group. Ethnic stereotypes abound in *The Black Shawl* (*Chernaia shal'*, sometimes published with the subtitle *Moldavian Song*), chronologically one of the first poems of the southern exile. In this case Pushkin does use an unusual form (amphibrachic tetrameter couplets with exclusively masculine rhyme), but these draw not on Slavic folk associations, but rather German ones, as mediated by Zhukovsky's ballad translations.²⁰

Mikhailovskoe

To summarize, there is very little to talk about if we consider Pushkin's interest in Russian folklore and folk culture in the ten years of poetic activity that precede his "northern exile." In Mikhailovskoe, however, things change radically. In a prose fragment probably written in 1827, Pushkin wrote: "В зрелой словесности приходит время, когда умы, наскучив однообразными произведениями искусства, ограниченным кругом языка условленного, избранного, обращаются к свежим вымыслам народным и к странному просторечию, сначала презренному" (In a mature literature there comes a time when minds that are bored by monotonous works of art, by the limited sphere of a conventional, selective language, turn to the fresh popular ideas and to the strange folk idiom that was once disdained).²¹ This passage describes precisely what happened in Mikhailovskoe, where Pushkin reevaluated his attitude toward folklore.

Pushkin was boundlessly curious, and part of his turn to folklore may be explained geographically. In his southern exile, he had taken advantage of exciting "ethnographic" subjects, setting his narrative poems in the Crimea, the Caucasus, and Bessarabia. The local color, which—unbeknownst to most contemporaries—came as much from books as from personal observations, gave these works an exoticism that contributed to their success.²² By contrast, the Pskov region offered little in the way of novelty or variety. In these new, seemingly familiar surroundings, Pushkin began

²⁰ Tomashevskii, "Strofika Pushkina," 57–58.

²¹ Pushkin, *PSS*, 11: 73.

²² In the spirit of Byronic Romanticism, Pushkin encouraged his readers to believe that his "southern poems" were inspired by his personal experiences. In the epilogue to *The Gypsies*, he remembers encountering the "peaceful carts of the Gypsies," joining them in their wanderings, sharing their modest meals and falling asleep by their fires. Approximately five years later, in his lyric poem of 1830 (likewise titled "The Gypsies"), he nostalgically recalls that happy time. However, as Oleg Proskurin has convincingly shown, this biographical episode was undoubtedly fabricated by the poet, who drew almost all his knowledge of this subject from a German source that had been translated into French. Oleg Proskurin, "Russkii poet, nemetskii uchenyi i bessarabskie brodiagi (Chto Pushkin znal o tsyganakh i

to think seriously about Russia in the broadest sense: its people, fate, history, customs, and language. The timely appearance of Karamzin's *History of the Russian State* inspired *Boris Godunov*, in which Pushkin hewed closely to his source, but added important "folk" elements, e.g., the characters of the holy fool and the wandering priests as well as folk songs and proverbs. Pushkin's interest in Russia was likewise precipitated by the discussions of "Romanticism" and *narodnost'* burgeoning in the Russian press, especially under the pen of his friend and champion Prince Viazemsky.²³

Several texts offer direct testimony to the abrupt nature of this shift. The first is the narrative poem *The Gypsies* (*Tsygany*), which was begun in the southern exile, but completed in the first months in Mikhailovskoe. While written in the same freely rhymed iambs as the other southern poems, *The Gypsies* has an interpolated trochaic passage. This poem is a stylized folk song, recognizable as such not only by the new meter, but also by morphological details (diminutives, truncated adjectives), verbal formulae (e.g., "za sine more"), and the subject matter taken from nature (a migratory bird). Still more striking evidence is provided by a clearly unfinished poem on the subject of Pushkin's great-grandfather Gannibal. According to the academy edition (*PSS*, 2: 1143), it was written no later than 31 October 1824 (and probably only slightly earlier, judging from its position in Pushkin's notebook), less than three months after Pushkin's arrival in Mikhailovskoe:

Как жениться задумал царский арап,
Меж боярынь арап похаживает,
На боярышн арап поглядывает.
Что выбрал арап себе сударушку,
Чёрный ворон белую лебёдушку.
А как он, арап, чернёшенек,
А она-то, душа, белёшенька.²⁴

When the tsar's moor planned to marry, / He wandered among the noble women, / The moor glanced at the little boyar lasses. / The moor chose for himself a little lady, / The black raven chose for himself a little white swan. / And just as he, the moor, is so very black, / So she, the sweetheart, is so very white.

pochemu skryl ot chitatelei svoi poznaniia)," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 123 (5) (2013): 165–83.

²³ On the history and significance of *narodnost'*, see David L. Cooper, *Creating the Nation: Identity and Aesthetics in Early Nineteenth-century Russia and Bohemia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 165–86. On the specific works of Bestuzhev and Kiukhel'beker that Pushkin was reading (and commenting on) at exactly this time, see Tomashevsky's essay "Pushkin i narodnost'," in B. Tomashevskii, *Pushkin: Raboty raznykh let* (Moscow: Kniga, 1990), 87–88.

²⁴ Pushkin, *PSS*, 2: 338.

These are the first verses that Pushkin ever wrote that were not syllabo-tonic.²⁵ As the ubiquitous diminutives already suggest, the excerpt is folkloric in style. However, what is truly remarkable and what sets this excerpt apart from the stylized interpolated poem in *The Gypsies* is the form. With few exceptions the lines have three stresses, which come at unpredictable intervals. The lines do not rhyme, but the line endings (with the exception of the first)²⁶ are clearly paired, with the final stress occurring either three or four syllables from the end, a very unusual feature in Russian literary verse. How did Pushkin come up with this form?

Pushkin's letter to his brother Lev from the first half of November 1824 sheds some light on this question, albeit obliquely:

Знаешь ли <мои> занятия? до обеда пишу записки, обедаю поздно; пос.<ле> об.<еда> езжу верхом, вечером слушаю сказки — и вознаграждаю тем недостатки проклятого своего воспитания. Что за прелест эти сказки! каждая есть поэма! Ах! боже мой, чуть не забыл! вот тебе задача: историческое, сухое известие о Сеньке <sic> Разине, единственном поэтическом лице рус.<ской> ист.<ории>. ²⁷

Do you know what I am doing? Before lunch I write notes; I have a late lunch; after lunch I go horseback riding, in the evenings I listen to fairy tales—and in this way compensate for the inadequacies of my accursed education. How charming these fairy tales are! Every one is an epic! Oh, my God, I almost forgot! Here is a task for you: <send me> historical, dry information about Sten'ka Razin, the only poetic character in Russian history.

This passage is generally cited as proof of Pushkin's admiration for his nanny Arina Rodionovna and her beloved fairy tales. This point is indisputable, though at the same time the passage reveals something rarely admitted: that Pushkin was obviously hearing these tales *for the first time*. Pushkin states that he is “compensating” for the lacunae in his

²⁵ The only other non-syllabo-tonic poems that Pushkin would write were his imitations of classical antiquity, likewise unrhymed. However, he first attempted that form in 1829. It bears repeating that Pushkin was characteristically conservative in his adaptation of hexameters and elegiac distichs. He favored syllabo-tonic realizations of these forms (which in Russian cease to be syllabo-tonic only when trochees are substituted for dactyls). See Michael Wachtel, *The Development of Russian Verse: Meter and Its Meanings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 182–89.

²⁶ Bondi (*O Pushkine*, 432–33) argues that Pushkin probably intended to return to the excerpt and supply a “parallel” line to the first one.

²⁷ Pushkin, *PSS*, 13: 121.

“accursed education.” It bears emphasizing that “education” is an inadequate translation of Russian “*vospitanie*.” Like German “*Bildung*,” the Russian term includes both formal education and family upbringing. In other words, nothing Pushkin encountered at home or in his studies at the Lyceum had introduced him to folk culture. There are at least two reasons why this should have been the case. First, Arina Rodionovna was *not* Pushkin’s nanny; she was the nanny of his sister. And secondly, even if Pushkin had been exposed to her tales as a child, there is no reason to assume that at that time he would have shown interest in them. If this fact surprises us, it can only be because of the ubiquitous platitudes of Soviet scholarship, according to which fairy tales Pushkin heard as a child served to create an indissoluble bond between him and the Russian people, a bond that allowed him to transcend his aristocratic origins.

Before we accept such claims, it would be wise to recall the enormous rift between aristocratic and folk culture in Pushkin’s day. We know little about the years of Pushkin’s life that preceded the Lyceum, but there is abundant evidence that he spent this time immersed in French literature and no evidence whatsoever that would suggest an interest in the illiterate Russian serfs and their songs and tales. As Pushkin’s sister recalled:

Учился Александр Сергеевич лениво, но рано обнаружил охоту к чтению и уже девяти лет любил читать Плутарха или «Илиаду» и «Одиссею» в переводе Битобе. Не довольствуясь тем, что ему давали, он часто забирался в кабинет отца и читал другие книги; библиотека же отцовская состояла из классиков французских и философов XVIII века.²⁸

Alexander Sergeevich was a lazy student, but he displayed from an early age a pleasure in reading, and at nine he already loved to read Plutarch or the “Iliad” and the “Odyssey” in Bitaubé’s [French] translation. Not satisfied with what he was given, he often made his way into our father’s study and read other books; for father’s library consisted of French classics and eighteenth-century philosophers.

And speaking of folk songs, even if the child Pushkin had wanted to hear them, it would not have been easy to satisfy this interest. As the memoirs of Pushkin’s sister Olga make clear, Arina Rodionovna recited her tales.²⁹ In fact, Russian fairy tales are never sung. And

²⁸ O. S. Pavlishcheva, “Vospominaniia o detstve A. S. Pushkina,” in *A. S. Pushkin v vospominaniakh sovremenников*, ed. V. E. Vatsuro et al. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1974), 30.

²⁹ “<Ona> masterski govorila skazki, znala narodnye pover’ia i sypala poslovitsami, pogovorkami” (“she was a brilliant teller of folktales, she knew folk beliefs

as Pushkin's own notes reveal, she recited in prose, not in verse.³⁰ When Pushkin insists that each of the fairy tales is a *poema* (a word that can be translated as "epic" or "narrative poem," but which in either case implies verse) he is speaking figuratively, not literally.

A few related issues deserve comment. Though the dating of specific texts written in Pushkin's years in Mikhailovskoe (August 1824–September 1826) is often unclear, there is every reason to believe that his attitude toward folk culture changed quickly and radically. This is suggested by the sheer number of Pushkin's works that contain such material. For example, the introduction to "Ruslan and Liudmila," in contrast to the rest of that work, which was written five years earlier, really does reflect exposure to Russian folktales. As Oleg Proskurin notes, "in the opening of the 'Prologue' motifs and verbal formulae of a tale are used that were written down by Pushkin in Mikhailovskoe (presumably from the recitations of his nanny Arina Rodionovna) in fall of 1824."³¹ Another of the tales written down at that time, presumably again from Arina Rodionovna's recitation, serves as the source material for Pushkin's 1830 "Fairy Tale of the Priest and His Worker Balda" (unpublished in the poet's lifetime). One significant detail of the text that Pushkin committed to paper at Mikhailovskoe appears to have eluded the attention of all commentators: the first time that Pushkin wrote down the name "Baldá," he marked the stress.³² Russian words do not have predictable stresses, and Pushkin obviously feared that, when he returned to the text, he might forget how to pronounce the protagonist's name.³³ This shows indisput-

and she poured out proverbs and sayings" (*ibid.*, 44). These memoirs were dictated in 1851 at the request of the scholar Pavel Annenkov. Olga dutifully recalled how Pushkin had loved Arina Rodionovna from childhood, which may be true or may be a projection backwards based on his experiences in Mikhailovskoe. (Even Pushkin's sister admits that he only "came to appreciate Arina Rodionovna fully" in Mikhailovskoe.)

³⁰ The tales that Pushkin took down in Mikhailovskoe—presumably from Arina Rodionovna's "dictation"—are all in prose. M. A. Tsivlovskii, L. B. Modzalevskii, and T. G. Zenger, eds., *Rukoiu Pushkina: Nesobrannye i neopublikovанные тексты* (Moscow-Leningrad: Academia, 1935), 405–14.

³¹ In A. S. Pushkin, *Sochineniia: Kommentirovannoe izdanie* (Moscow: Novoe izdatel'stvo, 2007), 1: 84. As has long been recognized, these motifs and formulae also find their way into the later "Fairy Tale of Tsar Saltan" (1831).

³² Tsivlovskii, Modzalevskii, and Zenger, *Rukoiu Pushkina*, 409.

³³ In Pushkin's day, the word *balda* was substandard and obscure. Pushkin himself never used it as a common noun, only as a proper noun in the fairy tale. When Pushkin's contemporary Vladimir Dal' published his pioneering dictionary in the 1860s, he included *balda* as a common noun with three definitions: (1) the rounded piece at the top of a cane [*nabaldashnik*] or any sort of growth on a tree; (2) a type of large hammer; (3) a simpleton. Vladimir Dal', *Tolkovyj slovar' zhivogo velikorusskogo jazyka* (Saint Petersburg: Kniga, 1864), 1: 112.

ably that when Pushkin heard this “well-known” tale in Mikhailovskoe, he was hearing it *for the first time*. Once again, the common assumption that Pushkin was familiar with these tales from childhood proves to be false.³⁴

In that same letter—in the very same paragraph—directly after lauding Arina Rodionovna’s fairy tales, Pushkin remembers that he meant to ask his brother to send him documentary material about Sten’ka Razin, the seventeenth-century bandit. This request is in fact directly related to the comments about Russian folklore. Razin’s colorful life (and death) had inspired a lively tradition of popular songs about him. Pushkin’s subsequent “Songs about Sten’ka Razin” indicate that he intended to add to this tradition. Their precise date of composition is unknown, but it stands to reason that Pushkin began them shortly after receiving the material he requested from his brother.³⁵

kogo iazyka (Moscow: Russkii iazyk, 1978), 1: 43. These definitions are still found in today’s dictionaries, though the first two are marked as archaic and/or regional. The entry in *Slovar’ sovremennoego russkogo literaturnogo iazyka* (Moscow: Russkii iazyk, 1991) gives only the second and third definitions, but notes that in the three dictionaries that predate Pushkin, two put the stress on the second syllable, while the other marks it on the first. (The dictionary that marks stress on the first syllable—Ivan Geim’s *Novyi rossiisko-frantsuzsko-nemetskii slovar’* [Moscow, 1799], 1: 9—gives only one definition: “le gros bout d’un bâton, das dicke Ende eines Prügels.”) Dal’s dictionary entry gives both stresses as possible. Conceivably Pushkin had encountered this word before hearing the fairy tale and was aware of the alternate stresses, but more likely he was hearing the word for the first time. In any case, he obviously marked the stress because he wanted to remind himself of the pronunciation exactly as he had heard it and because the stress would be necessary insofar as he planned to use the word in a poetic context.

³⁴ Admittedly, one of the sources of this assumption is Pushkin himself, who in a draft of his 1835 poem “...Again I visited” (“...Vnov’ ia posetil”) wrote: “И вечером при завыванье бури / Ее рассказов, мною затверженных / От малых лет, но все приятных сердцу” (And in the evening at the howling of the storm / Her stories, which I memorized / From my young years, yet still dear to the heart). Numerous variants indicate that Pushkin was wavering between that version or one in which the stories were repeated to him by his nanny. See PSS, 3: 998. Ultimately, he rejected all of these possibilities. It should be recalled that Pushkin was fond of creating a biographical image of himself that did not correspond to reality. See the comments above on *The Gypsies*.

³⁵ The editors of the academy edition (PSS, 3/2: 1129) suggest that they could have been written as early as September 1824, which makes little sense, since he sent his brother the request for material in November of that year. (Perhaps the editors considered the possibility that he had begun writing them before getting his brother’s response.) Tomashevsky argues for a composition date of 1826 or 1827, based on Benckendorff’s letter to Pushkin of 22 August 1827 in which he forbids the poems’ publication. B. Tomashevskii, “Genezis ‘Pesni Zapadnykh Slavian,’” *Atenei: Istoriko-literaturnyi vremennik* 3 (1926): 40. Tomashevsky’s argument is

What prompted Pushkin's interest in Sten'ka Razin? At some point while in Mikhailovskoe, Pushkin began copying down folk songs that he heard in the region. Mstislav Tsialevsky apodictically states that because these poems are in the same notebook as the fairy tales, Arina Rodionovna was the source of both.³⁶ Among these were two songs connected to the theme of Sten'ka Razin. The first describes how Razin's son appears in Astrakhan and is arrested after explaining that his father plans to visit the city the following day. The second, a sequel of sorts, focuses on Sten'ka Razin himself, who expresses his anger to two hundred fellow bandits, who in turn assure him that they will take down the prison brick by brick, free his son, and take revenge on the responsible party. Tsialevsky dates these song transcriptions to 1824, shortly after the fairy tale transcriptions. If this is correct, it would be plausible that precisely these songs—

predicated on the odd assumption that Pushkin sought to publish the poems as soon as he had written them.

³⁶ Tsialevskii, Modzalevskii, and Zenger, *Rukoiu Pushkina*, 409. I remain skeptical. The only suggestion that Arina Rodionovna sang is contained in Pushkin's stylized poem "Winter Evening" of 1825, written in (folkloric) trochees, where the poet asks his nanny to sing two specific songs. Both of these songs, incidentally, were considered not so much "folklore" as "gentry-lore" (A. N. Rozov, "Arina Rodionovna glazami fol'kloristov," in *Zdes' adresov rodnykh dlia serdtsa priblizhen'ia: Sbornik statei po itogam nauchno-prakticheskikh chtenii* [St. Petersburg: Letopis', 2009], 35–36). And neither is found among the songs that Pushkin collected. This single passage, which may or may not have a basis in biographical fact, has led to vastly exaggerated claims about Arina Rodionovna's singing. "Throughout his whole life he retained the memory of the songs [my emphasis, MW] and tales of his old nurse," writes Roman Jakobson ("On Puškin's Responses to Folk Poetry," in Roman Jakobson, *Selected Writings*, 5: *On Verse, Its Masters and Explorers*, ed. Stephen Rudy and Martha Taylor [The Hague: Mouton, 1979], 295). In Yuri Tynianov's unfinished novel *Pushkin*, a mine of misinformation on the young Pushkin's closeness to folk culture, Arina Rodionovna sings. Iu. N. Tynianov, *Sochineniia* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaiia literatura, 1959), 3: 41. Even such careful scholars as Boris Katz and Caryl Emerson repeat—without attribution, as there is little to attribute this to—that Arina Rodionovna was an "important source" of musical folklore ("Pushkin and Music," in Bethea, *Pushkin Handbook*, 595). It is true that in a letter to Viazemsky from 25 January 1825 Pushkin reports that he is "listening to old fairy tales and songs"—"слушаю старые сказки да песни" (*Pushkin, PSS*, 13: 135)—but he does not mention the singer(s). Tellingly, not a single contemporary remarked on Arina Rodionovna's singing. Nikolai Iazykov, who can hardly be accused of a lack of interest in Russian folk song and who spent a considerable amount of time with Pushkin at Mikhailovskoe, addressed a poem to Arina Rodionovna in 1827, "To A. S. Pushkin's Nanny" ("К няне А. С. Пушкина"). He praises her "captivating speech" (*plenitel'nyi rasskaz*) and "loquacious tongue" (*iazyk slovoookhotnyi*), but nowhere does he write about her singing. And as we have already noted, Pushkin's sister—who knew Arina Rodionovna better than anyone—does not mention song in her memoirs about her nanny.

whoever might have sung them—were what led Pushkin to dub Razin “the only poetic character in Russian history” and to request information on him from his brother. In terms of form, however, the poems that Pushkin took down are in trochees, with occasional lapses. Pushkin’s own emendations show him “correcting” what he presumably considered a faulty text. For example, whereas one of the lines initially started in iambs—“Как наш хозяин припечалился”—Pushkin rearranged the words so that it read as trochees: “Припечалился хозяин.”³⁷ Yet Pushkin’s own original poems on Sten’ka Razin are not in trochees: all are in tonic verse, and two of three are in the form of the “*bylina*,” the Russian folk epic.³⁸

Genuine Russian folkloric texts—at least of the *bylina* (or epic) variety—were not written in syllabo-tonic meters, i.e., the system of versification that had been introduced by Lomonosov.³⁹ Only in the twentieth century did scholars study the provenance of this form, but their discoveries are significant enough to be summarized here. The oldest Slavic verse (proto-Slavic) is presumed to be syllabic, most probably consisting of 10 syllables that were organized by a caesura after the fourth and a repeating pattern of long and short (unrhymed) syllables at the end of the line. In Russian, where stress plays such an important role, the ten-syllable line initially evolved into a trochaic pentameter with caesura after the second foot and a dactylic cadence at the end of the line. However, that form proved unstable, and it began to develop in a variety of directions, most of which included extra “unmetrical” syllables. While some lines still scanned as trochees, many did not. M. L. Gasparov adapted the term *taktovik* (which had previously been used in connection with certain modernist tendencies of Russian versification) to account for these variations. He defined the taktovik as a form that has a fixed number of stresses in a line (“ictuses” or “icti”) that are separated by either one, two, or three unstressed syllables. According to his statistics, the taktovik accounts for 83–95 percent of lines in *byliny*. The taktovik is distinctively Russian; no other Slavic tradition developed such a form.⁴⁰

³⁷ Bondi (*O Pushkine*, 399) has a different take on these emendations.

³⁸ *Bylina* is the accepted scholarly term, though it was never used by the actual performers (*skaziteli*), who called their genre *starina*.

³⁹ Bailey argues that some *byliny* were written in trochees. James Bailey, “Da, Virdzhiniia, khorei est’ v bylinakh,” in *Studio Metrica et Poetica: Sbornik statei pamiati Petra Aleksandrovicha Rudneva* (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 1999), 52–61. This possibility is not relevant to the present paper, since the works that Bailey discusses were discovered only after Pushkin’s death.

⁴⁰ Given the lack of historical documentation, there are a number of theories about when and how the taktovik emerged. The account I give here follows M. L. Gasparov, *A History of European Versification*, trans. G. S. Smith and Marina Tarlinskaja, and ed. G. S. Smith with Leofranc Holford-Strevens (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 18–23. Some scholars (most notably Trubetskoi) argued that the

Where could Pushkin have encountered the taktovik? If we look soberly at the evidence, the *least* likely source turns out to be local folk song. It is true that Pushkin's interest in folklore led him to collect a number of folk songs among peasant singers he encountered beginning in Mikhailovskoe and continuing into the 1830s. This activity anticipated and dovetailed with that of Petr Kireevsky, generally considered the father of Russian folklore studies, but who began his fieldwork in earnest only in 1831.⁴¹ Once Kireevsky commenced his project, he enlisted a number of fellow enthusiasts, most notably Pushkin and Nikolai Iazykov, to assist him. Towards the end of 1832, when Pushkin planned to publish his own collection of folk songs, Kireevsky was eager to send him additional material for inclusion. When Pushkin abandoned this project, he sent his collection to Kireevsky and promised to furnish that edition—which likewise never materialized—with an introduction.⁴²

All told, the number of folk songs that Pushkin collected from the mid-1820s to the early 1830s is about fifty. That number should be put in context. The Iazykov family (the poet Nikolai Iazykov, aided by his brothers and sisters) compiled approximately 900 texts.⁴³ Iazykov's contribution was so significant that Kireevsky wanted to publish his collection under both their names, putting Iazykov's first, though in the Russian alphabet “Iazykov” of course comes after “Kireevsky.”⁴⁴ Against this background, it

proto-Slavic syllabic line evolved directly into the taktovik as a result of the fall of the “jers” and that Russian trochaic folk verse was a later development. For a discussion of the various theories, see Bailey, *Three Russian Lyric Folk Song Meters*, 235. The question of the exact evolution of Russian folkloric meters is not germane to the arguments of this paper. For present purposes it is enough to recognize that both the trochee and the taktovik are found in different genres of Russian folklore; it does not matter which came first. It should also be noted that many lines of taktovik scan as trochees.

⁴¹ Azadovskii, *Literatura i fol'klor*, 131. On Kireevsky's broader program, see *ibid.*, 133–53; and Abasheva, *Iazykovy*, 230–57.

⁴² Azadovskii, *Literatura i fol'klor*, 141; Tsivavlovskii, Modzalevskii, and Zenger, *Rukoiu Pushkina*, 433–38. During his lifetime, Kireevsky published only brief excerpts from his collection. His scholarly fastidiousness kept him from producing the full edition that he envisioned. His collection was published posthumously, though without the careful scholarly apparatus he had hoped to provide.

⁴³ Nikolai Iazykov transcribed very few poems, largely because his handwriting was so bad that he himself could often not decipher what he had written earlier. But he was the guiding force behind the project, encouraging others and determining the principles, e.g., to take down all texts regardless of content, to take down numerous versions of the same song, and to do so without “smoothing out” or otherwise altering the texts (Abasheva, *Iazykovy*, 253–55). The extent to which Iazykov's principles were (or could be) followed is an interesting question, though not germane to the present essay.

⁴⁴ Azadovskii, *Literatura i fol'klor*, 141–42.

would be fair to say that Pushkin's activity as a collector of folklore reflects a definite curiosity, but not an obsession. He was clearly fascinated by the potential of Russian folklore, but his goal was less to collect as complete a corpus as possible (though he approved of such a project) than to gain insight sufficient to exploit the material in his own original poetry. Indeed, when he sent his collection of folk songs to Kireevsky, he warned him that one of the poems included was his own composition. Kireevsky thought that all of the poems were genuine and that perhaps Pushkin had been joking. Subsequent scholars have tried to puzzle out which of the poems was Pushkin's invention, without reaching any consensus.⁴⁵

If we are to believe that Pushkin's use of the taktovik came directly from his study of local folklore, we would need to posit the following: (1) that Pushkin had collected these poems in his first year in Mikhaiловskoe; (2) that he had collected a sufficiently large corpus to allow him to generalize on the form as such; and (3) that Pushkin had the patience and ability to study a form completely foreign to everything he had previously written and to determine its distinctive features.⁴⁶

The Taktovik

Pushkin's ethnographic efforts should not blind us to the fact that he learned his folklore primarily from books, the same way he learned about antiquity, the Enlightenment, and Romanticism. There was, after all, a limit to how many folk songs he could gather in Mikahilovskoe and how representative and genuine those songs were. Pushkin himself obviously questioned the Razin-themed poems that he took down. Based on his emendations, it appears that he found the lexicon anachronistic and the form corrupt.⁴⁷

As concerns the taktovik, there were two written sources that he could and did consult. First, texts in taktovik appeared in the famous anthology of folklore collected by the mysterious Kirsha Danilov and published

⁴⁵ Tsivlovskii, Modzalevskii, and Zenger, *Rukoiu Pushkina*, 434, 451.

⁴⁶ Bondi (*O Pushkine*, 396) cites a few lines of a draft to Pushkin's unfinished "Vadim," presumably from 1821. They seem to represent an attempt to imitate folk versification, but they reflect a fundamental lack of understanding. If anything, these lines are based on principles of ancient Greek metrics as applied to modern European languages. In places they allow the substitution of one stressed syllable for two unstressed syllables (cf. the substitution of a spondee for a dactyl in Greek and Latin verse), and the cadence is that of the Homeric hexameter. Pushkin abandoned this experiment after a few lines, but it is sufficient to indicate that, at least in the early 1820s, he was unaware of the essential elements of Russian folk versification.

⁴⁷ Tsivlovskii, Modzalevskii, and Zenger, *Rukoiu Pushkina*, 453–54. On these changes, see Bondi, *O Pushkine*, 398–400.

first in 1804 and then, in a much fuller version, in 1818.⁴⁸ Second, Pushkin's elder contemporary Alexander Vostokov had studied this form using the Kirsha Danilov anthology as his source and had imitated it in various stylized poems. Vostokov published his scholarly work on this subject in a journal article of 1812 and, in expanded form, as a book in 1817.⁴⁹ This book not only contained a description of what he called the "Russian meter" (his term for the taktovik), but also included Vostokov's own translation of Schiller's "Sprüche des Confucius" in this same "Russian meter."⁵⁰ The fact that Vostokov called this non-syllabo-tonic form "Russian" is itself an interesting statement, implying that the entire system of versification created by Lomonosov was "not Russian," i.e., contrary to the nature of genuine Russian verse. In short, Pushkin could have become aware of this "Russian meter" long before 1824. However, it is essential to recognize that he only displayed an interest in it in Mikhailovskoe, where he first became aware of the creative potential of folklore.

In 1825, in response to the lively polemics on the pages of Russian periodicals, Pushkin sketched an essay about the problem of narodnost' in literature. This prose piece, never completed, testifies to his sudden

⁴⁸ The 1818 edition was in Pushkin's library, although it is not known when he acquired it. B. L. Modzalevskii, "Katalog Biblioteki <A. S. Pushkina>," *Pushkin i ego sovremenniki: Materialy i issledovaniia* 9–10 (1910): 34. A. Zhelanskii demonstrates that Pushkin obviously knew the 1804 edition as well, even if it did not end up among the books that Modzalevskii catalogued. He likewise convincingly argues that Pushkin was sufficiently familiar with this book to quote it from memory. See A. Zhelanskii, *Skazki Pushkina v narodnom stile: Balda. Medvedikha. O rybake i rybke. Opyt issledovaniia po rukopisiam poeta s dvumia fotosnimkami* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1936), 149. As far as I am aware, Pushkin's first direct reference to the Kirsha Danilov anthology occurs in the footnote to stanza XVII of chapter 5 of *Eugene Onegin*. That chapter was written in Mikhailovskoe in 1826. On Pushkin's subsequent references to this anthology, see Azadovskii, *Literatura i fol'klor*, 96.

⁴⁹ Vostokov's 1817 *Opyt o Russkom stikhoslozenii* was in Pushkin's library (Modzalevskii, "Katalog Biblioteki <A. S. Pushkina>," 24). Not all of the pages in Pushkin's copy were cut, but the sections about Russian folk versification were. (All passages cited in this paper were among the sections with the pages cut.) It is worth noting that Vostokov complained about editors of Russian folk songs who insisted on "correcting" the tonic verse of genuine folklore to make it sound more familiar to an audience that had become accustomed to syllabo-tonic verse (Vostokov, *Opyt*, 135).

⁵⁰ Vostokov, *Opyt*, 165–166. Vostokov's Schiller translation is part of a lengthy final footnote, in which he insists that this "Russian meter of fairy tales" (*skazochnyi Russkii razmer*) could be applied to an "abstract subject" "foreign to the Muse of the simple folk." The text proper closes with an appeal to "people with talent" to apply the "Russian meter" in their own poetry. Pushkin responded to this challenge, though he never went so far as to use the taktovik outside of a folk context.

fascination with the folk elements of national literatures, that is to say, with the specific qualities that distinguish one national literature from another. The subject matter, according to Pushkin, is not the deciding factor.

что есть народного в *Rosciade* и в <Петриаде кроме имен>, как справедливо заметил <кн. Вяземский>? Что есть народного в *Ksenii*, рассуждающей шести<стопными> ямбами о власти родительской с наперсницей посреди стана Дмитрия?⁵¹

What is *national* in the “*Rossiad*” or the “*Petriad*” besides the names, as Prince Viazemsky justly noted? What is national about *Ksenia*, who reasons in iambic hexameter about her parents’ power with her confidante amidst Dimitri’s warriors?

The reference to *Ksenia* is particularly interesting, as it concerns the 1807 tragedy *Dmitrii Donskoi* by Vladislav Ozerov.⁵² Ozerov had died in 1816, and his work was posthumously championed by none other than Viazemsky, who saw in this dramatist the sure sign of narodnost’. In this passage, Pushkin agrees with his friend’s critique of the superficiality of the Russian elements in Kheraskov’s *Rossiada* and the *Petriada*,⁵³ but he contests the claim that Ozerov is any better. Not only is the scene Pushkin describes a cliché of neoclassical French tragedy (where the leading male and female characters inevitably had confidants so that the playwright could reveal their psychology in dialogue form), but he criticizes the iambic hexameter (the traditional means of rendering the French alexandrine line and thus the standard meter of Russian eighteenth-century tragedy) as being inappropriate to Russian thematics.⁵⁴ A genuinely Russian theme, he implies, requires a genuinely Russian form.

Incipit the taktovik. Tomashevsky draws attention to a two-line experiment that Pushkin jotted down in the margins of one of his manuscript pages:

=Разходились <sic> по поганскому граду
Разломали темную темницу

⁵¹ Pushkin, PSS, 11: 40.

⁵² On this play and its enormous contemporary success, see Simon Karlinsky, *Russian Drama from Its Beginnings to the Age of Pushkin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 200–01.

⁵³ It is unclear which *Petriada* is meant. Pushkin himself mentions two of them in *Eugene Onegin* 5: XXIII. See Iurii Lotman, *Roman A. S. Pushkina Eugenii Onegin: Kommentarii* (Leningrad: Prosvetshchenie, 1983), 277.

⁵⁴ On the conventions of eighteenth-century neoclassical drama, see Karlinsky, *Russian Drama*, 68, 73, 200.

They went about the pagan city
They destroyed the dark prison

Beyond describing an uprising, the precise subject of these lines is unclear, but the formal qualities are distinctive. Each of these lines contains three stresses, with the initial stress falling on the third syllable and the final one on the penultima, producing a feminine cadence. The second line (with stresses on syllables 3, 5, and 9) could be scanned as a trochaic pentameter, but the first (with stresses on syllables 3, 7, and 10) can only be read as a taktovik. In the context of the second line, the first must likewise be interpreted as a taktovik. Next to these lines Pushkin himself sketched the rhythmical pattern, suggesting (1) that he was working with an unfamiliar form, and (2) that he recognized the key to this new form as the three-stress line.⁵⁵ Pushkin may have “compensated” for the lack of rhyme with emphatic sound repetition, both at the beginning of the lines (the anaphoric “Raz...”) and within each line (“*po poganskому*” and “*temnuiu temnitsu*”).⁵⁶

This poetic fragment is found on the back of a draft of the 1825 poem “*Ia pomniu chudnoe mgnoven’ e,*” leading some scholars to conclude that it also dates from 1825. Tomashevsky is more circumspect, noting that it could have been written at any point after “*Ia pomniu*,” even years later. However, if we are to assume that this was Pushkin’s first conscious foray into the taktovik⁵⁷ (and the fact that he included the rhythmic scheme strongly encourages such an assumption) and that the “Songs about Sten’ka Razin”—which likewise employ the taktovik—were written shortly after he requested material on Razin from his brother, then it would be logical to date both of these works to 1825, towards the very beginning of his turn to folk culture.

All three of Pushkin’s original Razin songs are written in non-syllabo-tonic meters, two of them in taktovik. The first narrates how the hero throws a captive Persian princess into the Volga as tribute to “mother Volga”:

Как по Волге-реке, по широкой
Выпльвала востроносая лодка,
Как на лодке гребцы удалые,

⁵⁵ Before writing his first Onegin stanzas, Pushkin had sketched out the formal requirements. Tomashevsky views this sketch of the metrical scheme of the taktovik as a similar first step towards mastering a new form (“Genezis,” 37).

⁵⁶ Bondi (*O Pushkine*, 397) assumes that Pushkin did not compose these lines, but simply jotted down part of a song he heard or otherwise encountered, though no such song has ever been adduced.

⁵⁷ The previously mentioned excerpt “*Kak zhenit’sia zadumal tsarskii arap*” predates this two-line experiment. While indisputably written in folk style, the wide range of clausulae (from masculine to dactylic to hyperdactylic) suggests that it was composed less systematically than Pushkin’s later work in the taktovik and may have been written “intuitively” rather than following a precise model.

Казаки, ребята молодые.
 На корме сидит сам хозяин,
 Сам хозяин, грозен Стенька Разин,
 Перед ним красная девица,
 Полоненная персидская царевна.
 Не глядит Стенька Разин на царевну,
 А глядит на матушку на Волгу.
 Как промолвил грозен Стенька Разин:
 «Ой ты гой еси, Волга, мать родная!
 С глупых лет меня ты воспопила,
 В долгую ночь баюкала, качала,
 В волновую погоду выносила,
 За меня ли молодца не дремала,
 Казаков моих добром наделила.
 Что ничем тебя еще мы не дарили».
 Как вскочил тут грозен Стенька Разин,
 Подхватил персидскую царевну,
 В волны бросил красную девицу,
 Волге-матушке ею поклонился.⁵⁸

On the broad Volga River, / A pointed boat set off, / On the boat were daring oarsmen, / Cossacks, young lads. / At the rudder sits the boss himself, / The boss himself, dread Sten'ka Razin, / Before him is a beautiful lass, / A captive Persian princess. / Sten'ka Razin doesn't look at the princess, / But he looks at mother Volga. / Dread Sten'ka Razin spoke: / "O hail to you, Volga, my own mother! / From my young years you nourished me, / In the long night you rocked me and sang to me, / You brought me through the bad weather, / For my sake you did not sleep, / You gave my Cossacks goods. / We didn't yet give anything to you." / Then dread Sten'ka Razin jumped up, / Grabbed the Persian princess, Hurled the beautiful lass into the waves, / With her showed his obeisance to Mother Volga.

Folkloric elements abound in this text. In terms of lexicon, one can point to collocations like “*Oi ty goi esi*” and fixed expressions like “*krasnaia devitsa*” and “*S glupykh let*.⁵⁹” On the stylistic level, one need not look beyond the first line to find ample evidence. Not only does Pushkin begin with the word “*kak*” (where it does not mean “how,” but simply marks

⁵⁸ Pushkin, PSS, 3/1: 23.

⁵⁹ The phrase “*S glupykh let*” also appears in Pushkin's “Urodilsia ia bednyi nedonosok,” likewise a folk stylization written in taktovik. Tomashevskii (“Genezis,” 51) dates this poem—this time basing his claim on paleographical evidence—to 1828, so it presumably postdates the Razin songs.

the opening),⁶⁰ he also repeats the preposition “po,” a distinctively folkloric usage. Elsewhere one can point to the diminutive in “matushka,” the truncated adjective in “v dolgu noch” (this precise phrase also occurs in the interpolated trochaic folklore stylization in *The Gypsies*) or the non-predicative use of short-form adjectives (“grozen Sten’ka Razin”), which in this case functions as an epithet (“dread Sten’ka Razin”).

In terms of Pushkin’s development as a poet, however, the most striking element of the poem is its rhythm. Though there are indeed individual lines in trochees (Сам хозяин, грозен Стенька Разин … Казаки, ребята молодые … Аглядит на матушку на Волгу … Подхватил персидскую царевну) and anapests (Как по Волге-реке, по широкой), they account for only a small proportion. The only metrical description that can account for 100 percent of the lines—including the trochaic and anapestic ones—is the taktovik. That is to say: every line has the same number of stresses (three), and there is no line in which the stresses are separated by more than three syllables.⁶¹ On the one hand, this form represents a radical departure from anything that Pushkin had previously written. On the other hand, Pushkin’s use of the taktovik shows his conservative tendencies; he was always cautious about accepting and applying rhythmic and metrical innovations.⁶² In this particular case we can see that Pushkin—whether consciously or not—included several elements that made this strange form more familiar. Every line has a stress on the third and the penultimate syllable. (This feminine cadence is not found in the few “taktoviki” that Pushkin collected; it is likewise not used in “Kak zhenit’sia zadumal tsarskii arap.” This strongly suggests that Pushkin’s source was Vostokov.)⁶³ The folkloric “taktovik” is an unrhymed form, but Pushkin was always

⁶⁰ This is the fourteenth (and final) definition of the word in the *Slovar’ iazyka Pushkina*: “Частица, употребляемая в качестве зачина в народных песнях и подражаниях им” (A particle used in the capacity of an opening in folk songs and their imitations).

⁶¹ There are lines that seem to have more than three stresses, but in these cases one—or more—of the possible stresses should be suppressed. For example, in the line “Сам хозяин, грозен Стенька Разин”), stresses should fall on syllables 3, 5, and 9. In folkloric texts, phrasal stress takes precedence over word stress. See V. M. Zhirmunskii, “Russkii narodnyi stikh v ‘Skazke o rybake i rybke,’” in *Problemy sovremennoi filologii: Sbornik statei k semidesiatiletiiu akademika V. V. Vinogradova*, ed. M. B. Khrapchenko et al. (Moscow: Nauka, 1965), 129–35.

⁶² One thinks of Pushkin’s famous parody when he first encountered Zhukovsky’s use of blank verse without caesura. Pushkin then took more than a decade before composing blank verse of this type. More relevant to the present discussion: when Pushkin first began writing elegiac distichs as stylizations of antiquity, he felt uncomfortable with the absence of rhyme and often compensated by creating some sort of euphony at the end of the line (Wachtel, *Development*, 60–65, 187).

⁶³ It is sometimes difficult to determine whether the poems Pushkin collected are trochaic with occasional irregular stresses or taktoviki, but in the clear-cut cases

uncomfortable leaving rhyme behind. In this poem there are striking sound repetitions at the end of lines based on euphony and anagrams (e.g. широкой / лодка, удалые / молодые, хозяин / Разин), which become indisputable rhymes later in the poem (воспоила / выносила / наделила, качала / дремала). In other words, Pushkin sensed a lack of organization in this new form and compensated by adding a feature foreign to it.⁶⁴

The implementation of rhyme, however, may also have had a literary source: in 1825 Vostokov published his translations of Serbian folk poetry from the celebrated collection of Vuk Karadžić. For these translations Vostokov used the folk meter that he had described and applied in his 1817 treatise on versification. He appended a note to his publication: "In the Serbian original the meter is a trochaic pentameter with an enjambment after the second foot. In order to retain the power of the original, the translator did not consider it necessary to slavishly imitate this meter, which is not used by us and which to the Russian ear perhaps is somewhat tiresome."⁶⁵ Vostokov preferred the Russian meter with three stresses and a feminine cadence. There can be no question that Pushkin received and read these translations soon after they appeared in December of 1824.⁶⁶ They were

(e.g., Tsivlovskii, Modzalevskii, and Zenger, *Rukoiu Pushkina*, 428–29, 454–55), the taktoviki have dactylic cadences.

⁶⁴ It should be noted that the second of the Razin folk songs that Pushkin took down in Mikhailovskoe ends with rhymes: *razberem / uvedem / voz'mem*. This conceivably influenced Pushkin's decision to include rhyme in his folkloric stylization.

⁶⁵ We see in Vostokov's renderings an early attempt at poetic translation through "equivalent" rather than "identical" meters. It will be remembered that the trochaic pentameter was not used in Russian poetry before Lermontov, who then set in motion a tradition that has been carefully studied by Taranovsky and Gasparov. Cf. Taranovsky's comments on Pushkin's avoidance of that meter: "Даже тогда, когда у Пушкина были причины для применения сплошного 5-ст. хорея, Пушкин избежал этого размера. Считал ли он его слишком литературным или слишком однообразным для произведений в народном духе—трудно сказать" (Even when Pushkin had reasons for using straight trochaic tetrameter, Pushkin avoided this meter. It is difficult to say whether he considered it too literary or too monotonous for compositions in the folk spirit). K. Taranovskii, "O vzaimootnoshenii stikhotvor-nogo ritma i tematiki," in *O poezii i poetike* (Moscow: Iazyki russkoi kul'tury, 2000), 379. See also Gasparov, "Russkii narodnyi stikh," 100, 114–15. Tomashevsky cites Apollon Maikov's attempts to render Serbian folk poetry in trochaic pentameter verses, noting: "стих этот несколько монотонен и не передает силы подлинника, народного склада" (this verse line is somewhat monotonous and does not render the *power* of the original, of the *folk quality*). B. Tomashevskii, "O stikhe 'Pesni zapadnykh slavian,'" *Apollon*, no. 2 (1916): 28. On Maikov's use of trochaic pentameter, see M. L. Gasparov, "The Semantic Halo of the Russian Trochaic Pentameter: 30 Years of the Problem," *Elementa*, no. 2 (1996): 196.

⁶⁶ V. E. Vatsuro, *Izbrannye trudy* (Moscow: Iazyki slavianskoi kul'tury, 2004), 30–32. Vatsuro speculates that Pushkin brought the almanac with him on his visit to

published by his best friend Anton Del'vig in the first issue of the almanac *Severnye tsvety*, which also contained several contributions by Pushkin himself.⁶⁷ In addition to seeing an implementation of this “Russian meter”—what today we call the taktovik—Pushkin would have noted that Vostokov used euphony and even occasional rhyme at the end of the line.⁶⁸

Similar things could be said about the third of the “Songs about Sten'ka Razin,” which is likewise written in taktovik.

Что не конский топ, не людская мольвь,
Не труба трубача с поля слышится,
А погодушка свищет, гудит,
Свищет, гудит, заливается.
Зазывает меня, Стеньку Разина,
Погулять по морю, по синему:
«Молодец удалой, ты разбойник лихой,
Ты разбойник лихой, ты разгульный буйн,
Ты садись на ладьи свои скорые,
Распусти паруса полотняные,
Побеги по морю по синему.
Пригоню тебе три кораблика:
На первом корабле красно золото,
На втором корабле чисто серебро,
На третьем корабле душа-девица».⁶⁹

It's not a horse's clatter, not people's speech, / Not a trumpeter's trumpet heard from the field, / But the weather is whistling, sounding noisily, / Is whistling, sounding noisily, singing out. / It urges me, Sten'ka Razin, / To go out on the blue sea: / “Daring youth, you are a dashing brigand, / You are a dashing brigand, you are a wild fighter, / Just take a seat on your fast skiffs, / Open up the cloth

Mikhailovskoe on 11 January 1825. In any case, Pushkin's letter to Viazemsky of 25 January 1825 makes clear that he had already read the almanac by then.

⁶⁷ Del'vig, whose interest in folklore is well known, had asked Vostokov to undertake these translations. See A. Kh. Vostokov, *Stikhotovoreniia* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1935), 25. They were among the last poems that Vostokov would write; he lived until 1864, but after 1827 published only scholarly work.

⁶⁸ See, for example, the rhymes in “Smert' liubovnikov,” first published in the issue of *Severnye tsvety* that Pushkin read in January of 1825, republished in Vostokov, *Stikhotovreiniiia*, 340. In that same poem Vostokov used the (admittedly not so very rare) phrase “dusha-devitsa” as a cadence. As we will see, this same phrase occurs as the cadence of the final line in the third of Pushkin's “Songs about Sten'ka Razin,” though Pushkin uses the more folkloric stress “dévitsa,” while Vostokov retains the literary “devítsa.”

⁶⁹ Pushkin, *PSS*, 3/1: 25.

sails, / Rush along the blue sea. / I will send you three little ships:
 / On the first ship is beautiful gold, / On the second ship is pure
 silver, / On the third ship is a darling lass.

This poem likewise has unmistakable folkloric elements, beginning with the negative simile so characteristic of Russian (and Slavic) folklore,⁷⁰ and including non-standard words like “top” and “molv’.”⁷¹ In this poem, there are usually three stresses per line, but in at least two lines there are four (lines 7 and 8, possibly also in line 1, where the stress on “molv’” is perhaps omitted). Moreover, the “anapestic” opening (i.e., the stressed third syllable of the line) is here only a tendency rather than an invariant, as it was in the first of the Razin songs. Rhyme appears here as well, but in a much more limited way (“Молодец удалой, ты разбойник лихой”). The cadences are often dactylic, but occasionally masculine.⁷² Most strikingly, an inordinate number of lines scan as syllabo-tonics (mainly anapests). This percentage is much higher than in genuine folkloric taktoviki. In the folkloric taktoviki, to the extent that lines scan as syllabo-tonics, they are usually trochaic. (It might also be recalled that the two Razin-themed poems that Pushkin himself collected are both trochaic.) In short, Pushkin once again adapts an unfamiliar form by making it as familiar as possible, even to the point of including elements foreign to the form itself.

⁷⁰ In laconic and incomplete notes about Russian folklore, probably sketched as his introduction to Kireevsky’s planned edition of Russian folk songs, Pushkin appears to have emphasized precisely this element. The phrase in question is so abbreviated that one cannot be certain, but Azadovskii (*Literatura i fol’klor*, 37–38) persuasively argues for this reading. For the full text and context, see Tsialevskii, Modzalevskii, and Zenger, *Rukoiu Pushkina*, 436–38. Pushkin may have been influenced by Gnedich, who identified the negative simile as a distinctive feature of Russian folklore in his introduction to a book of Greek folk songs. See V. V. Vinogradov, *Stil’ Pushkina* (Moscow: Nauka, 1999), 263. Vinogradov incorrectly gives 1826 as the publication date of Gnedich’s book, but it was actually February of 1825, and Pushkin received it directly from the author. See B. Tomashevskii, *Pushkin* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990), 2: 351. It bears mentioning that a negative simile opens one of the folk songs that Pushkin collected (Tsialevskii, Modzalevskii, and Zenger, *Rukoiu Pushkina*, 458) as well as the Serbian “Hasanaginica,” translated by Vostokov in 1827 and by Pushkin himself some years later (probably in 1835).

⁷¹ In footnote 31 to *Onegin*, Pushkin defended his use of these words, pointing out that they were not neologisms, but traditional Russian words that demonstrate the “freedom of our rich and beautiful language.”

⁷² As we have noted, Vostokov’s “Serbian Songs” have a feminine cadence (like the first of Pushkin’s Razin songs), but his translation of Schiller uses dactylic cadences.

Eugene Onegin

Pushkin's "novel in verse" is often adduced as proof of his immersion in folk culture. Once again, there is some truth to this claim, but it must be carefully examined and put in the proper context. The status of this work as the cornerstone of the Russian literary tradition has encouraged interpretations that read it as an organic whole. However, it is worth emphasizing that the work was not conceived as a whole, but rather as a fragment and that it took many years before reaching its "canonic" form. When he published the first chapter in 1825, Pushkin included an introduction in which he offered his readers "the beginning of a long poem that will probably never be completed" (начало большого стихотворения, которое, вероятно, не будет окончено). Though Lotman has tagged that introduction as ironic, there seems little reason to doubt this particular claim.⁷³ At the time of publication the plot was still being developed, and there was no obvious way that it could be—or even needed to be—unified. Support for this reading can be found in the penultimate stanza of the final chapter, where Pushkin recalls how he began the work, not yet discerning the shape of the whole through his "*magicheskii kristal*" (crystal ball, yet another folkloric motif). Leslie O'Bell has perspicaciously suggested that the key to understanding this crystal ball is found in the many works written simultaneously with each chapter.⁷⁴ I would emphasize that we need to recall and conceptualize the particular time and place of composition of its various parts.

After completing the novel, Pushkin himself noted where and (in most cases) when he composed the various chapters, so this information was obviously meaningful to him. Careful study of Pushkin's manuscripts has allowed scholars to confirm his notations and to make them still more precise. The first two chapters were written in Odessa (during the southern exile). The third was begun in Odessa and completed in Mikhailovskoe in 1824. We should recall that the end of the third chapter is the first instance where folklore intrudes on the plot (the "Song of the Maidens"). The next three chapters—including chapter 5, in which folklore and folk rituals are central, were written in Mikhailovskoe. (The final chapters were written elsewhere, but they are not relevant to a study of Pushkin and folklore.)

Readers have long struggled to understand the novel's character development. Pushkin himself, in his prose introduction to the "Excerpts from Onegin's Journey," admitted the soundness of Pavel Katenin's judgment that "the transition from Tatiana the village lass to Tatiana

⁷³ Lotman, *Roman A. S. Pushkina*, 118. The terms *stikhovorenie* and *poema* were used loosely at this time.

⁷⁴ Leslie O'Bell, "Through the Magic Crystal to Eugene Onegin," in *Puskin Today*, ed. David M. Bethea (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 152–70.

the aristocratic lady is too unexpected and unexplained.”⁷⁵ However, a no less inexplicable change is the transition from Tatiana as French miss (“с французской книжкою в руках”—“with a French novel in her hands,” 8: V) to the Tatiana who is immersed in Russian folk custom and superstition (“русская душою, сама не зная почему”—“Russian in her soul, herself not knowing why,” 5: IV). The obvious explanation for this paradox, I would argue, is one of timing. When Pushkin in his southern exile initially conceived of the character of Tatiana, he did not imagine that folklore would play any role whatsoever in his novel.

The first portrait we get of Tatiana is of a strange child who does not participate in the activities of her counterparts. In chapters 2 and 3, the few references to folk culture show Tatiana in opposition to it. She does not play at the traditional game of tag (*gorelki*). In chapter 3, when folk culture is introduced, its function is to accentuate Tatiana’s distance from it. She hears the “Song of the Maidens” “indifferently” (*s nebrezhen’em*). That song, one of the few places in the novel that break the Onegin stanza, is written in trochees with unrhymed dactylic endings, recalling the form of Pushkin’s own “Bova.”⁷⁶ In fact, it is the only trochaic passage in the entire novel, just as the folk song in “The Gypsies” is the only trochaic passage in that entire work. In short, the serf girls are given a folklorically tinged form (which, like the game of “*gorelki*,” draws on folkloric mating rituals), but this makes no impression on Tatiana, whose impressions and behavior reflect her “French” upbringing. This song, marked as Russian also by morphological and motivic details, serves as an antipode to the only other passage up until now that was not written in the Onegin stanza—her famous letter to Onegin, which was, as the narrator assures us, written in French. And that letter is “French” in yet another sense—it draws on the clichés of the French novels Tatiana has read.

Hence the careful reader should be astonished at chapter 5, which suddenly claims—and shows—Tatiana’s closeness to the world of Russian folklore, first in the Yuletide divination practices and then in the dream sequence. While some readers may explain this Tatiana as an organic development of the earlier one, a reading in keeping with Pushkin’s own development must come to a different conclusion: when folklore became important for Pushkin (in *Mikhailovskoe*), then it likewise became

⁷⁵ “переход от Татьяны, уездной барышни, к Татьяне, знатной dame, становится слишком неожиданным и необъясненным” (Pushkin, *PSS*, 6: 197).

⁷⁶ “Bova” was in tetrameter, hence the “Song of the Maidens” is truncated by a foot. Pushkin presumably wanted to avoid duplicating that form exactly, given its associations with Karamzin’s “Ilya Muromets” and its imitators (including the young Pushkin himself), not to mention that the meter had run its course and was no longer popular. Pushkin initially penned and then rejected a different “Song of the Maidens” that was in rhymed trochees. On formal reasons why he may have decided against including this song, see Bondi, *O Pushkine*, 385–86.

important for his heroine. This blatant change of character is hard for the narrator to explain, hence he introduces the famous line about her Russian soul. In other words, Pushkin tries his best to undo the Frenchified image of Tatiana that he had worked so assiduously to create.

Written in Mikhailovskoe in 1826, the fifth chapter is a tour-de-force of folk belief, from divinations to superstitions. Where did Pushkin amass such knowledge? Again, it is traditionally assumed that Pushkin had observed the peasants on his estate from a young age. This is the scenario in Tynianov's novel *Pushkin*, where the child Pushkin is portrayed eavesdropping on peasant customs.⁷⁷ It is likewise commonly assumed that these practices were well known to any Russian of this time, since even if the gentry did not participate in such rituals, their peasants were doing so.

Once again, such assumptions are dangerous. Why should we think that aristocratic post-Petrine Russians—whose elevated status was predicated on the distinction between European sophistication and peasant life—would have evinced even the slightest curiosity about what was happening in the serf villages of their estates? Evidence suggests that Russian gentry had little knowledge of folk custom. One need only look at Pushkin's own footnotes to the fifth chapter of *Eugene Onegin* to see proof positive that he did not expect his readership to have any familiarity with such practices. Just as in his notes to *Prisoner of the Caucasus*, where he translated regional words like *aul* (village) and *shashka* (sabre) for the benefit of his Russian aristocratic audience, so in his notes to *Onegin* he felt it necessary to explain his references to folk culture. Thus, in note 29 (to stanza 5: VIII) he expands on the brief reference to a “kitty” by quoting in full a passage about a male cat calling a female cat to sleep by the fireplace. Not only does Pushkin presume that his readers will not know this ditty; he even goes so far to interpret it for their benefit, explaining that it augurs a wedding. That same note closes with Pushkin interpreting another dish-divination song. In that same stanza he had cited three lines of ritual song and written that the “sad melody of this song portends losses.” In the note

⁷⁷ After explaining the significance of these rituals to him, Arina Rodionovna sends him off to bed. See Tynianov, *Sochineniya*, 3: 128: “Он говорил и читал по-французски, думал по-французски. Лицом он пошел в деда-арапа. Но сны его были русские, те самые, которые видели в эту ночь и Арина и Татьяна...” (He spoke and read in French, he thought in French. His face resembled his grandfather the moor. But his dreams were Russian, those same dreams that Arina and Tatiana dreamed that night). The Tatiana in question is one of the serf girls who participated in the divinations. The choice of her name reflects Tynianov's broader strategy of locating in Pushkin's childhood the raw material for his later creative work. The fact that so little documentary evidence existed left Tynianov free to imagine Pushkin's childhood as he wished, and his treatment of the subject is remarkably close to the official Soviet party line.

Pushkin is still more precise, pointing out that it prophesizes death.⁷⁸ In the following stanza Tatiana takes a mirror to the moon, then asks the first passerby what his name is. Footnote 30 explains this custom: “this is how one learns the name of one’s future husband.” In his commentary to the novel, Nabokov assures us that “these are well-known outdoor methods of divination.”⁷⁹ However, he does not clarify why Pushkin felt it necessary to explain such “well-known” customs in a footnote. What was “well known” to Nabokov was clearly not well known to Pushkin’s contemporaries.⁸⁰

So how *did* Pushkin know? Once Pushkin’s interest in folklore was aroused, he clearly sought out every source he could find. This did not exclude the practices of the serfs on his own estate, and the fact that he began writing the fifth chapter of *Onegin* on 4 January 1826—immediately after the Yuletide rituals had been observed—suggests that he may have included some personal observations. W. F. Ryan and Faith Wigzell, who have done by far the most thorough investigation of the folk elements in chapter 5 of *Onegin*, recognize this possibility, though they also stress that virtually everything that Pushkin describes can be attested to in literature that was accessible to him at that time.⁸¹ This included not only Zhukovsky’s ballad “Svetlana” (and Zhukovsky was himself hardly an authority on Russian folk practice; he probably consulted the same books Pushkin did), but also Mikhail Chulkov’s encyclopedia of Russian folk customs and several other works of that type.

Ryan and Wigzell also note that, unbeknownst to Pushkin, a great number of seemingly distinctive Russian folk practices and beliefs are found in other European countries as well. I would like to supplement their observations with one of my own. Much has been made of Tatiana’s fear of crossing paths with a priest or a hare (*Onegin* 5: VI). Pushkin himself apparently shared this fear, and, if we are to believe the story that he repeated to several friends, he aborted a furtive trip from Mikhailovskoe to Petersburg in 1825 when he encountered both of these bad omens. That “biographical” episode may be true, but it may have been invented to suit

⁷⁸ Ryan and Wigzell point out that Pushkin himself seems to have misunderstood the song. W. F. Ryan and Faith Wigzell, “Gullible Girls and Dreadful Dreams: Zhukovskii, Pushkin and Popular Divination,” *Slavic and East European Review* 70, no. 4 (1992): 657.

⁷⁹ *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*, by Aleksandr Pushkin, trans. Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Pantheon, 1964), 2: 498.

⁸⁰ These practices might have been familiar to Nabokov simply because he had read about them in *Onegin*. However, the gentry of Nabokov’s generation were more aware of folklore than Pushkin and his contemporaries. In the years after the emancipation of the serfs, the status of folklore grew, as evidenced by the number of published collections of folkloric materials. Nabokov’s youth followed decades of aristocratic fascination with “the people.”

⁸¹ Ryan and Wigzell, “Gullible Girls and Dreadful Dreams,” 650.

Pushkin's purposes of self-presentation. In an English novel he definitely read, he would have come across the following: "It is unlucky to travel where your path is crossed by a monk, a hare, or a howling dog, until you have eaten your next meal" (*Ivanhoe*, chap. 18). This is not to suggest that Walter Scott was Pushkin's direct source (the bits about the howling dog and the next meal seem not to be part of Russian superstition), but simply to show that superstitions did not know national boundaries.

Pushkin and Slepushkin

A revealing yet little-known episode in Pushkin's exploration of folklore takes the form of his acquaintance with the peasant poet Fedor Slepushkin (1787–1848).⁸² Slepushkin was a direct beneficiary of the heightened interest in narodnost'. His 1826 debut book of poetry *Leisure Activities of a Villager* (*Dosugi sel'skogo zhitelia*) was, in the words of V. I. Zharkova, "the first book written about peasants by a peasant" and, as such, it achieved enormous success.⁸³ An introduction to the book written by the minor writer (and Pushkin acquaintance) B. M. Fedorov attests to Slepushkin's sterling character, both as an honest shopkeeper and a dutiful family man: "As an artist and poet his only teacher was nature. Slepushkin loves reading, but he has had little time and opportunity to read the best writers. He has clear and beautiful handwriting, writes rather correctly [*pishet dovol'no pravil'no*], and sparks of wit shine in his simple conversation."⁸⁴

Despite his impeccable peasant credentials, Slepushkin was never appreciated by Soviet literary historians. In his poetry, he sang the joys of country life and was unfailingly cheerful. The image of an unschooled yet gifted serf poet was attractive, but his gratitude did not square with Soviet historical preconceptions. However, it fit perfectly with the ideals of Pushkin's day, and Slepushkin was celebrated widely. On 22 January 1826, upon the publication of his book, he received a caftan from Tsar Nicholas. Shortly thereafter, he received a letter from Alexander Shishkov in his role as the minister of people's enlightenment and the president of the Russian Academy, informing him that he had been awarded a medal. Within a few months of the publication of the book, a group of enthusiastic literary men were inspired to purchase him his freedom.⁸⁵

⁸² The birth year may have been early 1788. V. I. Zharkova, "K biografi F. N. Slepushkina," *Russkaia literatura*, no. 2 (1980): 154.

⁸³ Ibid., 147.

⁸⁴ Fedor Slepushkin, *Dosugi sel'skogo zhitelia* (St. Petersburg, 1828), vii.

⁸⁵ Blagoi asserts that Pushkin "participated in the efforts to purchase Slepushkin his freedom," but offers no evidence to support this claim. D. D. Blagoi, *Tvorcheskii put' Pushkina 1826–1830* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1967), 527.

Marooned in Mikhailovskoe, Pushkin learned of his partial namesake's success with some annoyance:

Чтó это в самом деле? стыдное дело. Сле-Пушкину дают и кафтан, и часы, и полу-медаль, а Пушкинульному — шиш. Так и быть: отказываюсь от фрака, штанов и даже от академического четвер^{<та>}ка (что мне следует), по крайней мере пускай позволяют мне бросить проклятое Mikhailovskoe. Вопрос: Невинен я или нет? но в обоих случаях давно бы надлежало мне быть в П.<етер> Б.<урге>. Вот каково быть верноподданным!⁸⁶

Truly, what is going on here? It's a disgrace. Sle-Pushkin is given a caftan, a watch, and a half-medal, while the real Pushkin gets nothing. Whatever: I pass on the frock coat, the pants, and even on the academic payment (which I deserve), but at least let me leave this accursed Mikhailovskoe. The question is: am I innocent or not? But in either case I should have been in Petersburg long ago. So this is what it means to be a loyal subject!

However, Pushkin's displeasure concerned only the generous treatment afforded a serf poet, in contrast to the "enforced rustication" (Nabokov's phrase) that was meted out to an aristocratic poet. Like so many of his compatriots, Pushkin was fascinated by the Slepushkin phenomenon. In another letter he wrote:

Видел я и Слепушкина, неужто никто ему не поправил *Святки, Масленицу, Избу?* у него истинный, *свой* талант; пожалуйста пошлите ему от меня экз. Руслана и моих Стих.<отворений> — с тем, чтоб он мне не подражал, а продолжал идти своею дорогою.⁸⁷

I also saw the Slepushkin. Is it possible that no one edited *Whitsuntide, Shrovetide, The Hut?* He has a true talent, *all his own*. Please send him from me a copy of "Ruslan and Liudmila" and of my "Poems"—not so that he imitates me, but that he continues to go his own way.

As the context makes clear, Pushkin saw Slepushkin's book, not Slepushkin himself. He was sufficiently impressed that he wondered whether Slepushkin was truly capable of writing this poetry with-

⁸⁶ Pushkin, PSS, 13: 265. From a letter to Pletnev of 3 March 1826.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 13: 262. From a letter to Del'vig of 20 February 1826.

out assistance.⁸⁸ Blagoi has argued that the poem Pushkin refers to as “Sviatki” (actually called “Sviatochnye gadan’ia”) was the source of Tatiana’s divinations in *Eugene Onegin*.⁸⁹ This argument comes as an unexpected and welcome relief from the common assumption that Pushkin was basing these scenes on his own personal observations. Indeed, Blagoi recognizes that two central motifs (holding the mirror to the sky and trying to determine the name of one’s future husband) can be found in Slepushkin’s poem and that Pushkin might well have appreciated the idea that he was appropriating his folk rituals from a “genuine” peasant’s poetry.

Let us look at the relevant quatrain in Slepushkin’s poem:

За ворота мы выходим
Проходящих окликать,
В месяц зеркало наводим
— Чтоб нам суженых узнатъ.⁹⁰

We go outside the gate / To call on passersby, / We turn our mirror to the moon / In order to recognize our future spouses.

Two observations seem germane, one formal and one semantic, neither one noted by Blagoi. The poem is written in trochaic tetrameter, which, as we have seen, has traditionally been linked to folklore, even if the rhymes are not. (Folkloric verse has a strict repeating cadence of either dactylic/masculine or feminine, so Slepushkin’s alternating rhyme scheme could not have any folkloric provenance.)⁹¹ In fact, the three poems that Pushkin praised are among the few in Slepushkin’s book written in trochees. Since many of the other poems are written in iambs, it would suggest that Pushkin once again associated trochees with folk poetry and for that reason

⁸⁸ Pushkin may have been justified in questioning whether Slepushkin had written this work without help. The Slepushkin phenomenon was an attempt by Pavel Svinin and Boris Fedorov to take advantage of the “Bloomfield effect” and apply it to Russia. Robert Bloomfield (1766–1832), an English autodidact (a tailor’s son), had attained enormous fame with the publication of his poem *The Farmer’s Boy* (1800), which was translated into French, Italian, and even Latin. It sold 26,000 copies in the first three years of its publication. On Bloomfield’s influence in Russia, see Artem Shelia, “Russkaia pesnia” v literature 1800–1840-kh gg. Dissertationes Philologiae Slavicae Universitatis Tartuensis 38 (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2018), 94–111.

⁸⁹ Blagoi, *Tvorcheskii put’ Pushkina*, 528.

⁹⁰ Slepushkin, *Dosugi sel’skogo zhitelia*, 82.

⁹¹ That said: Pushkin himself used trochaic meters with alternating rhyme in folk contexts. M. L. Gasparov, “Semanticheskii oreol pushkinskogo chetyrekhstopnogo khoreia,” in *Pushkinskie chtenia: Sbornik statei*, ed. S. G. Isakov (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1990), 5–14.

found these the strongest poems in the book. The second point to be made is that even Slepushkin felt it necessary to explain the meaning of the rituals found in his poem. He does not simply describe calling out to strangers or pointing a mirror at the moon; he adds that one does these things in order to divine the name of one's future mate. Presumably Slepushkin recognized that he was addressing his poems not to fellow serfs—who were in the main illiterate in any case—but to gentry readers, who would not know the significance of such customs. Once again, we see evidence of a cultural chasm that separated the educated classes from the peasants.

The connection of Pushkin and Slepushkin continued beyond this initial impression and potential influence. Most probably in 1827, Pushkin penned another of his folkloric taktoviki. This poem was never published by Pushkin and was never even completed, but scholars have taken the drafts and pieced together an “almost final” version. While certain lines (for example, the final one) were clearly unfinished, the shape of the whole is fairly clear. The subject matter is unmistakably folkloric.⁹² The dramatis personae are an old groom, his horses, and a young assistant to the groom. In the first part of the poem, we learn that the groom keeps the stables beautifully, but encounters one problem: a “domovoi” (house spirit) torments his horses to the point that each morning one of them appears to be exhausted. In the final section of the poem, the mystery is solved: the cause of the horse’s exhaustion is not the supernatural spirit, but the young groom, who takes the horse each night and gallops to visit his sweetheart.

Всем красны боярские конюшни:
 Чистотой, прислугой и конями;
 Всем довольны добрые кони:
 Кормом, стойлами и надзором.
 Сбруя блещет на стойках дубовых,
 В стойлах лоснятся борзые кони.
 Лишь одним конюшни непригожи —
 Домовой повадился в конюшни.
 По ночам ходит он <в> ко<нюшни>
 Чистит, холит коней боярских,
 Заплетает гриву им в косички,
 Туго хвост завязывает в узел.

⁹² It is often assumed (e.g., Blagoi, *Tvorcheskii put' Pushkina*, 525) that Pushkin heard this plot from Arina Rodionovna or from local peasants as he gathered folklore. There is no documentary evidence for such a claim. In fact, there is strong reason to believe that the source was literary. As Iezuitova shows, Chulkov's *Dictionary of Superstitions* includes a lengthy passage about the “domovoi” and even emphasizes its closeness to horses. R. V. Iezuitova, “Stikhotvorenie Pushkina ‘Vsem krasny boiarskie koniushni’ kak opyt sozdaniia ‘prostonarodnoi ballady,’” *Vremennik Pushkinskoi komissii* 1975 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1979), 38–39.

Как не взлюбит он вороно^{<го>}.
На вечерней заре с водопою
Обойду я боя^{<рские>} конюшни
И зайду в стойло к вороному —
Конь стоит исправен и смирен.
А поутру отопрешь конюшню,
Конь не тих, весь <в> мыле, жаром пышет,
С морды каплет кровавая пена.
Во всю ночь домовой на нем ездил
По горам, по лесам, по болотам,
С полуночи до белого света —
До заката месяца⁹³

Ах ты, старый конюх [неразумный],
Разгадаешь ли, старый, загадку?
Полюбил красну девку младой конюх,
Младой кон^{<юх>}, разгульный парень —
Он конюшню ночью отпирает,
Потихонъко вороного седлает,
Полегонъко выводит за вороты,
На коня на борзого садится,
К [красной девке] [в гости] скакет.⁹⁴

Everything about the boyars' stables is good: / The cleanliness, the service and the horses; / The good horses are satisfied with everything: / The feed, the stables and the oversight. / The harness shines on the oak stands, / The fleet horses show sleekly in their stables. / Only in one respect are the stables bad— / A house spirit kept visiting the stables. / At night it would enter the stables, / It would clean and care for the boyars' horses, / Braid their manes into pigtails, / Tie their tails into a knot. / But how it dislikes the black horse. / When in the evening twilight I go around the boyars' stables / To give water to the horses / And I go into the stable of the black horse— / The horse stands fine and peaceful. / But in the morning you open up the doors / The horse is not quiet, foaming at the mouth, all ablaze, / Bloody foam drips from its maw. / All night long the house spirit was riding him / Through mountains, forests and swamps, / From midnight until dawn— / When the moon goes down // O you old groom / Can you guess the secret, old man? / The young groom fell in love with a beautiful lass, / The young groom,

⁹³ Tomashevskii ("Genezis," 42) suggests that the traditional epithet *zlatogo* (golden) was supposed to end the line and that Pushkin simply did not bother to write it.

⁹⁴ Pushkin, *PSS*, 3/1: 73–74.

a wild guy, / He opens up the stables at night, / Quietly saddles the black horse, / Eases it out of the gate, / Mounts the fleet horse, / Gallops <to visit his beautiful lass>.)

As so often with Pushkin's unfinished poetry, the date of composition is difficult to determine. The Academy edition, without offering any explanation, dates the poem "presumably from August to the beginning of October 1827."⁹⁵ Tomashevsky argues that it was written towards the end of 1828 because it is found with drafts of some stanzas from chapter 7 of *Onegin*.

The dating is complicated by the fact that Slepushkin also wrote a poem on this very subject that he dated precisely: 3 December 1827. In an introduction to the volume where it appeared, his indefatigable editor and patron Boris Fedorov noted that Slepushkin's poem was written "po zadache Aleksandra Sergeevicha Pushkina" (in accordance with a task of Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin).⁹⁶ And indeed, the poem closely parallels Pushkin's plot.

«Конь и домовой»

С зарёю конюх поседелый,
Всегда ходил к своим коням;
Бросал на них свой взор веселый —
И называл по именам.
Как друг у всех он побывает,
Глядит, спокойно ль конь стоит,
Погладит, гриву расплетает,
Водою свежею поит.
Опять вечернею порою,
К коням любимым он ходил,
И радуясь на них душою,
Судьбу свою благодарил!
Однажды скучен пробудился,
Быть может видел сон худой,
К своим ретивым торопился...
Там смотрит, конь его гнедой
Стоит невесело при сене,
И пар клубился из ноздрей
И гривой встряхивал своей,
Весь был в поту, в кровавой пене!
И примечает каждым днём,
Его конь день от дня худеет:
Ночной лежал нетронут корм,

⁹⁵ Pushkin, PSS, 3/2: 1149.

⁹⁶ One recalls that Pushkin would later "give" Gogol the plots to *The Inspector General* and (supposedly) *Dead Souls*. Noted by Blagoi, *Tvorcheskii put' Pushkina*, 525.

Старик душой коня жалеет!
 А молодец, сынок родной,
 Сказал: нашло ночной порой,
 Конь стал перебирать ногами,
 Понуро в сторону глядел,
 Взвивался на дыбы, храпел,
 Тянулся, и рвал оркан зубами.
 Вздыхая конюх говорил:
 С чего так навелось гнедому?
 — Знать не взглянулось домовому,
 Гнедую шерсть незалюбил!
 Отягощала сердце дума,
 Не знал, чем горю пособить,
 Тут мысль пришла ему сходить —
 В сelenье ближнее до кума,
 А кум ворожею слыл,
 Лечил, гадал, судил, мирил;
 К нему-то шел просить совета
 И все, как другу рассказал:
 И дед на речи отвечал:
 Напрасно кум твоя примета!
 Коня не портит домовой,
 Виною конюх молодой,
 Который на гнедке летает
 К красоткам сельским по ночам!
 На посиделках распевает,
 Вернется к утренним часам.
 По сказам кума дорогого,
 Одну он ночку не спал,
 Тогда-то конюх все узнал,
 Кто мучил доброго гнедого.
 К коню и в ночь он приходил,
 С тех пор как бы рукою сняло:
 Гнедко игрив и гладок был,
 И дух недобрый залюбил,
 И горе в добрый час пропало.
 Поныне тоже говорят,
 Случится ль где такое чудо,
 Коню от домового худо,
 А смотришь — конюх виноват.

3 Декабря, 1827 года⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Cited according to Slepushkin, *Dosugi sel'skogo zhitelia*, 49–51.

"The horse and the house spirit": // At dawn the gray-haired groom / Always went to his horses; / He directed his joyous gaze at them— / And called them by name. / Like a friend he visits them all, / Looks whether the horse is standing peacefully, / Pets it, loosens its mane, / Gives it fresh water. / Again in the evening, he goes to his beloved horses / And enjoying them fully, / Thanks his fate! / Once he woke up bored / Perhaps he had a bad dream, / He rushed to his fleet horses... / There he sees his chestnut horse / Is standing unhappily at the trough, / And steam is coming from its nostrils / And it's waving its mane, / Completely in sweat, in bloody foam! / And he notes with every day, / His horse is getting thinner: / The evening feed remains untouched, / The old man feels terribly sorry for the horse! / But a young lad, his own son, / Said: "when the night came, / The horse began to shift on its feet, / It glanced away downcast, / Got onto its hind legs, snorted, / Pulled and tore at its rope with its teeth." / With a sigh the groom said: "Why is all this happening to the chestnut horse?" / "It must be that a house spirit / Has it in for the chestnut coat." / The thought troubled him, / He did not know how to rectify his sadness, / Then a thought came to him— / In a nearby village his buddy lived, / And this buddy was known to be a sorcerer, / He healed, divined, judged, made peace; / He went to him to ask for advice / And he told his friend everything: / And the old man answered his speeches: / "Buddy, your signs are in vain! / A house spirit is not spoiling your horse, / The one to blame is the young groom / Who rushes off on the chestnut mare / To see the beautiful lasses at night! / He sings at the local festivals, / And returns in the morning hours." / After the comments of his dear buddy, / One night he did not sleep, / Then the groom found out everything, / Who was tormenting the good chestnut horse. / He started going to the horse even at night, / From that time everything was perfect: / Horsey was playful and well-kept, / And it came to love the evil spirit, / And the misfortune instantly disappeared. / Up to this very day it is also said, / When such a miracle takes place, / That a horse is suffering because of a house spirit, / If you look closer, the groom is guilty. // 3 December 1827.

Once again, a groom is mystified by his horses' behavior. Once again, the poem initially suggests a supernatural explanation; in Slepushkin's version, this is already present in the title. However, rather than directly addressing the groom to resolve the mystery, Slepushkin introduces another character from village life. This man, expert in questions of magic and superstition, explains that nothing supernatural is involved, that the young groom (here visiting not one, but many village lasses) is to blame.

The fundamental difference between the poems is stylistic. Slepushkin, showing his facility with Russian verse, writes a freely rhymed poem

in iambic tetrameter. By 1827, this meter had become canonical in Russian poetry, thanks largely to Pushkin himself, and Slepushkin may have considered his formal choice an act of homage. However, by 1827 Pushkin had become convinced that Russian poetry on folk subjects should be written in an appropriately folkloric form. He surely did not want to see Slepushkin produce a bad imitation of his own work. Blagoi goes so far as to conclude that there is more Russian spirit in Pushkin's unfinished sketch than there is not only in Slepushkin's poem on the same subject, but in Slepushkin's entire oeuvre.⁹⁸ Tomashevsky, convinced that Pushkin's poem postdates Slepushkin's, speculates that Pushkin returned to the subject only after he saw that Slepushkin had utterly failed. This explanation strikes me as odd. If this were really the case, one would expect Pushkin to have finished the poem. It seems more probable that Pushkin worked on the poem, was not entirely satisfied with it, and turned it over to someone who would have a more direct connection to the subject matter.

Regardless of the composition history, the fact that Pushkin—even if he ultimately was dissatisfied with his own version—succeeded where Slepushkin did not shows several essential points about folklore and its imitators. First, in Pushkin's day, being a peasant may have brought one closer to folk custom, but it did not necessarily bring one closer to folk poetry. If Slepushkin was aware of genuine folk versification, he did not let it affect his poetic compositions. It is of course possible that he had such familiarity, but rejected it, considering it inappropriate for “true,” literary poetry. Slepushkin apparently saw his task as bringing a folk mentality to Russian poetry. Much like the poets of the eighteenth century, writing poetry for him was a matter of following the rules and not making mistakes. Pushkin initially detected praiseworthy qualities in this poetry and, like so many of his peers, celebrated the phenomenon of a genuine folk poet. When he asked his friends to give his books to Slepushkin, he hoped that the peasant poet would not imitate them, but rather would “continue to go his own way.” But this was not possible; Slepushkin had no way. His talent lay in imitation.

In 1829 Pushkin and Adam Mickiewicz, whose fascination with folklore is well documented, had plans to pay a visit to Slepushkin.⁹⁹ But after the experience of “Kon’ i domovoi,” Pushkin would never again comment on Slepushkin’s poetry, even after receiving an inscribed copy of that poet’s

⁹⁸ Blagoi, *Tvorcheskii put’ Pushkina*, 529.

⁹⁹ It is not known whether the visit actually took place. It should be remembered that Pushkin considered Mickiewicz the authority in questions of folklore. In the prose foreword to his “Songs of the Western Slavs,” Pushkin admits that the poems he took to be genuine folklore were in fact mystifications. In defense of his mistake, he notes that “Поэт Мицкевич, критик зоркий и тонкий и знаток в славенской поэзии, не усумнился в подлинности сих песен” (Pushkin, *PSS*, 3/1: 334; The poet Mickiewicz, a perspicacious and subtle critic and an expert in Slavic poetry, did not doubt that these poems were genuine).

1830 book *A Russian Villager's Four Seasons of the Year*. Soon to embark on his fairy tales and his "Songs of the Western Slavs," Pushkin had nothing to learn from Slepushkin. Even in terms of folk customs and poetry, Pushkin's research had brought him far beyond anything Slepushkin had written.

Coda: The 1830s

The 1830s saw Pushkin's deepest immersion in folk culture. A wide range of work—from the fairy tales, the "Songs of the Western Slavs," and the novel *The Captain's Daughter* to his collaboration with Kireevsky on Russian folk songs and his planned annotated edition of "The Igor Tale"—testifies to what had by this point become an obsession.¹⁰⁰ For our present purposes, however, it is neither possible nor necessary to examine this activity closely. First of all, this was the focus of Azadovsky's work, and his conclusions hold up quite well eighty years after he first came to them. Secondly, insofar as our principal focus has been formal (and Azadovsky generally avoided formal questions),¹⁰¹ we will limit ourselves to following the trajectory of the taktovik in Pushkin's last years.

¹⁰⁰ Pushkin's work on "The Igor Tale," of which only his comments on Zhukovsky's translation have survived, were part of a larger project that was unrealized at the time of his death. See Tsivakovskii, Modzalevskii, and Zenger, *Rukou Pushkina*, 127–52. Like many readers of the time, Pushkin understood "The Igor Tale" as a type of folklore. It is worth noting that Pushkin's interest in this subject once again lagged behind that of his contemporaries. Zhukovsky had translated this work in the early 1820s, and in 1825 Bestuzhev had praised the "Igor Tale" as the only true reflection of the Russian folk spirit (Azadovskii, *Literatura i fol'klor*, 15), yet Pushkin recognized its significance only in the 1830s.

¹⁰¹ In the Soviet Union of the 1930s it would have been unusual if not dangerous to undertake a discussion of formal aspects of Pushkin's verse. As it was, Azadovsky's work pushed hard against the boundaries of what was tolerated. It took considerable courage to argue that Russia's national poet had borrowed the plots of his most "popular" (in both senses) works from German sources in French translation. Azadovsky first published his essay "The Sources of Pushkin's Fairy Tales" in 1936, and then expanded it as a chapter of his book in 1938 on literature and folklore. In that latter version, he left his conclusions unchanged, but attempted to soften some of his tangential remarks. In the 1936 essay he had written: "We do not know the true extent of Pushkin's knowledge of oral tradition—there is no reason to think that it was very large" (M. K. Azadovskii, "Istochniki skazok Pushkina," *Vremennik Pushkinskoi komissii* 1 [1936], 154). In the republished version, he altered this passage, removing the phrase "there is no reason to think that it was very large" (*Literatura i fol'klor*, 95). In the long run, such minor emendations did not save him. When in 1949 the party committee of Leningrad University purged the Department of Philology of its "cosmopolitan" and "formalist" faculty, Azadovsky was one of the victims, and his Pushkin essays of more than a decade earlier were trotted out as proof of his guilt. See P. A. Druzhinin, *Ideologiia i filologija: Leningrad*,

The most prominent place in which we find the taktovik is in a work of translation, the “Songs of the Western Slavs.” In this 1834 cycle of sixteen poems, Pushkin pulls out all the stops to render foreign folkloric texts in a way that calls forth equivalent (though not identical) folkloric associations to a Russian ear. In most cases, he was translating from French prose, so the “original” lacked any semblance of meter, though Pushkin clearly sensed the (nonexistent) poetry behind Mérimée’s pale prose, rendering each paragraph of prose as a poetic stanza. Interestingly, the vast majority of poems in “Songs of the Western Slavs” (twelve of sixteen) are in taktovik, while the other four are in rhymed trochees. Pushkin here uses only the taktovik with feminine cadences, i.e., the version that was pioneered by Vostokov in his renderings of Serbian folklore from the collection of Vuk Karadžić. Since Pushkin’s cycle likewise includes a poem from the Karadžić anthology (“*Se-strā i brat’ia*”) in taktovik, one is tempted to read it as either an homage to Vostokov or a competition with him.¹⁰² By now, after numerous experiments, the taktovik was familiar terrain for Pushkin, and the “crutches” he had earlier used (frequent syllabo-tonic lines, consistent “anapestic” anacrusis, occasional rhyme) become less important.¹⁰³ In “Gaiduk Khrizich” one even finds the line “Семью пулями каждый из них прострелен” (Each of them was shot with seven bullets), in which the number of consecutive unstressed syllables between the second and third ictuses exceeds the “allowable” three. Such lines can be found with some frequency in genuine folklore, but until this point Pushkin had avoided them. In short, Pushkin’s experimentation now brings this verse form closer to folklore, whereas his early experiments (e.g., inserting rhyme into the taktovik) had distanced it.

The most extended example of the taktovik in all of Pushkin’s work is the “Fairy Tale about the Fisherman and the Fish” (“*Skazka o rybake*

1940-e gody, dokumental’noe issledovanie (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2012), 2: 296–300.

¹⁰² Curiously, when Pushkin attempted his own translation of the classic “*Hasanaginica*,” he did not follow Vostokov’s 1827 rendering of that poem. Both used the taktovik, but Pushkin retained the by now familiar feminine endings, whereas Vostokov had used dactylic endings. See Michael Wachtel, *A Commentary to Pushkin’s Lyric Poetry 1826–1836* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 311–14. Pushkin’s version of this poem is unfinished.

¹⁰³ Tomashevskii (“*Genezis*,” 44) makes a similar observation in regard to the frequency of trochees in some of the taktovik poems: “Очевидно, в своих первых опытах Пушкин, теоретически принимая формулу Востокова, еще не мог освободиться от навыков книжного стопосложения и впадал в обычный литературный хорей. В «Песнях Западных Славян» он обнаруживает большую свободу, и там пятистопный хорей не является таким навязчивым размером” (Clearly, in his first attempts Pushkin, accepting in theory Vostokov’s formula, could not yet free himself from the rules of bookish syllabo-tonic verse and fell back on the typical literary trochee. In the “Songs of the Western Slavs” he showed greater freedom, and there the trochaic pentameter is not such an intrusive meter).

i rybke"). It consists of 205 lines, while the longest of the "Songs of the Western Slavs" is 119 lines, and most are considerably shorter (less than 50 lines). Though completed before the "Songs of the Western Slavs," it was published at approximately the same time. In the manuscript Pushkin called his fairy tale the "eighteenth Serbian song" (18 pesn' serbskaia), which suggests that he planned to publish it as part of the "Songs of the Western Slavs."¹⁰⁴ As Azadovsky has shown, the source of the fairy tale was a French translation of the Brothers Grimm, but the work sounds so distinctively Russian that it is hardly surprising that prior to Azadovsky, it was assumed to have its roots in Russian folk culture.¹⁰⁵

Despite its Western source, Pushkin clearly attempted in his fairy tale to create a work that would come across as genuinely Russian, whereas in the "Songs of the Western Slavs," he was consistently emphasizing the foreignness of his sources, whether through place names (South Slavic toponyms), motifs (the vampire), etc. In the case of the fairy tale, Pushkin consciously removed plot elements that would have made the tale seem less Russian, e.g., references to the pope.¹⁰⁶ In short, the taktovik, as in the "Songs of Sten'ka Razin" and "Kon' i domovoi," is used here to convey a specifically Russian quality, in this case in an extended plot sequence.

Pushkin's enthusiasm for Vostokov's "Russian meter" is reflected not only in his poetic practice, but also in his untitled essay conventionally known as "A Journey from Moscow to Petersburg" ("Puteshestvie iz Moskvy v Peterburg"), which was written at approximately the time as the "Songs of the Western Slavs" and the "Fairy Tale about the Fisherman and the Fish." In that essay, after lamenting the limited rhyming possibilities of the Russian language, Pushkin turned his attention to the (unrhymed) folkloric tradition: "Много говорили о настоящем русском стихе. А. Х. Востоков определил его с большою ученостию <и> сметливостию. Вероятно, будущий наш эпический поэт изберет его и сделает народным"¹⁰⁷ (Much has been said about genuine Russian verse. A. Kh. Vostokov defined it with great erudition and cleverness. Our future epic

¹⁰⁴ See Tomashevskii's commentary in A. S. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v desiat tomakh* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1977), 4: 435. The first publication of the "Songs of the Western Slavs" contained fifteen poems. Pushkin then added a sixteenth in the second publication. It is unclear why he would have considered the "fairy tale" the eighteenth rather than the seventeenth poem. Either there was another poem that he had in mind for the seventeenth position (conceivably the "Hasanaginica") or he simply lost track of how many poems constituted the "Songs."

¹⁰⁵ See Azadovskii (*Literatura i fol'klor*, 66–67) on the false assumptions that led earlier scholars astray.

¹⁰⁶ In his drafts to the fairy tale, Pushkin included the lines about the pope (which exist in the German original and French translation). See Azadovskii, *Literatura i fol'klor*, 71–72.

¹⁰⁷ Pushkin, *PSS*, 11: 263.

poet will probably choose this verse and make it popular). Through this reference to Vostokov, Pushkin indirectly acknowledges his own indebtedness to his predecessor for defining the rules of the taktovik. In the “future epic poet” we may be tempted to see none other than Pushkin himself, who used this “genuine Russian verse” in his fairy tale about the fisherman, a work that deserves the epithet *narodnyi* both in its plot—simple Russian characters and their encounter with the supernatural—and in the wide popularity it has achieved among generations of Russian readers and listeners.

Conclusions

This essay has sought to look without preconceptions at the question of Pushkin’s relationship to folklore. It may be helpful to summarize the principal points that we have established. First, there is no reason to believe that Pushkin was exposed to folklore in his early years, either at home or in school. This ignorance of folk culture was hardly unique to the young Pushkin and appears to have been widespread in gentry families of his era. This means that the legendary nanny Arina Rodionovna had a much more modest role in Pushkin’s upbringing than has been claimed. Among other things, it should be recalled that when Pushkin was a child, she was his sister’s nanny, not his.

When Pushkin began his “northern exile” in Mikhailovskoe in 1824, his attitude toward folklore changed dramatically. Partially this interest can be attributed to Pushkin’s incessant curiosity about developing the range of Russian literature, but partially it was sparked by the lively discussions of narodnost’ and Romanticism in Russian and European journals. One way that this sudden shift manifested itself was in the composition of *Eugene Onegin*. The mysterious transformation of Tatiana from a provincial miss raised entirely on French novels to a Tatiana thoroughly conversant with folk tradition can be explained quite simply. When Pushkin began writing the novel, he had no interest in folklore; when he got to Mikhailovskoe, the direction of the novel in verse changed in accordance with his new interests.

Pushkin scholarship has produced a cult of Arina Rodionovna, consistently exaggerating her significance.¹⁰⁸ First off, she was a “teller” rather than a “singer” of tales. She communicated her stories in prose, not in verse. Insofar as Pushkin used her stories, he gave them a poetic form that made them unforgettable. However, her input can be documented only in a few instances, whereas the influence of books is overwhelming. Pushkin obvi-

¹⁰⁸ Azadovsky presumably felt obliged to conclude his book with a chapter on Arina Rodionovna, whom he calls a “master storyteller,” admitting that the evidence for such a claim is minimal. Even here, however, he notes that it would be a mistake to attribute Pushkin’s turn to folklore to her influence, since developments in world literature (e.g., the rise of Romanticism) played the decisive role (Azadovskii, *Literatura i fol’klor*, 291–92).

ously consulted Mikhail Chulkov's *Dictionary of Russian Superstitions*, Kirsha Danilov's anthology of folk poetry, and—most important—Alexander Vostokov's treatise on Russian verse as well as his translations and stylizations of folklore. These Russian sources were supplemented by folklore collections in other languages: Vuk Karadžić's celebrated anthology of Serbian folk poetry (which Pushkin seems to have read in the original), Grimms' fairy tales in French translation, and the *Guzla*, Prosper Mérimée's anonymously published French "translation" of South Slavic folklore. In these cases, we can point to a significant level of indebtedness. Curiously enough, most of Pushkin's folkloric plots and texts have Western European origins. It is largely by applying Russian folk meters that he "domesticates" them.

When writing poetry in folk style, Pushkin used two meters. The first was trochaic (both rhymed and unrhymed), a traditional means since the eighteenth century of stylizing folklore. As he matured, he increasingly turned to the taktovik, a form that breaks the norms of the syllabo-tonic system that Lomonosov had established and made canonic in the eighteenth century. This formal decision is particularly revealing, since the opportunities for Pushkin to witness a folk singer perform a taktovik were limited. The obvious conduit here was Vostokov, whose works—both scholarly and poetic—Pushkin owned, studied, and admired.

Pushkin's relationship to the folk poet Fedor Slepushkin demonstrates that folk poetry has little to do with origins and everything to do with talent. Slepushkin, an autodidact, was a genuine serf whose immersion in folk culture was "natural." Ironically, Slepushkin himself learned his craft from books. His attempts to render his native element in poetry can only provisionally be called "folk poetry." Except for the occasional trochaic meter, there is nothing that stylistically distinguishes his verse as belonging to folk culture. When he and Pushkin both wrote poems based on the same folkloric plot, Slepushkin used "Pushkinian" rhymed iambic tetrameter, while Pushkin wrote in the taktovik.

The success of Pushkin's folkloric works (and the oblivion accorded to the once celebrated Slepushkin) indicates that it is not necessary that a poet come from the "folk" or even that a poet take his material from the folklore of his native land. What matters, as Azadovsky argued in the 1930s, is that great folk poets recognize folklore as a living tradition. It is not a subject to be approached with reverence as much as a source to be creatively adapted and developed.

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