GREAT ANNIVERSARIES

PUSHKIN

1799 — 1837

BY WLADIMIR WEIDLÉ

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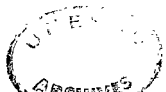

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AMONG THE GREAT FIGURES in European letters none appears so dim and so difficult to apprehend for the foreigner, yet so near, so present and so friendly to his countrymen. Among Russians the love of Pushkin has an intimate and warmly personal quality lacking in that of Goethe among Germans, and has little resemblance to the cult of Shakespeare in England or of Dante in Italy. His work, to be sure, commands the respect and admiration of those who read it in the original but, more than that, it enlists their sympathies. It lies wide open to them; the particular, as they find it expressed there, is for them no more than an incarnation of the general : a unique incarnation, but one that comes naturally and beside which they can imagine no other. Nothing seems so simple as Pushkin's genius. In his writing, as in his living, there is no pretence, no affectation. The human being whom his correspondence—among the most humanly beautiful in existence—reveals, and whom the memories of his friends recall to life, is the same figure that can be glimpsed behind

the least of his creations, all of them as spontaneous and natural as every act of his. His peculiar perfection never gives an impression of effort or of strain; so little that in spite of the irrefutable witness of the manuscripts it is difficult to believe that he had to labour so hard to attain it. It seems the more innate in that it is always supple and alive, and is, moreover, so special to himself, so constantly present in his books, that those who love them most are least able to say what it is they love, while those who do not yet love them wonder with amazement how that love can be acquired.

These last, as a rule, are those who read Pushkin's works in translation. He is the greatest of Russian poets, but also the least translatable. Not that his poems are rich in peculiarities of idiom; but the delicate perfection of their verbal fabric—their rhythm, sonority, syntax and shades of meaning—is such that in default of a miracle (not, by the way, absolutely impossible in this connexion) we cannot imagine how it could be transposed into another tongue. Translated without a miracle, a poem by Pushkin gives an impression not of vain artifice or incoherence, but simply of the commonplace : a much graver defect in the eyes of the modern man of letters. Moreover, this impression is not entirely mistaken, and it must not be forgotten if we are to form a correct idea of the poet's work and of the place he holds in Russian, and thence in European

literature. The lyrical themes of Pushkin are the common coin of lyricism in general; as for those of his narrative or dramatic poems, most of them also belong to the common heritage of modern European poetry. All this, of course, is subtly and profoundly transformed, assimilated and bathed in an intensely new and vital atmosphere. It is both Russianised and "Pushkinised" to a marvellous degree; but the means of this metamorphosis are the peculiar appanage of the Russian language as Pushkin was the first to use it, with full command of its fine shades and its resources. Poetical creation, with him, is inseparable from the toil required to forge, in its turn, the instrument of that creation. Every step in the accomplishment of his own task was also a step in the formation of the Russian language, its prose and even more its verse. The former owed much to him but the latter owed him everything : so much so that each of the poets who came after him could only add his special note without making any essential change in the splendid idiom he had left them.

In the time of Pushkin the language of literature, and therefore of Russian literature, traversed one of those periods of intense fecundity, of joyous renewal such as that of the young Goethe in Germany, of Shakespeare and the 1611 Bible in England. By comparison with the French poets, the place of Pushkin in the history of Russian poetry is equal to those of Ronsard, Malherbe

and Racine. Vigour and achievement, youth and plenitude all meet in him. Historically his position is akin to that of Goethe, especially because in both cases there could be no question of being satisfied with native sustenance : of exploiting the heritage of Germany or Russia alone. What lies behind such natural perfection, such youthful maturity as Pushkin shows? Is it only the rapid and brilliant flowering of Russian letters between the appearance of Lemonossov and the arrival of Zhukovski? To accept such an answer would mean giving up the effort to understand Pushkin, for in truth what always nourished and sustained him, what made him the most European—and also the most Russian —of Russia's poets was the whole heritage of European literature, and more especially that of the West. Of this latter inheritance he took possession and clung to it with all the powerful tenacity of his genius, without ceasing for a moment to be a Russian.

I. European Apprenticeship

Many foreign observers have noted receptivity, the faculty of assimilation, among the outstanding features of the Russian character. All the history of Russia from Peter the Great to our own day bears witness to this, for all the cultural forms, all the ideas and all the crazes of the West have

found in Russia a faithful echo and often a louder note. The greatest Russian poet might afford the most striking example of this national trait if there were not apparent in his case an additional phenomenon, the power of absorption peculiar to genius itself. Genius does not consist, as often seems to be thought nowadays, in the ability to dispense with others. It consists rather in the power to profit by what others have done or failed to do. It does not mean shutting oneself up in anxious isolation. It means having the gift of new vision and being able to transfigure ordinary things. The Divine Comedy is the sum of mediaeval imagination and intelligence. Shakespeare's last play is the only one in which the theme and much of its development are not borrowed from one or more of his predecessors. The embryo of *Faust* is a popular piece for a marionette theatre, which Goethe saw played as a child and whose theme had already served for a well-worn but attractive narrative in prose, as well as for Marlowe's drama, itself a magnificent work. Receptivity is as inherent in the very essence of genius as originality—not the originality which is sought after, but that which the writer cannot avoid. None the less, profound but narrow geniuses are slightly less generously equipped with it than those that are broad and harmonious. Pushkin was one of these; his work resembles that of Ariosto, who seems at first sight merely to have repeated, more happily, what others had done

with rather less success. Even more it resembles that of Raphael, in which a purely analytical mind, lacking in response to the artistry in a work of art, found only a perfectly ordered summary of all that his predecessors had accomplished before he went to them for instruction.

It is necessary to point out, however, that among the geniuses of his fraternity Pushkin was perhaps the most conscious of his gifts of absorption and assimilation. He was especially conscious of the function they had to perform, not only in relation to his personal work, but in relation to Russian literature of his time and of the future. When he adopted or rejected this or that element of Russia's literary past, he knew that his example would be followed by his contemporaries, and by posterity. Sifting, absorbing, making profoundly his own the immense heritage of European literature he knew that Russia imbibed and assimilated it through himself as intermediary. His poet's vocation, though it never left him, did not make him forget his mission as a man of letters or his duty as a writer towards the language that was his instrument and the people which had created it. Towards the end of his life especially, after his marriage, he applied himself with a still greater sense of duty to the reading of foreign writers, of whose works he had a fine collection in his private library. As far as possible he read them in their own language, trying to penetrate their thought, to study their means of expression and

to translate fragments of their work, either for publication or for the sake of a better understanding of the authors' methods, so that he might produce their equivalent in Russian. "Translators", he said, "are the post-horses of civilization"; and he did not scorn to harness himself, after Zhukovski, to the heavy vehicle of foreign literature that he might draw it at any cost on to Russian soil. The task was hard and not without its sacrifices; sometimes the poet was forced to do violence to his genius. *Angelo*, a sort of poetical condensation of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, is not a masterpiece; nor, perhaps, in spite of Dostoïevsky's opinion to the contrary, are the opening lines of a free translation into verse of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. On the other hand, this form of activity produced that remarkable adaptation, *A Feast at a Time of Pestilence*, which is certainly a finest example of what a supreme artist can do even when he is only translating, with modifications, a text rather indifferent in itself : in this case, that of a scene chosen with extraordinarily sure taste from the first act of *The City of the Plague*, a play by a forgotten author, John Wilson (Christopher North, 1785-1854), which becomes in Pushkin's hand, and that almost playfully, a work of art of rare perfection.

Pushkin, moreover, did not merely make occasional excursions into these foreign letters : he lived constantly in their atmosphere without ever having left his native land. Probably

unique in the history of literature is this case of a great poet, the greatest poet of a great nation, confessing that a foreign language is more familiar to him than his own, writing his love-letters and his official communications in that language and using it by preference when he wanted to make abstract notions clear. At the most we might compare the part played by French in the intellectual formation of Pushkin (incidentally he did not write it without mistakes) with what the same language meant for Chaucer or with what knowledge of Greek had been to Cicero. When he had to reason, he did so, if not in French, at least in the French manner, and the Russian expression, to judge from the rough drafts of his critical studies, was rarely the first to come to his mind. Politeness and gallantry could at that time only stammer in Russian; he had to restore to them the only idiom in which they could express themselves with ease. Pushkin's first literary education was more French than Russian. He never altogether forswore certain idols of his youth, not to speak of Chénier, who succeeded them later in his admiration and kept his place there to the end. It is true that his critical attitude changed later and that more than once he judged with extreme severity not only the French literary tradition as a whole, but the output of his contemporaries. This he followed with the keenest interest, but in the end (with the exception of Chateaubriand and Mme de Staël, whom he held

in great esteem) he spared only Stendhal, Mérimée, Sainte-Beuve (or rather Joseph Delorme) and above all Benjamin Constant, the author of that *Adolphe* which he seems to have liked better than any other French novel. Struggle as he would, however, his taste had submitted early to the classical disciplines derived from the literature of the *Grand Siècle*, and the "austere judge of French rhymesters", Boileau, though Pushkin had shaken his yoke off pretty roughly, yielded to no man as the lawgiver of his Parnassus and forbade him to do justice, among others, to the poets before Malherbe. As for his own work, he might rebel, he might change models and allegiances, but this did not cancel the fact that he had trained himself in the handling of French literature and that French phrases, figures of speech and rhythms rose constantly in his mind. His prose, if not his poetry, showed this influence to the end, and Mérimée was right when he wrote to their mutual friend Sobolevski about the *Queen of Spades* : "I find Pushkin's phrasing wholly French; that is, French of the 18th century, for no one writes simply today".

The great foreign literature whose influence on Pushkin's mind succeeded the spell of French letters was that of England. Byron attracted him first, to such a degree as to make him learn English, and he taught him the art of lyric narrative, to be dethroned later by Shakespeare, Walter Scott and Coleridge. It is as impossible to imagine

Pushkin's poetical maturity without the contribution of the English poets as it is to imagine his years at college without Vergier, Parny and Grécourt, whose names he scatters through one of his first poems. *The Captain's Daughter* would not have been written without Scott's example, nor *Boris Godunov* without the spell of Shakespeare. The more often these two influences are studied the more endless they appear, but they were not alone, and that of Coleridge can no longer be neglected as it used to be. In this case, moreover, it is difficult to distinguish influence properly so-called from the affinity of taste and style which existed between the two poets. In a general way, the "new poetic diction" of the Lake poets attracted Pushkin; he imitated Wordsworth and translated Southey. Wilson and another forgotten poet, Barry Cornwall (1787-1874) interested him, no doubt because he found in them the same natural tone and simple style. But Coleridge was for him something more. We may say today, after having collected the scanty information we possess on this point, that he loved him like a brother. He had read him with favour in 1828. He read him again at Boldino in 1830, when he was putting the last touches to his "little dramas", and for a moment he thought of writing a poem "in the manner of *Christabel*"; a quotation from *Remorse* was to serve as an epigraph to the poem *Anchar*. He bought for his library the collection of poems that Coleridge's

son published in 1833; again, after his death, his bookseller sent his widow a work ordered by him, Coleridge's *Conversations;* finally, the two volumes of the first (posthumous) edition of *Table Talk*, kept in his library, contained the note : "Bought on the anniversary of his death"—a clear sign that this date was not indifferent to Pushkin and that the death of Coleridge had moved both the man and the poet in him.

Nor does the case stand quite alone, especially in his relations with English literature. There is much warmth, and friendship as well as admiration, in his attachment to Shakespeare, and it was characteristic of Pushkin to have a Mass said for the repose of Byron's soul a year after his death. Later, there was a time when he thought of writing Byron's biography. Though he was far from omnivorous, European literature not only interested him, it inspired him with a genuine and filial love. He must have felt that he had inherited its traditions just as he had inherited the traditions, necessarily much less rich, of Russian letters. Yet the French and English fields, though for him, as for Goethe, they meant most of all, were not enough. He read the Italian poets in the original though he did not know their language thoroughly; but he could deeply appreciate its euphony and sensuousness. One of the manuscript notes in the margin of his copy of Batiuchkov's poems says : "Italian sounds", indicating the verses in which his predecessor had come nearest to their common

models in Ausonius. Petrarch had charmed him in his youth. He made early acquaintance with the world of Tasso and especially of Ariesto, whose influence can be felt, mingled with that of La Fontaine's fables, in *Ruslan and Ludmilla.* Dante impressed him to the point of inducing him to imitate him, and he said as early as 1826 that the plan alone of the *Inferno* was enough proof of the highest genius. Two years earlier he had written a Spanish romance as though in preparation for that astonishing evocation of the Iberian atmosphere that he achieved in *The Guest of Stone.* His library contained the works of Cervantes in French translation; the writer attracted him greatly and he began to learn Castilian in order to read him in the original. As for German literature, since he hardly knew German, his knowledge of it was slight and he does not seem to have found it very attractive. Schiller, for instance, seems to have left him cold; he sometimes mentions his name, but nowhere gives an opinion of his work. Yet the genius of Goethe sufficed to fill this vacuum. In Pushkin's eyes Goethe's work supplanted and eclipsed the remainder of German literature. As soon as he knew him (probably from the beginning of his stay in South Russia) he ranked him with Dante and Shakespeare. As early as 1827 he placed him above Byron, with whom, by his own confession, he had been obsessed a few years before, but who, he said, tried vainly in his *Manfred* to rival "the giant

of romantic poetry". In *Faust* he discerned incomparable "boldness of invention, enveloping a vast plan in creative thought". He judged that this work was destined to represent modern thought in the history of letters, just as the *Iliad* represented classical antiquity. He remained faithful to his opinion to the end, and we may suppose that he was deeply touched when Jukovski brought him from Weimar the pen that Goethe sent him. But it is even more characteristic that two years before he had thus expressed his admiration, he had already begun, so to speak, to put it into practice. The *Scene from Faust* that he wrote later, as well as two others that he left unfinished, dates from 1825. Here was a process that he constantly repeated : for him it was not enough to admire, he had to take possession. Russian poetry and literature could and must be fertilized by European literature.

Whether towards French and English letters, which he knew best, or towards any Italian, German or Spanish work, Pushkin's attitude does not vary. He desires, apparently, only to imitate. He has all the modesty of the translator, coupled sometimes with what might be taken for a tendency to plagiarize; but when his task is finished, we are convinced that he has only taken what belonged to him where it was to be found, for we have before us a work whose every line bears the indelible imprint of his genius. Naturally this is often unrecognizable to anyone who does not

read his writings in the original. To the western reader who does not know Russian, *Eugene Onegin*, *The Guest of Stone* and even the *Bronze Horseman*, as well as a prose work like *The Captain's Daughter*, must give the impression of something seen before : a noble but bloodless affair. For a Russian or a reader who knows Russian the opposite is true. For him *The Captain's Daughter* has a quiet charm that is lacking in Walter Scott; *Eugene Onegin*, from the first chapter, is more alive than its Byronic model; "The Guest of Stone" is the most moving of the Don Juans and, as for the *Bronze Horseman*, the big conception of the work is the more striking for the rhythmic inflexion and sonorous structure of every verse. We are almost ready to believe that the Russian language and Russian poetry, as they are found in Pushkin, suffice to infuse new life into the poetic heritage of old Europe. When he chooses mediocrity, he raises it to the level of his genius; when he touches greatness, it is never to lower it. Pushkin is not, indeed, the equal of a Dante, a Shakespeare or a Goethe in range and depth of creative power, but it is enough to have read the *Scene from Faust*, the tercets imitated from the *Divine Comedy* and the astonishing monologue of the *Miser Knight* (that unique transplantation of Shakespearean style to another linguistic and poetic soil), to realize that within the limits of an extract or fragment (not to be despised, since the material of genius is everywhere the

same), Pushkin could stand beside them and become their companion without ceasing for a moment to be himself.

Undoubtedly he absorbed Russian letters of the previous century with the same enthusiasm. He had fed on Derzhavin, Bogdanovitch, Batiushkov and Zhukovski; he admired the few works of mediaeval Russia that he was able to know; he passionately studied the popular poetry, the stories, the old heroic legends of his country. This seemed as natural to him as to be Russian and to write in Russian. It could not be otherwise; but the great task at which he laboured consciously with all the power of his gifts and his intelligence was, none the less, the assimilation of everything that made up the spiritual greatness of Europe, of everything that belonged by right of birth to Russia, a European nation, and of which she was deprived by the course that her history had taken in the past. This was the task of the Czar Peter, of Catherine, but it was transposed into a sphere where it could be accomplished peacefully and smoothly in the midst of a harmony that was the law of Russia's art and the secret quality of her genius. All that we have said shows how deeply this work appealed to Pushkin and to what heights it could reach in the domain of artistic creation. And yet, if we are to gain a full understanding of its meaning and its scope, we must still define Europe and European literature as they appeared in Pushkin's eyes.

II. Europe as Pushkin saw it

"By its geographical and political situation, Russia is the Court of Justice and Tribunal of Europe. *We are the great judges.* The impartiality and good sense of our judgments on what does not happen in our country are astonishing." These lines of Pushkin's, written a year before his death in the rough draft of an essay, must not be interpreted as the expression of excessive national pride or overweening presumption. The irony of the last phrase and of the word "judges" precludes such an interpretation and it cannot be reconciled with the poet's general opinion on such matters. He meant rather that it is comparatively easy for a Russian to judge European nations impartially, since his country was not involved, in the past, in their rivalries and age-long enmities. He meant also, no doubt, that it is easier for a Russian to see Europe as a whole, neglecting what has broken it up and still divides it. Where a Frenchman or an Englishman will be inclined to emphasize the contribution of his own or another country, a Russian will be quick to see a thing as a thing of the West and will distinguish its national colour only at a second glance. On being challenged by Chadaiev to write to him in Russian, "the language of your vocation", Pushkin answered : "My friend, I will speak to you in the language of Europe;

it is more familiar to me than our own." This "language of Europe", of course, was French, but what we must emphasize is this : that for Pushkin French was first of all the language of cultivated Europe and only afterwards that of France. This does not mean that he was a cosmopolitan as that term was understood in the 18th century. For him every country in Europe had a character of its own, and that character gave the country its value and rendered it attractive. None the less, that which the whole made up existed also : this was Europe, and in literary matters it was European literature. The word was familiar to him, like the thing. In the sketch of a preface for *Boris Godunov* he speaks of European literature and protests against the tendency of certain critics to divide it into compartments and dissect it in an arbitrary way. The fragment dates from 1827, the year in which Goethe, in a review article and in conversations with Eckerman, launched the idea of a universal literature, a *Weltliteratur*—a literature not of Europe alone but of the whole world. It is significant that this idea cannot be found in Pushkin, whose evolution in this respect was opposed to Goethe's. The latter, in the course of years, became more and more interested in the poetry of India, Persia and China. Pushkin, on the contrary, soon lost interest even in the Near East, which had attracted him in his youth. The nine admirable poems entitled *Imitations of the Koran* date from 1824;

after that, the poet hardly drew on this or any comparable source of inspiration. There was a time when he set down Turkish words on notepads, but that time was long past when he attained maturity. In the course of these same years, while Goethe is broadening his literary horizon to the utmost (not without apprehension), Pushkin—fifty years his junior—is restricting his. He does this not from prejudice, not because the "hideous oriental imagination", as he called it one day, repels him so strongly, but for the simple reason that he has too much to do elsewhere. This he feels deeply : what Russian literature needs is not initiation, however pleasurable, in the charm of Arab or Persian poetry; it needs to be restored to Europe, to return to the bosom of European letters, for it is part of them by right of birth. This must be done before it can belong to universal literature on the same terms as that of India or Japan.

There is more yet. European literature itself shows, in Pushkin's eyes, zones which call for study with different degrees of urgency. "Since I left school", he wrote in 1830, "I have not opened a Latin book and I have completely forgotten Latin. Life is short; there is no time to reread. Remarkable books appear one after another at short intervals and no one writes them in Latin today. In the 14th century, on the contrary, Latin was necessary and was justly considered as the first attribute of an educated

man." In Pushkin's day French was still very much what Latin had been at the time of Petrarch; and he used it, as we have seen, as the common tongue of Europe. Knowledge of Latin, like that of Greek (which he had tried to learn, apparently without much result) did not seem to him a prime necessity, but he was not content with the knowledge of French alone. It could not give him the key (or it gave it only through the services of translators) to the other great modern literatures that he wanted to know and that he felt bound to study attentively. "The study of modern languages", he wrote to a friend in 1825, "should take the place of Greek and Latin in our day. Such is the spirit of the age." He did not disapprove of classical studies as such; but the learning of the chief literary languages of modern Europe seemed to him even more important from the Russian point of view. See him engrossed in Italian vocables, attending a lecture on *Faust* in German, trying with all his might to understand the *Gitanilla* of Cervantes or to read Byron in the original. Having learnt only French as a child, he taught himself the other great languages of European culture. He never mastered them perfectly (it is known, for instance, that he never fathomed the mysteries of English pronunciation), but he knew them well enough to grasp, with his poet's instinct, the resources they had offered to the writers who used them, and to nourish with the juices he was able to draw from them that

Russian language which he described as "so supple and so powerful in its substance, so apt for imitation and so sociable in its relations with foreign tongues".

Thus, what Pushkin called Europe was above all the West : the Romano-Germanic Europe of the Middle Ages and of modern times. He did not forget, indeed, what Goethe also remembered very well, in spite of his tardy taste for exotic lyricism : namely, the fact that the foundations of European humanism and civilization were laid by Greco-Roman antiquity. He did understand, however (what Goethe was not required to understand) that classical antiquity had to be seen through the western tradition if it was to become the common heritage of Russia and the West. For centuries Russia had had her own classical tradition : an almost exclusively Greek tradition, derived from Byzantium; a tradition that had pierced the very depths of her spiritual life, her language and (through the medium of ecclesiastical Slavonic) her religion. There was no question of denying this tradition, but it had to be rejuvenated and revived; above all it had to be made to converge with the classical tradition of the rest of Europe. This is what Pushkin did, first of all by creating a language in which the western elements were carefully balanced, then by impelling Russian literature, not directly towards the study of Greek or Latin models, but towards what derived from them in western

letters and towards the assimilation of those letters themselves. Now, it is important to note that, though he relegated classical antiquity to the background of the European heritage as seen from Russia, Pushkin took no narrow view of what should remain in the foreground of that heritage. He did not seek to reserve that position only for the literature or culture of his time or of modern times. He did seek, on the contrary, to keep it for the whole Romano-Germanic world, and more than that, for the whole body of Western European Christendom.

There is nothing more revealing in this respect than Pushkin's attitude towards the main literary currents of his age. As we have seen, the atmosphere of the 18th century in France, in which he had been brought up, soon became unbreathable to him; but he was not entirely satisfied with the new writing of his western contemporaries of his own and the preceding generation, or with the fruits of the great revolt against the "century of light". We have said that he admired some of the new writers, but he did not give his complete approval to any general movement except the very moderate and in no way boisterous movement of the English Lake poets. (In this his taste came fairly near that of Sainte-Beuve.) The French Romantics—Lamartine, Hugo, Vigny—hardly pleased him. He knew the Germans little and there is no sign that he had read Shelley and Keats, though he possessed their published

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works (thanks to the Parisian bookseller Galignani) in the same volume as those of Coleridge. As for Romanticism, he liked neither the word nor the movement, or rather he hated the movement and would have reserved the word for another use. In *Eugene Onegin* Lensky, a bad poet, writes "in that obscure and insipid style that we call Romanticism, though I can see in it nothing romantic". The common use of the term was certainly familiar to him, and he could not always avoid giving it its ordinary sense as the designation of a great movement of contemporary poetry; but he tried to employ it as often as possible with a different meaning, much nearer the origins of the word, that he must have learnt when he was still young, while reading Schlegel's Course in Modern Poetry. Real Romantic poetry, for him, was that of the great nations of mediaeval and modern Europe, the poetry of Christian and chivalrous inspiration with all its later developments. Thus he included in it the semi-liturgical mysteries as well as the plays of Shakespeare, the first *chansons de geste* of Ariosto and of Tasso, the *Divine Comedy* as well as *Faust*, and even La Fontaine's fables and Voltaire's *La Pucelle*. What Pushkin really wanted to call Romantic poetry was all the poetry of old Europe before the advent of Romanticism and after the end of the ancient world, with the exception of French classical tragedy and a few works which had closely followed the examples of Greece and

Rome. If such a use of the term seems paradoxical, that is because we have grown rather unaccustomed to it since Schlegel; but it must be admitted that it has a certain logic and especially that it expresses Pushkin's thought with perfect clarity and precision.

If its author is to be believed, *Boris Godunov* is a "real Romantic tragedy" because it is based on Shakespeare's dramatic method. For Pushkin, we have seen, Goethe is the "giant of Romantic poetry". On one occasion he uses the expression "Gothic Romanticism" to indicate that he is speaking of mediaeval poetry, for he is far from identifying Romanticism with the Middle Ages. He even goes so far (in 1825) as to attribute to what he calls Romanticism an Italian origin, thinking both of Dante and of Ariosto. Let us not take him for an historian of letters. If he adopts Schlegel's use of the word, while reserving the right to use it very freely, it is not for historical or ideological reasons; it is because this suits his deepest purpose and conforms with the most imperious dictates of his instinct. That instinct requires that he should do his utmost to recover for his country not only what is lacking in its too narrow and too short tradition, but also what was withheld from it, by the action of past realities, in the course of history. Unconsciously, no doubt, he tries to make up not only for a lack of form but for certain defects of growth and gaps in accumulated experience. He tries to

restore to Russia what she had lost during the segregation from the West that marked the Muscovite period. Hence the interest he shows, when choosing many of his subjects, in the western Middle Ages and the feudal or urban forms of life belonging to them; but his interest has nothing to do with *Romantic* nostalgia (in the ordinary sense of the term) such as it appears, for instance, in the *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* of Novalis, or even, less obviously, in the novels of Walter Scott. The entire atmosphere of the *Miser Knight*, the *Scenes from the Days of the Knights* (in prose), the *Feast at a Time of Pestilence*, bears witness to this turn of his mind, while "The Guest of Stone" attaches to Russia a myth that is strange to it, and *Mozart and Salieri* imbues it with a cult : that of the western god of music. Finally, though this seems to have been overlooked, it is clear that the local colour emphasized in the two poems of Mickiewicz that Pushkin translated (after having failed in a project to put Conrad Wallenrod into Russian verse), as well as in the *Serb Songs*, which may be said to have made Mérimée's *Guzla* authentic, accentuates not the Slav element in these writings but rather that which is non-Russian and in a broad sense western. For the Serbs and the Poles undoubtedly took a greater share in the life of the West during the centuries when Russia was cut off from it.

The feeling of a national mission, so strong in

Pushkin, agreed perfectly with the most personal aspect of his nature and his poetical vocation. Thus, the idea of European literature that emerges from all his writing and from the general direction of his creative work was not merely dictated to him : it was profoundly his own. Having started early from their point of origin —the literature of the 18th century—Pushkin's own literary taste and instinct develop not towards Romanticism, which was moving to a future rather troubled and rather dangerous for the life of letters, but in the opposite direction, towards the 17th and 16th centuries in Europe, towards the great poets of the Renaissance and the end of the Middle Ages. To appreciate the full meaning of such an evolution we must realize that it conformed not only with Pushkin's more or less conscious aims but with the very make-up of his personality and of his genius. In spite of the time in which he lived, he was a pre-Romantic poet—the last great poet of that Europe which Romanticism had left untouched, or had touched only on the surface. Mérimée saw this very well : Pushkin's prose reminded him of that of the previous century, but he regarded the classicism of his poetry as Greek rather than French and on the whole he must have had a strong intuition that Pushkin belonged to a vanished world, to Europe as it had been and not as it was about to become. Apart from this, the very thing he understood so well is what

prevented others from understanding; for the frequent mistakes of foreigners about Pushkin are due not only to the difficulty of approaching him through translations, but also to the fact that he is too much a European of the past for modern Europe, fresh from the crisis of Romanticism, to recognize herself in his works.

The ancient vigour, the ancient equilibrium of Europe, her awareness that she guards the most precious of inheritances, all this still lives in the work of Pushkin, bound though it is for ever to an idiom that most Europeans do not understand. As for this language that he helped so powerfully to form and that country whose future he secured in the world of the mind, the return to old Europe was equivalent from their point of view to the definite birth of a new Russia. It could not spring from the crisis of Romanticism; it could spring from an alliance with something much greater and much older, with the perpetual soul of Europe : a thing from which it had been separated while remaining capable of union with it. Pushkin's Europeanism in no way contradicts the Russian essence of his genius. He was a European not in opposition to Russia, like so many "westerners" who later invoked his example, but in her service; and that, not although he was a Russian, but because of it. He was a European because he saw Europe as a whole and because, while he remained Russian, he was conscious of being part of the continent. For him it was not only his

own mission but that of Russia herself to affirm by his whole life's work that he belonged to Europe. His effort bore greater fruit, perhaps, than any other great effort ever made in his country. Everything that Russia has been able to give since his death to the art, the thought and the moral consciousness of the West was born of his labour and of his prestige.

FRANCE. At the Imperial College Pushkin was nicknamed by his comrades "Frenchman". He wrote poems in French before he wrote any in Russian. The first influence he felt was that of Voltaire and the "light" poets of the 18th century, especially Parny and his imitators. A little later André Chénier supplanted them in his esteem. The influence of La Fontaine's fables and of their literary aftermath can be detected in *Ruslan and Ludmilla*. In 1822 he turned to England; French poetry then seemed to him "timid and affected". Throughout his life, however, he took a lively interest in French literature. He liked Sainte-Beuve's poetry but not Balzac's prose. He cared little for the Romantics and (like Goethe) he abhorred Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*. On the other hand, he thoroughly admired Stendhal, Mérimée, the *Liaisons Dangereuses* of Laclos and the *Adolphe* of Benjamin Constant.

ENGLAND. At the age of 22 he was "mad on Byron". To know him better he learnt English —from books, and pronouncing it like Latin. This did not prevent him from catching the music of English verse or from dropping that of Byron in favour of more refined specimens. The strongest influences he felt later were those of

Shakespeare (*Boris Godunov*, the *Miser Knight*, the adaptation of *Measure for Measure* as a poem); Walter Scott (*The Captain's Daughter*, *The Negro of Peter the Great*, *Dubrovski*); and among the Lake poets, Coleridge first, though less in any particular work than in the general technique of his lyrical and dramatic verse. He imitated Wordsworth's "Sonnet to the Glory of the Sonnet", began to translate Southey's *Madoc* and a dramatic scene of Barry Cornwall, translated a fragment of John Wilson's *City of the Plague* and made it a masterpiece by adding two poems. Towards the end of his life, also, he began a translation into verse of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

GERMANY. Pushkin hardly knew the language and had little knowledge of German literature. Only Goethe attracted him but he made up for all the rest. He composed a *Scene from Faust* and sketched out two others. Goethe remained for him to the end an example to follow and one of the great heroes of his life.

ITALY. He read Italian and appreciated the suave sonority of that language. Petrarch was one of the first poets he encountered after having discarded Parny. He knew Tasso but probably felt nearer Ariosto. He admired Dante and understood him better than Goethe had done. He wrote poems in tercets imitated from the

Inferno. Some of the contemporaries also interested him among them Francesco Gianni, whose poem on Judas he imitated.

SPAIN. He tried to learn Castilian by reading the *Gitanilla* of Cervantes, whose chief work he placed very high. The moral atmosphere of Spain fascinated him several times, as may be seen from his Spanish "romance" and his play, *The Guest of Stone*. Finally, he spoke with enthusiasm of Calderon, whose works in French translation were in his library.

SLAV COUNTRIES. The *Songs of the Western Slavs*, though inspired by Mérimée's *Guzla*, show real understanding of the spirit of Serbian popular poetry. They were based also on other sources, especially those which Goethe had used for his *Plaint of the Noble Wife of Assan-Aga*, an authentic Serb poem that Pushkin also began to translate, showing real understanding of the spirit of popular Serb poetry. An equally sure instinct appears in his translation of two poems by Mickiewicz. The latter certainly exercised a personal influence on Pushkin at the time of their association in 1828-29. Pushkin does not seem to have been interested in other Slav countries than Serbia and Poland, and he definitely regarded these two as part of the West.

THE EAST. When visiting the Crimea as a young man, Pushkin wanted to learn Turkish. *The Fountain of Bakhchisaray*, no doubt, represents the peak of his interest in oriental things, together with the group of poems entitled *Imitations of the Koran.* At this time, too, he imitated the Song of Songs in two brief lyric poems and read *Saadi* in a French translation. But he was not destined to write an oriental Divan, and in later years it was the West that more and more attracted him.

THE NEW WORLD. America rose on Pushkin's horizon with the novels of Fenemore Cooper, which he liked to read just as he liked to read Goethe, but especially with Tocqueville's book, published in 1836, which he had time to study. He refers to it in the long account he devoted in the last year of his life to John Tanner's *Memoirs.* This work seems to have appealed to him powerfully.

PUSHKIN'S INFLUENCE. This can be considered seriously only in relation to the Slav countries and Rumania, where the influence of his work was strong throughout the 19th century. Among other countries only those where his language was understood appreciated him. Mérimée learnt Russian in order to read him and admired him deeply. For the rest, the translations were

and still are inadequate for anyone who wishes to judge whether his fame was not purely local and transitory. Pushkin's future outside Russia depends entirely on the extent to which the Russian language is known abroad.

CHIEF BIOGRAPHICAL DATES

1799 26 May-6 June : Birth in Moscow of Alexander Sergeevitch Pushkin.

1811 Pushkin goes to St. Petersburg and enters the Imperial College at Tsarkoe Selo (recently founded), on Oct. 19.

1814 First poems.

1817 Pushkin completes his studies at the college. He is appointed Attaché at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

1820 Publication of *Ruslan and Ludmilla.* His *Ode to Liberty* causes his banishment to South Russia. He travels with the family of Gen. Raevski in the Caucasus and the Crimea, then settles at Kichinev (Bessarabia).

1821 Writes *The Captive of the Caucasus* (published 1822).

1822 *The Fountain of Bakhchisaray* (published 1827)

1823 Departure for Odessa. Pushkin begins *Eugene Onegin* and *The Gypsies.*

1824 *The Gypsies* is finished. Pushkin is ordered to return to his estate at Mikhailovskoe, near Pskov. He arrives there on 9 Aug.

1825 *Boris Godunov* (published 1831).

1826 September. An Imperial equerry fetches Pushkin and conducts him to Moscow. The Czar receives him. He is now free

and lives sometimes in Moscow, sometimes in St. Petersburg.

1828 *Poltava* (poem published in 1829). First meeting with Natalia Goncharova.

1829 Second visit to the Caucasus (described in *Journey to Arzrum*).

1830 In the autumn, Pushkin retires to his estate at Boldino and writes (or finishes) the four "little dramas". He published *The Tales of Ivan Petrovitch Belkine.*

1831 12 Feb. Pushkin marries Natalia Nikolaevna Goncharova. The Czar commissions him to write a history of Peter the Great. He finishes *Eugene Onegin.* First *Tales* (in verse).

1832 *Russalka. Dubrovski* (unfinished).

1833 He writes *The Bronze Horseman* (published after his death). In the autumn, travels to Kazan, Simbirsk and Orenburg to collect material for the history of Peter the Great and of Pugachev.

1834 *The Queen of Spades.* Begins to write *The History of the Revolt of Pugachev.*

1835 Publication of the *Songs of the Western Slavs* (in the fourth volume of the Poems).

1836 *The Captain's Daughter.*

1837 27 Jan.-8 Feb. Pushkin is fatally wounded in a duel with Baron d'Anthès. 29 Jan.-10 Feb. : Death of Pushkin.