JAMES DANIEL ARMSTRONG

IN MEMORIAM

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Andrej Bitov’s novel *Puškinskij dom*, one of the landmarks of Russian prose of the 1970s, chronicles the childhood, boyhood and youth of Lev Nikolaević Odovtsev. As the Tolstoyan reference suggests, Russian literature provides a major frame of reference in the author’s exposition of Leva’s biography. Indeed, the novel’s title announces this aspect of *Puškinskij dom*. Puškin House, the home of the Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Russian Literature, serves as one setting for the novel and points to the importance of the history of Russian literature as the novel’s dominant theme. In a recent interview on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday, Bitov states that the institution, however, carries a symbolic meaning:

> V romane ob ètom skazano: “I russkaja literatura, i Peterburg (Leningrad) i Rossija – vse èto tak ili inače Puškinskij dom bez ego kurčavogo postojal’ca...” to est’ èto kak by dom Puškina. [...] Mne xotelos’ narisovat’ ètot dom Puškina bez Puškina. Xotja bez Puškina my sebja ne myslim, bez Puškina u nas net ničego. (Bitov, 1987)

The parenthetical apposition “Peterburg (Leningrad)” subtly signals two major issues in *Puškinskij dom*, namely the juxtaposition of the tradition of nineteenth-century literature, the Petersburg heritage with Puškin as the beginning and center, and twentieth-century Leningrad, viewed through the life of the novel’s protagonist.

The first section of *Puškinskij dom*, “Otcy i deti,” subtitled “Leningradskij roman,” recalls the subtitle “Peterburgskaja povest’” to Puškin’s *poèma Mednyj vsadnik*, the universally recognized progenitor of the Petersburg tradition. In his eloquent essay, “A Guide to a Renamed City,” Joseph Brodsky outlines the contours of the Petersburg tradition in Russian literature:

> But perhaps more than by its canals and rivers, this extremely “premeditated city,” as Dostoevsky termed it, has been reflected in the literature of Russia. For water can talk about surfaces only, and exposed ones at that. The depiction of
both the actual and mental interior of the city, of its impact on the people and their inner world, became the main subject of Russian literature almost from the very day of this city's founding. (Brodsky 1986, 78)

Brodsky, too, notes that the “tone” of the Petersburg tradition was set by Puškin’s Mednyj vsadnik, whose verses are “the best ever written in praise of the city, with the exception of those by Osip Mandelstam” (Brodsky 1986, 78), a comparison that underscores the continuity of the Petersburg theme in the twentieth century. The poet concludes his homage to the “renamed city” with the observation that “there is the second Petersburg, the one made of verse and of Russian prose” (Brodsky 1986, 94). Andrej Bitov securely places his Leningrad novel within the esthetic and ethical tradition that his fellow Leningrader, Brodsky, summarizes as the essence of the Petersburg tradition.

Puškinskij dom, ostensibly the biography of Leva Odoevcev from his birth in 1937 until November 1964, is ultimately a creation of what Brodsky terms “the second Petersburg,” whose cornerstone is Puškin’s Mednyj vsadnik. And though Bitov uses the term “Leningradskij,” the action of Puškinskij dom only once strays from the environs of Puškin’s Petersburg, significantly when Leva visits his grandfather, who with Uncle Dickens represents pre-Soviet Russia.

The narrator in Puškinskij dom offers several definitions of the novel’s genre, the first of which is roman-muzej. “A.B.” expands this formulation in his introduction to the novel’s second section, entitled “Kursiv moj”:

I nazvanie etogo romana — kradennoe. Što že učreždenie, a ne nazvanie dija romana. S tablikami otdelov: Mednyj vsadnik, Geroj našego vremen, Otec i deti, Čto delat?, и t.d. по škol’noj programme... Ekskursija v roman-muzej…

A.B. lists the exponents of his museum in chronological order. The novel, however, reverses this chronology, for the prologue opens with an epigraph from Černyševskij’s Čto delat’, while the final epilogue (of three) begins with an epigraph from Mednyj vsadnik. The metaphor roman-muzej is finally realized in the appendix, “Axilles i čerepaxa,” where the narrator takes an excursion through Puškin House and meets his hero, Leva Odoevcev.

The Mednyj vsadnik motif, announced by the subtitle “Leningradskij roman,” is adroitly continued in the prologue, entitled “Lli glava, napisannaja pozże ostal’nymy.” The prologue, disregarding chronology not unlike the reverse chronology of Černyševskij to Puškin, commences with the novel’s final scene. The first two paragraphs read:

Although the reader at this point is wholly in the dark as to the significance of the clear window and the dates, the time of the novel’s conclusion is placed: November 7-8, 196-. The final digit of the year is never filled in, but may be deduced from internal evidence in the novel. Leva is born in the “rokovoj god,” that is, 1937 (the Great Terror), which not incidentally marks the one-hundredth anniversary of Puškin’s death and the first publication of Mednyj vsadnik, not to mention the birth of Andrej Bitov. Leva writes his essay “Tri proroka” when he is twenty-seven, which places the action in approximately 1964-1965. In the interview cited above, Bitov states: “Ja načal Puškinskij dom v 1964 godu. Estestvenno, čto god, v kotoroj zakančivaetsja ego sjužet” (Bitov 1987).

The year has been established, but what of the dates November 7-8? To anyone familiar with Russian history the dates cannot help but invoke the October Revolution. Indeed, it is because of the October holidays that Leva reports for duty at Puškin House. November 7, however, is also not without its Puškinian overtones. The worst flood in the history of Petersburg, which forms the historical background of Mednyj vsadnik, took place on November 7, 1824, precisely 140 years before the time of the action in Part III of Puškinskij dom. The parallel that Bitov draws between the time and place of Mednyj vsadnik and Puškinskij dom is impossible to ignore, particularly now that Bitov has proved himself to be a Puškin scholar in his own right with the publication of his Stat’i iz romana (1986).²

Puškin’s Mednyj vsadnik plays its most significant role in the third and final part of Bitov’s novel, “Bednyj vsadnik,” which unfolds on the anniversary of the 1824 flood. Nevertheless, to understand the events that transpire in Puškin House that November evening we need to consider briefly the hero’s aristocratic heritage: “V žizni Levy Odoevceva, iz tex samyx Odoevcevix, ne slučalos’ osobyh potrjajenij… Sobstvenno, i prinadležnost’ ego k staromu i slavnomu ruskomu rodu ne slňškom suščestvenna” (p. 19). The notion of Leva’s princely background, accentuated by virtue of its announcement in the novel’s first sentence, is cancelled in the next one, which refutes the significance of this detail in Leva’s biography. Unlike Leva, Evgenij in Mednyj vsadnik is not given a
Leva and Evgenij have both been deprived of their birthright by political reform. Their aristocratic heritage, a thing of the distant past, can be regarded as a secondary element in their biographies, but a significant one, nonetheless.

The theme of the aristocracy surfaces throughout the course of *Puskinskij dom*, most forcefully perhaps in Modest Odoevcev's drunken monologue, in which he offers a panegyric to the role of the aristocracy in Russian history and culture, but concludes that that class and the freedom that was its unique legacy are extinct. Leva does not function in *Puskinskij dom* as a representative of a liquidated social class, but as a type, as a member of Leningrad's intelligentsia, which Modest Odoevcev quite correctly notes does not enjoy the freedom of the vanished aristocracy.

Leva, whose father and grandfather are both academics, lives in an apartment house of academics. Thus, Leva does belong to an elite, their aristocratic heritage, a thing of the distant past, can be regarded as a secondary element in their biographies, but a significant one, nonetheless.

In his *K izuchenii Mednogo vsadnika*, E.A. Toddes sees a similar shift of purpose in Puškin's characterization of Evgenij:

> Delo v tom, što v proses roboty nad Mednym vsadnikom Puškin otkazalsja ot postanovki social'no-istoričeskoy problematiki v duche svoey koncepii russkogo dvorianstva. On pošel po puti transformacii konfikta social'no-soslovnogo v obobsčennyj istoriko-filosofskoj konfikt. (Toddes 1968, 106-107)

Commonly viewed as the prototype of the “little man,” Evgenij works as a petty civil servant, whose primary aspiration is to marry and settle down with Parasa, a hope that is felled by the disastrous flood. Leva’s love affairs with Faina, Al'bina and Ljubaša all end disastrously, but more through his own fault, certainly not the result of anything so dramatic as the 1824 flood. In this respect Leva shares much in common with the other Evgenij alluded to in *Mednyj vsadnik*:

> Prišel Evgenij molodoj....
> My budem našego geroja
> Zvat' etim imenem. Ono
> Zvučit prijatno; s nim davno
> Moe pero k tomu že družno. (V, 138)

As the part titles from Turgenev and Lermontov indicate, Leva represents a twentieth-century variant of the superfluous hero, a figure drawn by Puškin in *Evgenij Onegin*.

Bitov’s *Bildungsroman* traces Leva’s internal development from naive youth to more sober and disappointed adulthood. Leva’s biography, however, is not measured in terms of a personal, familial chronology, but by historical events: “Budto Leve už tak povezlo: rubežami vozrasta otmečat’ istoričeskie rubeži. I roždenie ego i namek na smert’ — vse daty, vse vexi v istorii strany” (p. 155). The section titles “Otce i deti” and “Geroj naségo vremeni” signal that Leva should be viewed as a representative of his generation, or as the narrator plainly states: “Poetomu-to i naš Leva — tip” (p. 111). To this end Leva, like Evgenij in *Mednyj vsadnik*, is never given a physical description, not even a generalized one. Even when the author meets his hero in the flesh, he carefully examines Leva, but refrains from description. Instead, what defines our image of Leva are the people who drift in and out of his life: Uncle Dickens, Grandfather Odoevcev, Leva’s three loves, and his “friend” Mitishat’ev. Each of these characters is given a separate chapter that bears his name. And it is through Leva’s relationships with them that we chart his development.

An important stage in that development is marked by Leva’s essay, “Tri proroka,” in which he analyzes poems by three twenty-seven-year-olds: Puškin, Lermontov and Tjutčev. The essay, ostensibly an academic article, is the most personal document we have in Leva’s biography and the only instance where Leva acts on his own, without the influence of others. Although the article formally addresses poems by the three poets, “Tri proroka” ultimately concerns another twenty-seven-year-old, namely Leva Odoevcev. As the narrator comments in his preface to the essay:

> ...ona ne strogo naučna, no zato Leva mnogo skazal v nej ot sebj, a eto v naše vremja cenno. Čto tem ona i sveža do six por, čto ona ne o Puškine, ne o Lermontove i, tem bolee, ne o Tjutčeve, a o nem, o Leve... v nej skazalsja ego opyt. (p. 267)

The Leningrad poet Aleksandr Kusner was one of the first to note that a primary motivating force in *Puskinskij dom* is precisely the rivalry between
Leva and Mitišat’ev, whether the object of competition be love, career, or social opinion. For this reason Leva establishes a Mozart and Salieri situation in his essay and analyzes the three poets not as a case of literary history or evolution, but as a literary rivalry (Kušner 1977, 94). Leva’s essay is immediately followed by “Bednyj vsadnik,” where the rivalry between Leva and Mitišat’ev will culminate in a duel.

The epigraphs from Puškin’s Mednyj vsadnik and Dostoevskij’s Bednye ljudi spell out the source of the section’s title, “Bednyj vsadnik.” The quotation from Puškin (beginning with the line “Na zvere mramornom verxom”) describes Evgenij, marooned on his marble mount during the 1824 flood, fearing for his safety of his beloved Paraša. For the second epigraph Bitov selects a passage from Makar Devuskin’s final letter to his beloved Varvara. Significantly, Bitov ends the epigraph with the line “A to u menja i slog teper’ formiruetsja...,” thereby alluding to Leva’s two principal preoccupations — women (Faina) and writing. The references to Puškin and Dostoevskij intersect in Bitov’s use of Povesti Belkina as a model for Uncle Dickens’ story “Metelica,” since the Puškin work is one of the books that Varvara lends to Devuskin.

If the epigraphs taken together firmly position Bitov’s “Leningradskij roman” in the Petersburg tradition, the subtitle to Part III, “Poema o melkom xuliganstve” (a decidedly contemporary formulation), reveals the tenor of events that take place on November 7, 1964. A large part of the “melkoe xuliganstve” that we witness in this final section of Puškinskij dom involves precisely literary allusion and word play, to which the actual duel (itself a literary convention that is parodied) is assigned a subordinate role.

Parts I and II of Puškinskij dom end with chapters entitled “Naslednik (Dežurniy)” and “G-ža Bonas’e (Dežurniy)” respectively. The third part opens with the chapter Dežurniy (Naslednik — prodolženie),” which alerts the reader to the fact that (s)he at last may discover the significance of the clear window drawn in the prologue. Leva — the dežurniy and naslednik — has been commissioned with the task of standing watch at Puškin House during the October holidays. Dežurstvo, an inescapable phenomenon of Soviet life, is not usually considered to be an honorary duty, though one may interpret Leva’s selection to represent symbolically his guardianship of Russian culture as embodied by Puškin House. In any case, Leva cannot refuse, for he is soon to defend his dissertation, “Nekotorye voprosy....” He, therefore, Pollyanishly attempts to find a brighter side to this incarceration and brings along his dissertation and an unfinished article on Mednyj vsadnik, entitled “Seredina kontrasta.” Such naïve intentions are brushed aside with the arrival of Mitišat’ev, von Gottix, Blank and several bottles of vodka.

The narrator does not divulge much about “Seredina kontrasta” other than to state that Leva began to write it soon after the success of “Tri proroka” and that he again writes ot sebya. Although the reader receives no summary of the article’s contents, he does witness Leva reading his unfinished work: “On pročital sejčas o Gosudarstve, Ličnosti i Stixii — i oxnu: gospodi, neuzeli ęto on, Leva, napisal” (pp. 294-295). In “Tri proroka” Leva refurbishes the cliché of comparing the “Prorok” poems of Puškin and Lermontov by adding a third poem — Tjutčev’s “Bezumie” — and in this manner creates an innovative, if ill-founded, interpretation of all three poems. Judging from the title “Seredina kontrasta,” a similar transposition from a traditional binary opposition to a triangle again serves as Leva’s modus operandi.8 In his overview of criticism on Mednyj vsadnik, Valerij Brjusov notes the polarities that are a commonplace of approaches to the Puškin work: “Vse ęto zastavilo kritiku, s ee pervyx šagov, iskát’ v Mednom vsadnike vtorogo, vnutrennogo smysla, videt’ v obrazax Evgenija i Petra vpološčenija, simvoly dvux načal” (Brjusov, 1975, 31). Just as the theme of literary rivalry in “Tri proroka” reflects the rivalry in Leva’s biography, the addition of a third element in Leva’s analysis of Mednyj vsadnik reveals the essayist’s character — his essential straddling of the middle ground.

Leva’s ambiguity is unmasked when he is forced to juggle two versions of himself: one for Mitišat’ev and another for Blank:

Mitišat’ev i Blank byli protivopokazany drug drugu.
Mitišat’ev ubival Levu v glazax Blanka, i Blank ubival Levu v glazax Mitišat’eva. Razvenčivanie i razoblacenie... I kak predstojalo Leve vykrutit’sja, kak govorit’ srazu na dvux jazykax, postupat’ v dvux sistemax odnovremenn, — Leve bylo nevdomek. (p. 310; my italics)

The shade of Mihail Baxtin so strongly makes its presence felt in the above quotation that it is not really possible to proceed without comment. The formula “razvenčanie i razoblacenie” is lifted, of course, without attribution from Baxtin’s theory of carnivalization in the novel. And, the notion of the double-directed, dialogical word that Baxtin develops in his theory of the polyphonic novel is realized by Leva’s predicament of being forced to speak simultaneously in two languages/systems.7 Leva, unable to mediate the two systems, betrays Blank. In effect, he has been unmasked and uncrowned. Though a prince by birth, and not a king, we have witnessed Baxtin’s “razvenčanie karnaval’nogo korolja.”

The comic divertissement provided by the two Natašas (pp. 324-327), immediately preceding the Mednyj vsadnik episode, forces the reader to consider once again the doublings and pairings (again an element of
Baxtin's polyphonic novel) that perform throughout *Paškinskij dom:* Modest Odoevcev and Dickens, Leva and Mitišat'ev, author and hero, version and variant of Leva's childhood and of Leva himself (odnogo Levu znal Mitišat'ev, drugogo — Blank” [p. 304]). A combination of professional hazard and extreme drunkenness induces Leva to transform the role of Anna Karenina and Audrey Hepburn in the role of the homely, simple girls, both named rather actresses who portrayed these characters: Tat'jana Doronina in the role of Anna Karenina and Audrey Hepburn in the role of Nataša Rostova. Again, Leva has begun with a pairing and expanded it: (1) the two Natašas, (2) Nataša Rostova and Anna Karenina, (3) Doronina and Hepburn. The series could be extrapolated to include stage and screen Rostova. Again, Leva has begun with a pairing and expanded it: (1) the two displaced “Na ulicy! Na barrikady!” and all exit to participate in the carnival (in the true Baxtinian sense of the word) of the celebration of the October holidays. They walk in the direction of Catherine’s monument to Peter the Great.

The following chapter “Maskarad” borrows its title and epigraph from Lermontov’s drama. The masquerade theme in Lermontov concerns betrayal, mistaken and real identities and ultimately is an exposé of high society, where people remove one mask to reveal another as they set off for the Engel’gardt’s infamous masked balls. The Lermontovian masquerade has now been recast into the *narodnoe guljanie* of the October holidays, but the central issues are the same in both Lermontov and Bitov.

Leva and Mitišat’ev are outside walking — and stumbling — in the direction of the Bronze Horseman. Leva with his “doubled” (again Baxtin), blurred vision, sees only a star in the distance:

Níčto ne popadalo v ego razdvoenný vzor, i očetlivno on mog videt’ liš v samuyu dalekuyu dal’ — vse tu že zvezdu...  
Vyxožu odin ja na dorooguu... — pel on. Navstrečo emu šlo massovoe narodnoe guljan’e. “Kremnistyy put’” — byl asfal’tom... (p. 328)

Presumably the star on which Leva has fixed his gaze prompts the spontaneous outburst in song of the Lermontov lyric, the fourth line of which reads “I zvezda s zvezdoju govorit.” The poem has been set to music by numerous hands, but the choice is hardly appropriate for the setting. Far from “walking out alone along the road,” Leva is surrounded by thousands of people. The temporal and spatial juxtaposition of the setting in Lermontov’s poem and Leva’s present location is ironically commented upon by the narrator’s aside that the stony path was asphalt. One should, however, interpret Leva’s sense of isolation not in the physical sense, but in the psychological, Lermontovian vein of the poet versus the crowd, that is, the lyrical “I” that in Lermontov is always contrasted to “them, the others.” Leva, thus, feels his isolation and apartness even when surrounded by a flood of people with whom he shares the same asphalt path.

A star provides the transition to St. Isaac’s Cathedral and its neighbor, the Bronze Horseman: “sledujsju zvezdu Leva razgljadel nad Issakievskim soborom. U Mednogo Vsadnika byl vodvorot narodnogo guljanija” (p. 329). The choice of the word *vodvorot* (whirlpool, maelstrom) to characterize the throngs of people harks back to the 1824 flood and *Mednyj vsadnik.* The narrator temporarily throws the reader off the Paškinian trail with a reference to Gogol’ (“Tut by gogolevskoe vosklicanie o tom... [p. 329]), which both acknowledges Gogol’s contribution to the Petersburg tradition and continues the theme of literature commenting on life, specifically the episode in *Bednye ljudи* when Devuškin reads Gogol’s “Sinel’” and is repulsed by any possible identification between his life and that of Akakij Akakievich. The oblique comparison of the historical flood and the “flood” of people that follows sets up just such a connection between life and literature:

Stixijnoe, ili massovoe, prazdnicnoe guljanie (potomu cto ono stikijnoe — cto pravda, ego učitvuyvayut, a ne organizovuyvayut — est’ poterjavšajasja demonstracija). To, cto my nabjudajem v tolpe kak “žizn’” — tak cto V tolpe, a ne tolpas. Tolpa — liš’ sreda živogo. Živee šnyraet’ se ne organizovato, flirt, draka. Živee — cto vorovstvo u tolpe. Vvorov b’jut. (p. 329; my italics)

Compare Bitov’s description of the flood of people on Decembrists’ Square with Puškin’s description of the flood in *Mednyj vsadnik:*

Osada! pristup! zve volny,  
Kak vory, lezut v okna. Čelny  
S razbega stekla b’jut kormoj.  
[...]  
Na balkon  
Pečalen, smuten, vyšel on  
I molvil: “S božij stixijej  
Carjam ne sovladet’. (V, 141; my italics)

The narrator in *Paškinskij dom* portrays the crowd on the square on November 7th as an elemental (*stixijnoe*) force that is taken into account, but not organized, much as the elements in Puškin’s *poema* cannot be
with the result that broken windows. Careening boats crash into appropriation of the simile leashed by the Tsar. Bitov reinforces the reference to Puškin through the metaphor so that the thieves rob the crowd, with the result that “thieves are beaten.”

Our attention is then turned from the crowd on the square to the square itself as a setting:

Ponravilos’ nam osvěščat’ svoi dekoracii, kak v teatre… […] Osveščeno: kupol Isaakij, Mednyj Vsadnik (podsvetka snizu, obratnye teni, gromozdatsja podkovy i nozdry — rakurs Benua…); Admiralit’eskaja igla (čtoby vsegda byla “svetla”…); želtaja stena Admiralitejstva podsvečena žel’tym že, snizu (sof’t! rampa?); naprotiv, čerez černý proval Nevý, čut’ podsvetim Universitet (Filfak);… (pp. 330-331)

The Benois perspective refers to Aleksandr Benois’ well-known series of illustrations for Puškin’s Mednyj vsadnik, which, indeed, make exceptional use of light and shadow.8 The remark regarding both in the general and Lermontovian senses, since both involve masks and the adoption of roles or impersonations, phenomena that are not restricted to Lermontov’s drama alone, but inform his lyrics and prose. The narrator continues his description of the theatricality of the lighting on Decembrists’ Square, moving from St. Isaac’s and the Bronze Horseman to the Admiralty and spire. The phrase “Admiralitejskaja igla (čtoby vsegda byla ‘svetla’…)” quotes from Puškin’s depiction of the spire in Mednyj vsadnik: “i svetla/Admiralitejskaja igla.” And once again Bitov emphasizes the theater-like atmosphere by questioning the source of the lighting in a parenthetical aside: “(sof’t? rampa?).” The stage is enlarged to include the blank expanse of the Neva, Leningrad University’s Department of Languages and Literatures (of course) on the opposite bank. The narrator, having accomplished his detailed stage directions, concludes: “statistov polnaja scena, — kak ne počuvstvovat’ sebja solistom, ne vyjti na seredinu i zapet’!” (p. 331). Leva, the soloist among this stageful of extras, has already performed his Lermontov number that foreshadowed his soloist status (“vyxožu odin ja”). We are now ready for the masquerade proper to commence.

Leva has not profited from the bracing November air or the walk and is still drunk. Inebriation induces our hero to believe that he is dreaming:

On, točno, ponjal, čto vse čto emu snitsja: čto obmylki lic (smazannyj fon statistov vo sne); čti ščeli v dekoracijax

Leva’s dream leads him to believe that he is acting on a theater set, continuing the narrator’s metaphor of reality depicted as theater or masquerade. Ultimately, the confusion of dream and reality, theater and life, allows the sonambulistic Leva to perform a role on what he perceives to be a stage (the square), a role which he would be too inhibited to undertake without the illusion that he is asleep (kak ne vospol’zovat’ja besopasnost’ju sna!” [p. 331]). And Leva begins to execute a series of pirouettes with Mitjaš’ev as his support.9

If there were any doubt whatsoever about the influence of Baxtin’s theory of carnivalization in this chapter, the authorial aside “Vot my uplatili dan’ vseobščej objazatel’noj karnavalizacii povestovovanija…” (p. 331), quickly removes any such questions. All usual laws, limitations and distinctions that order Leva’s life have been removed. He is acting in an open public square, which he perceives to be a theater, but one without a stage. For Leva this interlude is precisely Baxtin’s “mir naoborot,” even though he must believe himself to be dreaming. Leva’s performance so far, as well as that which is yet to come, is a textbook case of carnival in the novel and one that does pay tribute to both theory and theorist.

Sleep and dream (son) have their analogue in Puškin’s poema, but without the release of inhibition we find in Leva’s performance. The first appearance of son in Mednyj vsadnik is the ominous note in the final lines of the introduction to the Puškin work:

Vraždu i plen starinnyj svoj
Pust’ volny finskie zabudut
I tsvetnoj zloboju ne budut
Trevožit’ večnyj son Petra! (V,137)

It is of course precisely the Finnish waves that are the cause of Evgenij’s dilemma and are ultimately responsible for awakening Peter the Great in the person of the Bronze Horseman. Of more relevance to Leva’s predicament are the narrator’s rhetorical questions in Part I of Mednyj vsadnik as to whether Evgenij is wishing or dreaming:

… tam one,

Vdova i doč’, ego Paraša,
Ego mečta… Ili vo sne
On čto vidit’? Il’ vsja naša
I žizn’ níčto, kak son pustoj,
Nasmeška neba nad zemljo? (V, 142)
Later in Part II, when Evgenij’s mind becomes unhinged by the terrible shock of losing Paraša, we read: “Ego terzal kakoj-to son” (V, 146). Evgenij and Leva both dream, but the source and nature of their dreams differ dramatically.

Leva stumbling through the revelers, Mitišat’ev at the ready to keep him from falling, stops to watch the tipsy Čubukova dance and jangle her war medals, but still believes that he is asleep. Leva, recognizing Mitišat’ev’s role in steering and guiding him through this mass of undulating and frolicking flesh, calls him his Virgil. After complimenting a passerby on her domino, Leva muses on the change that has taken place in the word’s meaning:

Domino… — Leve vdrug stalo tak smešno. […] Domino! ved’ kak vse pereigralos’? Togda by ne ponjali, čto značit čto slovo sejčas, a sejčas už nikogda ne pojmuj, čto ono značilo raniše! Predstavljaješ’, ona rešila, čto ja predlagaju ej igrat’ v domino! Axmatova igrajuščaja v domino… (p. 332)

The term for the masquerade costume in common usage has come to signify a game. Each understanding of the word perfectly characterizes the speaker and his time. Leva pictures Anna Axmatova, the author of Anno Domini, playing dominoes. The symbol of Petersburg runs throughout Axmatova’s verse (for example, Stixi o Peterburge, Poema bez geroja, Severnye ęlegii) and in fact opens her collection Anno Domini in the lyric “Petrograd, 1919,” the last quatrain of which reads: 11

Inaja blizitsja pora,
Už vter smerti srdce studit,
No nam svjaščennyj grad Petra
Nevol'nym pamjatnikom budet. (Axmatova 1976, 149)

“Petrograd, 1919” contrasts the two images of Axmatova’s city, the historical present of the city ravaged by civil war and the one which “my soxranili dlja sebja/Ego dvoryc, ogon’ i vodu,” that is, the one which will be a monument to the preservers of the city and its culture. Axmatova, who in 1964 represented the last living link between the poetic traditions of pre-Soviet Petersburg and contemporary Leningrad, is a figure whose life and work encompasses both meanings of the word domino, as well as a third — Anno Domini — and in this way becomes an appropriate emblem of the past and present.

A literary quarrel provides the transition from the domino-playing Axmatova to the chapter’s final scene:

— Da net že, ja tebe govorju! Ty ne na togo l’va dumaeš’!…
— Oni kak raz stojali podle admiraltejskih l’vov, igrajuščix

The argument that brings Leva and Mitišat’ev to a halt centers on whether the Admiralty lions are the ones described in Mednyj vsadnik. Leva correctly insists that they are not, quoting as evidence the phrase “na zvere mramornom,” which also opens the epigraph to Part III. Leva, drunk and dreaming, becomes remarkably lucid when the issue at stake is Puškin. The young Puškinist indignantly defends his idol, dismissing the possibility of poetic license, for Puškin carefully and accurately incorporated Petersburg’s architectural reality into his tale. Puškin clearly refers to the residence of Prince Lobanov-Rostovskij, completed in 1819-1820, as the locus of his lions: “Togda, na ploščadi Petrovoj/Gde dom v uglu voznessja novyj” (V, 141). The lion that Evgenij mounts (verxom) stands in direct opposition to Falconet’s equestrian statue of Peter the Great.12 The motif of the lions reappears in almost identical terms in Part II of Mednyj vsadnik (the rhyme žive-storoževye is repeated once to reinforce the parallel), as the first of a series that inexorably leads to the Bronze Horseman:

I l’vov, i ploščad’, i togo
Kto nepodvižno vozvyšalja
Vo mrake mednoju glavoj… (V, 147)

The lion, as symbol of Evgenij, and Peter the Great’s bronze steed represent antithetical positions, whether one chooses to interpret them in terms of history, philosophy or religion.

Leva, to prove that the Admiralty lions are not marble, mounts the lion (“sidel Leva verxom”), thus literally duplicating Evgenij’s stance, and scrapes the lion with a coin. He is so lost to his discussion of Puškin that he does not immediately comprehend who is pulling him off the statue: “Smotrite! on v kostjume milicionera! – Ax-xa-xa-xa-xa! A maska gde? Nu da, v furažke možno i bez maski… Da pustite že! Ja ved’ ne na tom l’ve sižu” (p. 333). Leva, physically jarred from the Puškinian sphere, imperceptibly slips back into the world of the masquerade and role-playing, the role of Peter the Great here being assumed by an ordinary policeman. Finally realizing that the policeman is genuine, Leva flees the scene of his crime and steals into the dark safety of Puškin House on the opposite bank. The parallel between Evgenij and Leva has come full circle.

The narrator in Mednyj vsadnik exhibits sympathy for his hero: “No bednyj, bednyj moj Evgenij.” Bitov appropriates the epithet bednyj for Part III of Puškinskij dom: Mednyj vsadnik becomes Bednyj vsadnik. Leva
is our Poor Horseman, his flight from the policeman represented only by rows of dots. Once inside Puškin House, Leva feels humiliated and begins with self-recriminations. He only too well senses the disparity between his flight from the policeman and Evgenij’s plight: “Vmesto Boga — milicionera bojat’sja!” (p. 337). Nevertheless, he understands that he has just experienced firsthand the “middle of the contrast” and rushes to resume work on his article on Mednyj vsadnik. But the themes of the State, the Individual and the Elements have now become the background. Fear becomes the dominant theme, once again revealing the very personal and autobiographical nature of Leva’s writing.

“Bednyj vsadnik” ends with a duel between Leva and Mitištar’ev. The presumed source of the conflict is Mitištar’ev breaking Puškin’s death mask (an intersection of the Lermontov masquerade line and the Puškinian subtext), but the mention of Faina, Leva’s Paraša, surely contributes. The drunken Leva acts in peculiarly un-Levian fashion and challenges Mitištar’ev, a challenge that for Leva approaches the force and despair of Evgenij’s blasphemy. The duel, following the example of the faked suicide alluded to in the epigraph from Černyševskij in the novel’s prologue, is without fatal consequences. Leva awakens the next day in Puškin House with twenty-four hours to repair the damage.

The combined forces of Puškin and Dostoevskij are called upon once last time to provide the title of the novel’s third epilogue: “Utro razoblačeniya, ili Mednye ljudi.” Instead of being unmasked, however, Leva receives a reward. With vague promises of a research trip to Puškin House to serve as a guide for a visiting American — a Puškinist. Leva fulfills this duty until they reach the site of his recent unmasking, the Bronze Horseman:

— A ěto, — skučno i neuběždenno skazal Leva, — znamenitý Mednyj Vsadnik, posluživši proobrazom... — Leva tut mučitel’no pokrasnel, potom krov’ stremitel’no otežešla so slovami: — Gospodi! čto ja govorju... (p. 394)

Leva, horrified at how easily he mouths the clichés that disguise rather than reveal the significance of the Bronze Horseman, misquotes Puškin: “Moj strax perėživet...” Substituting strax for the word prax in Puškin’s “Ja pamjatnik sebe vozdvig nerukotvornoj,” Leva restates the major theme in his “Seredina kontrasta.”

Having left the Americans behind, Leva sits on the bank of the Neva, watching his spit disappear into a little whirlpool (vodovorotik). The chapter ends with a direct equation of Evgenij and Leva Odoevcev, our Poor Horseman:

...i Leva načinaet plavno kačat’šja u nas pered glazami na fone vycvetšego zolota s siluetom Mednogo Vsadnika, budto Leva, kak Evgenij, stancuet nam sejčas svoe pa-de-de, plastičeskij i vyražaščee tosku po Paraše (Faine)... (p. 396)

Leva has returned to the Bronze Horseman, which as Bitov writes in his “Predpołoženie Žit’ (Vospominanie o Puškine),” in Russian culture was completely transformed by Puškin’s poema:

Knizhnyj Mednyj vsadnik prevzošel ego brongovuju materiju, oduxotvoril ee: I nikto teper’ ne vidit pamjatnik dopuškinskim (kakim on byl i est’) — vse vidjat geroja velikoj poemy. (Bitov 1986, 279)

No longer merely a statue honoring the city’s creator, Catherine’s monument to Peter the Great has become a symbol of the city and its historical and literary past and present. The epigraphs and literary allusions in Puškinskij dom represent not an homage to a great past, but recognition of the existence of what Brodsky termed “the second Petersburg.” The course of Leva’a biography, marked by historical events, is interpreted through the prism of the double reality of literature.

Notes

1Andrej Bitov, Puškinskij dom (Ann Arbor, 1978), p. 154. Further references to Puškinskij dom are to this edition and will be cited in the text in parentheses.

2See the section “Predpoloženie Žit’ (Vospominanie o Puškine)” in Stat’i iz romana (Moscow, 1986). References to Mednyj vsadnik appear throughout Bitov’s memoir of Puškin.


4In fact Lermontov did not live to his 27th birthday, but that spoils the parallel that Lev constructs between his biography and those of the three poets. In this connection it should be noted that Andrej Bitov was born on 27 May 1937 and that he was 27 years old when he began work on Puškinskij dom.

5“Tri proroka” has entered the critical literature on Lermontov’s “Prorok.” The bibliography of literature on “Prorok” in Lermontovskaja enciklopedija (Moscow, 1981) begins with Belinskij and ends with Bitov.

6The number three appears in numerous guises: Puškinskij dom (and Stat’i iz romana) is divided into three parts, has three epilogues; Leva has three girlfriends. In a footnote to Leva’s “Tri proroka” the author remarks on this fondness for the number three: “V eterom vozraste byvajut poražennij člom ‘tri,’ ibo ono označaet rozdenie rjada, pervuju rodivu svatku opytu” (p. 269). Again, “v eterom vozraste” equally applies to Andrej Bitov.
This is not the first appearance of Mixail Baxtin in the novel. As E. Xappenenn notes in his unpublished "Kommentarij," Baxtin served as a prototype for the character of Modest Odoevcev. Both Odoevcev and Baxtin were "early" exiles and were later rehabilitated in the 1960s, Baxtin with the 1963 publication of his 1929 work, Problemy poezii Dostojevskogo.

Benois was twice commissioned to illustrate Mednyj vsadnik. The first commission was never realized and the illustrations were published in Mir iskusstva in 1903. The second series of illustrations was begun in 1916 and published in 1923. See A.L. Ospovat and R.D. Timenčik, Pečal’nu povest’ soxranit’... (2d ed., Moscow, 1987) for a discussion of Benois and Puškin.

It is impossible to guess the ballet Leva dances, but it might be noted that a ballet has been set to Mednyj vsadnik (music by R.M. Glier), which had its premiere at the Kirov Theater in 1949. One of the opening scenes is described in Balet. Enciklopedija (Moscow, 1981): "Junye vlyublennye Evgeniy i Parafa vstreeat'ja na narodnom gol'jane u pamjatnika Petru (p. 337; emphasis added).

Leva alludes to Virgil's task of keeping Dante in line, from making a fool of himself. Osip Mandelstam comments eloquently on this aspect of the Virgil-Dante relationship in his Razgovor o Dante.

Professor Helena Goscilo directed my attention to "Petrograd, 1919," as well as making a number of other suggestions on an earlier version of this paper. This is Axmatova's second appearance in Puškinski dom. In the quarrel about Puškin's wife, Natal'ja Nikolaevna, Axmatova is named as one of the jealous poetesses who believes herself to be worthy of Puškin (p. 319). There are a number of similarities between Axmatova's Poema bez geroja and Bitov's work. Axmatova's triptych, too, borrows its subtitle "Peterburgskaja povest'" from Puškin. In connection with the domino-playing Axmatova, it should be noted that Part I of Poema bez geroja begins with an argument that concludes: "Maskarad. Poet. Prizrak." More importantly, the theme of the double runs throughout Axmatova's Poema bez geroja (see Leiter 1983, 145-90).

Finally, the domino in Andrej Belyj's Peterburg is no doubt also implied.

References


_____. 1986. Stats' iz romana. Moscow: Sovetskij pisatel'.


Bednyj Vsadnik


