

The Pushkin Centenary Celebrations

First Speech About Pushkin

'It is with a feeling of pride that I'd like to remark that during these Centenary celebrations our building is not lagging behind events. First of all, we've acquired a one-volume collection of Pushkin's works at 6 roubles 50 for universal utilization. Secondly, we've erected a plaster bust of the distinguished poet in the Housing Committee office, which should also help remind all those behind on their rent instalments to pay up.

'What's more, in the gateway of our building we have hung an artistic portrait of Pushkin with fir wreaths round it.

'And finally, the present meeting speaks for itself.

'All right, maybe it's not much, but frankly, our Housing Committee office didn't expect there'd be such a fuss. We thought, OK, they'll mention it in the press as usual: he was a poet of genius, they'll say, who lived in the bleak time of Tsar Nicholas I. And then, well, there'll be all kinds of shows with artistic readings of extracts, or they'll sing something from *Eugene Onegin*.

'But what's been going on this time, frankly, it's made our Housing Committee office sit up and take notice and take a long hard look at our position in the field of the literary art, so as to be sure that afterwards there'll be no slinging accusations at us that we haven't been valuing poems properly and so on.

'Also, let me tell you, it's lucky that, as far as poets are concerned, our building, as they say, has been spared. Though we do have one tenant, Tsaplin, who writes poems, but he's an accountant, and what's more he's such a troublemaking bastard I don't even know if I should speak about the likes of him during the Pushkin Celebrations. The day before yesterday he came to the Housing Committee office, making threats and so on. "You spindly bastard," he shouted, "I'll have you buried alive if you don't get my stove repaired before the Pushkin Celebrations. The fumes are choking me," he said, "and I can't write poems." I said, "For all my sensitive attitude to poets, at the present moment I cannot have your stove repaired, on account of the stove repair man being drunk." The way he was shouting! And he started chasing after me.

'We can count ourselves lucky that our register of residents doesn't contain any of your trained writers and so on. Or they'd probably harp on about their stoves just like this Tsaplin.

'All right, so he can write poems, so what? If that's how it is, then excuse me, but my little Kolya who's seven can start lodging claims at the Housing Committee: he can write too. And some of his poems are pretty decent:

We children like it when birdies are caged in.
We don't like enemies of the five-year plan.

'The little rascal's all of seven but he can already turn out stirring stuff like that! But that doesn't necessarily mean that I want to compare him with Pushkin. Pushkin is one thing, and Comrade Resident-choking-from-fumes Tsaplin is quite another. What a loud-mouthed bastard! The worst thing was that my wife was just arriving as he was chasing after me. "I'm," he shouted, "gonna stick your head up that stove." Well, I ask you! The Pushkin Celebrations are now taking place, and he's got me all worked up.

'Pushkin writes so well that every line is beyond perfection. For a resident who was that much of a genius, we'd have repaired his stove in autumn. But do *his* repairs, Tsaplin's that is – you must be joking.

'A hundred years have passed, and Pushkin's poems still amaze people. But what, pardon me for asking, will Tsaplin be in a hundred years' time? The troublemaking bastard! Or if Tsaplin had lived a hundred years ago, I bet I know what would have become of him, and what would have remained of him until our times!

'Frankly, if I'd been in d'Anthès's shoes I would have riddled that Tsaplin with bullets. The second would have said: 'Fire one shot at him,' but I'd have emptied all five into him, because I don't like troublemaking bastards.

'Poets of genius and distinction die before their time, but that troublemaking bastard Tsaplin will remain, and he'll probably even wear *us* out.'

(Voices: "Tell us about Pushkin.")

'I *am* talking about Pushkin, I'm hardly talking about Lermontov, am I? Pushkin's poems, I was saying, still amaze people. Every line is popular. Even people who haven't read him, they know him too. Personally, I like his lyrical verse in *Eugene Onegin*: "Why aren't you dancing, Lensky?" and *The Queen of Spades*: "I'd like to be a little branch."'

(Voices: "That's an opera libretto, not by Pushkin.")

'How d'you mean not by Pushkin? You're having me on . . . Though

flicking through our one-volume collection of Pushkin I see that there really isn't any verse in *The Queen of Spades* . . . Well, if the lines: "If only pretty girls could all fly like the birds" aren't by Pushkin, then I'm not sure what to think about these Celebrations. I'll tell you one thing, I'm not going to repair Tsaplin's stove. Pushkin's one thing, Tsaplin's another thing altogether. The troublemaking bastard!

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Second Speech About Pushkin

'Well, dear comrades, I'm no literary historian, of course. I'll just take the liberty of approaching this great date in a simple, as they say, in a human way.

'This frank approach, I suggest, will bring this great poet even closer to us.

'So then, a hundred years separate us from him! Time really does fly faster than ever!

'The war with Germany, as we all remember, started twenty-three years ago. That means when it started it wasn't a hundred years to Pushkin's time, but only seventy-seven.

'And just think, I was born in 1879. So I was even nearer the great poet. It wasn't as if I could have met him, but as they say, we were only about forty years apart.

'What's more, my very own grandmother was born in 1836. So Pushkin could have met her and even held her in his arms. He could have cradled her on his lap, and she could have, perish the thought, cried not realizing who was holding her.

'Though it's not very likely that Pushkin would have cradled her, especially since she lived in Kaluga, and Pushkin doesn't seem to have gone there, but all the same we can admit that exciting possibility, especially since for all we know he might just have gone to Kaluga to see some friends.

'What's more, my father was born in 1850. But by that time Pushkin was unfortunately no longer with us, or otherwise he could have cradled my father too.

'But my great-grandmother, he could probably have held her in his arms. Just imagine, she was born in 1763, so the great poet could have just gone round to her parents' house and demanded that they let him hold her in his arms and cradle her . . . Although, I suppose in 1837 she

would have been about sixty or so years old, so frankly, I don't really know how they would have got on and how they would have done these things . . . Maybe it would even have been her cradling him . . . But what for us is hidden in a cloud of ignorance, they probably didn't find a problem, and knew perfectly well who to cradle and who to rock. And if the old bat really was about sixty back then, it's plainly stupid even to think of someone cradling her. It was her, more likely, that would be doing the cradling.

'And who knows, rocking him in her arms and singing lyric songs to him, without knowing it, she herself might have awakened poetic feelings in him, and maybe, along with the better-known nanny Arina Rodionovna, she inspired him to write certain individual poems.

'As for Gogol and Turgenev, they could have been cradled by any of my relations, since there's even less time separating them. As I always say: children are the joy of our lives, and a happy childhood is a problem which, as they say, is very, very much of no small importance, which we've now resolved. Nurseries, children's homes, mother and baby rooms at railway stations, all these are worthy signs of this very same thing . . . Um, what was I talking about?'

(Voice from the audience: 'Pushkin . . .')

'Oh yes . . . Well, as I was saying, Pushkin . . . The one-hundredth anniversary. And it looks like we'll soon be landed with other glorious centenaries: Turgenev, Lermontov, Tolstoy, Maykov and so on and so forth. We'll be rushed off our feet.

'Mind you, between you and me, sometimes you find it a bit strange that there's this respect for poets. Take singers, it's not that we give them a hard time, but no one goes on about them like they do with that other lot. But they're artists too, you know. They can touch your heart as well. And your emotions. And the rest of it.

'Of course I'm not denying that Pushkin's a great genius, and every line he wrote merits widespread attention. Some people, for example, even respect Pushkin for his minor poetry. But personally I wouldn't go that far. A minor poem is just what they say it is, minor and not really a major work. It's not that anyone could have written it, but, as they say, when you look at it you definitely won't see anything particularly original or artistic. Would you believe for example, this load of what I would call simple, not-very-highly-artistic words:

A serf-boy takes his dog out sleighing,
Himself transformed into a horse;
One finger's frostbitten, of course . . .

(Voice from the audience: 'That's Eugene Onegin . . . That's not a minor poem.')
 'Are you sure? When I was a kid we did it as an individual poem. Well, all right then, that's fine by me. *Eugene Onegin* really is an epic poem of genius . . . But, of course, in any epic there may be isolated artistic shortcomings. On the whole though, I'd say for children he's a very interesting poet. In his own time they maybe even thought of him just as a children's poet. But he's come down to us in a somewhat different way. Especially when you think how fast our children have been growing up. They're no longer satisfied with children's verse like:

Choo-choo goes the train,
 Chuga-chuga go the wheels,
 Gosizdat, hip-hurra
 Away with the writers, ha ha ha . . .

'I remember in our school they made us learn a minor, stupid little poem by Pushkin. I can't remember whether it was about a switch or a bird, I think it was about a branch. About how a branch was growing, and the poet says to it, artistically: "Tell me, branch of Palestine . . ."'

(Voice from the audience: 'That's Lermontov . . .')

'Is it? Well, you see I normally get them mixed up . . . For me it's as if Pushkin and Lermontov are one and the same. I don't distinguish between them.'

(Noise in the hall. Voices: 'Say something about Pushkin's poetic art.')

'I'm just coming to that, comrades. With Pushkin, his poetic art is astonishing. He was paid ten roubles a line of poetry. What's more, he was constantly being reprinted. But he still went on writing more and more. There was no stopping him.

'Of course, court life was constantly getting in the way of his poem-writing. If it wasn't balls it was something else. As the poet himself said:

Whence comes the noise, the furious cries?
 Whither and whom call the timbrel and bells . . .

'The timbrel! Just think, fancy him coming up with that . . .

'We're not going to waste time over the poet's biographical details, of course: everyone is familiar with them. But as they say, on the one hand there's his private life, a seven-room apartment, a coach and horses, and on the other hand the Tsar himself, Nick-the-Stick, court life, the lycée, d'Anthès and so on. And between you and me, Tamara wasn't exactly faithful to him . . .'

(Noise in the hall. Shouts: 'Natalya, not Tamara.')

'Are you sure? Oh yes, Natalya. Tamara, that's Lermontov . . . As I was saying. But Nick-the-Stick himself, of course, couldn't write poetry. And so of course he couldn't help getting upset and envying the poet . . .'

(Noise in the hall. Individual exclamations turning into shouts. Some people stand up: 'That's enough! Get him off!')

'All right then, I'm just finishing comrades . . . Pushkin's influence on us is enormous. He was a great poet of genius. And we should regret that he is not living now, with us. We would have treated him like a king and arranged a fairy-tale life for the poet, that is, of course, if we knew that he would actually turn out to be Pushkin. Otherwise, what happens is that contemporaries place their hopes in their own man, and organize a decent life for him, give him cars and apartments, and then it turns out that he's not all that good. And, as they say, no one returns a bribe . . . It's a dodgy profession on the whole, the whole lot of them can go to heaven for all I care. As far as I'm concerned, singers cheer you up more. As soon as they burst into song you can see what kind of voice they've got.'

'And so, before I finish my lecture about our poet of genius, I'd like to point out that after the celebratory part of the programme there will be an artistic concert.'

(Appreciative applause. Everyone stands up and goes to the buffet.)

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