

The Mythical Author

by Sasha Koskin

"Hanging for such atrocities!" — the police chief just finished reading the verdict. The lazy July sun has already peeked over the horizon, but it is still damp and cold in the crownwork of the Peter and Paul Fortress. Especially for these five: barefoot, in white shrouds with the word "Criminal" sewn on the breastplates. They watch the somber sun rise, their uniforms burn, soldiers fuss, hurrying to complete the gallows because part of it did not reach the place of execution. Soldiers exchange glances — sabotage? a sign from above? — they place boards over a deep pit, where the feet of the hanged will dangle. The ropes creak, the executioners check them — are they strong? will they hold? One of the executioners collapses for some reason. Others carry him away. Morning claims its first victim.

On July 25, 1826, statesmen in the Peter and Paul Fortress executed five Decembrists, participants in the December 14, 1825 revolt on Senate Square of Russian St. Petersburg. First nobility death sentence since 1741, it shook the whole country, but for 26-year-old Russian writer Alexander Pushkin it was especially big.

How do artists make creative decisions? How do they choose topics, how do they approach them? What grabs their attention and drives them forward? It's common to talk about *artistic flair*, *artist's intuition*, *sensitivity*, and *subtlety of perception*, but these retrospective vague labels suggest artistic fatalism: you either have it or not. I wonder if we could demystify them.

From childhood, Pushkin was a darling of fate. Loved and cherished by his parents, sister, comrades, and teachers, who noticed his talent early. He had the opportunity as a boy to be among writers and, some say, was hiding behind an armchair in the living room while his father's friends read their poems to each other. His nanny was a great connoisseur of Russian folklore and gave the poet a love for the magical Russian language. The joker, the farceur, the ladies' man,

the author of sharp and biting epigrams, the owner of voluptuous hair and sideburns, which so often adorned the margins of his drafts, that a Russian schoolboy knows Pushkin's profile better from such "pen selfies" than from a few lifetime portraits.

Pushkin was not shallow, but according to evidence, he enjoyed shocking the public, liked to be the subject of stories and curiosity. He liked the reputation of a daring, headstrong, disobedient poet. Protest, boyish rebellion bordering on roistering fed his early life and early works. And although there was no clear revolutionary spirit in them, and only friendship connected Pushkin with real rebels, the content of some of his poems outraged the high authorities. Only efforts of the poet's patrons could replace Siberian exile with a more merciful exile to the Russian south in 1820. Four years later, Pushkin's letter mentioning his fascination with "atheistic teachings" led to yet another little exile, this time to his mother's estate.

It is difficult to see a coherent political and truly free-thinking position in all this. Instead, there is a lot of youthful craving for danger, for something forbidden, for dashing deeds and spectacular adventures. All this time, Pushkin's dialogue with his revolutionary-minded friends was one-sided: they swayed him to their side, probably trying to give his incredibly successful works a social and political color. But Pushkin looked upon their criticism detached, did not obey it, was more preoccupied with the poetic form than the message, and in some cases couldn't understand it: "They say that poetry is not the main thing in poetry. What is the main thing? prose?"

We usually attribute an artist's achievements to talent and luck. We see successful artists as heroes of their stories, we praise personal triumphs but art is a collective effort. Artist is a product of his environment. The environment that he largely does not control. For an artist, the environment usually determines what to pursue, how to pursue it, and why. Art is the creative recycling of experience. To an extent, we affect our environment, we can choose one or another, but we do not know which specific environment will foster the results we want. If he could, another Russian writer, also Alexander, but Solzhenitsyn, would avoid prison and the camps that shattered his health and separated him from his home and family for nearly a decade, but those years shaped his creative focus. Strangely enough — or per some universal justice —

the Soviet government gave Solzhenitsyn the weapon that he would later use against it.

Five convicts stand on boards. But new trouble: the tall one somehow can get his head into the loop, and the other four can't reach it. The soldiers run to the abandoned school nearby and drag student benches and set them on top of the boards. Heads in loops. Drumroll. Dirty boots hit the benches. Three out of five ropes rip and three criminals, like sandbags, break through the boards and fall into the pit ahead of time, still alive. One of them with a double last name grumbles: "Poor Russia! Here we can't even hang properly!" Carriers run for new boards and ropes, and the soldiers look at each other again. God had mercy on these three, He does not want their death. Do we hang them a second time?

We tend to track the "how"-component of art. How do writers create worlds, and characters? How do they come up with ideas? How do they hold the reader's attention? How do they make creative decisions? This technical component, the craft, is undeniable and we can analyze it, reverse engineer notable works and turn the knowledge into teachable skills. But the ability to tell a good story isn't enough to make a writer great. As David Foster Wallace puts it, "if it were, Judith Krantz and John Grisham would be great fiction writers, and as matters stand they're not even very good."

There is an intangible "why"-component, the reason and drive to write, to create, to tell the story, to open your mouth, or attack a defenseless canvas with a brush in hand. Writing and art, in general, are quite narcissistic endeavors, and therefore only something big, urgent, and important can distract the artist from self-absorption, from grandiose tendencies to create a monument to himself. The problems the artist combats determine the scale of his personality. A genuine, significant artist seems to have a certain prism through which all his work is refracted and focused. That prism, that "why"-component makes him coherent and integral even if he is all over the place.

Then we can simply say that the presence of that "why"-component is the only valid indicator of artistic potential and all other hints are faulty and irrelevant. But that would be presumptuous. Especially since this "why"-component and moral and ethical ideals do not come right away.

The executioners tie new ropes next to two dead pendulums. Soldiers re-lay the wooden floor over the pit and put school benches on it. Three again rise to the pedestals of shame. A convict with a double surname watches pictures from the past on the lining of a white bag. His classmates, friends, and foes look up at him as he climbs onto the school bench and recites his first daring verses. Suddenly movement, clatter, the teacher scolds him and orders him to get off the bench. The three again step into the abyss. This time successfully.

In 1826, Pushkin began to draw gallows in his drafts. Only by a miracle, the poet wasn't on Senate Square along with his comrades, maybe not the political revolutionary, but the sympathizer, who was already in exile for his creative rebellion. Part of him thanked the creator for the salvation, the other part tormented Pushkin with the vague survivor's guilt, and perhaps that is why "the sun of Russian poetry" covered the margins with rebels' portraits and his curly profile among them.

In the same 1826, Pushkin wrote the poem "The Prophet" about awakening, rebirth, and the meaning of creativity, which would become his "spiritual ideal, revealed to the poet at a time when life and history confronted him with the need to choose a life's purpose."

The Prophet

By Alexander Pushkin

[Translated by A.Z. Foreman](#)

My spirit wracked by thirst for grace,
I wandered in a darkling land
And at a crossing of the ways
Beheld a six-wing'd Seraph stand.
With fingers light as dream at night
He brushed mine eyes and they grew bright
Opening unto prophecies
Wild as a startled eaglet's eyes.
He touched mine ears. Then noise and sound
Poured into me from all around:
I heard the shudders of the sky,
The sweep of angel hosts on high,

The creep of beasts below in the seas,
The seep of sap in valley trees.
And leaning to my lips he wrung
Thereout my sinful slithered tongue
Of guile and idle caviling;
And with his bloody fingertips
He set between my wasting lips
A Serpent's wise and forkèd sting.
And with his sword he cleft my chest
And ripped my quaking heart out whole,
And in my sundered breast he pressed
A blazing shard of living coal.
There in the desert I lay dead
Until the voice from heaven said:
"Arise O Prophet! Work My will,
Thou that hast now perceived and heard.
On land and sea thy charge fulfill
And burn Man's heart with this My Word."

"The Prophet" suggests a special state that shifts the traditionally individualistic view of the artist. Self-expression and self-actualization recede into the background, and what needs to be said is put into the mouth of the creator from the outside. What the prophet says takes on special significance and weight, because it is divine. Many authors took seriously the divinity of the artist's gift, especially during the heyday of religion and the great influence of the Church. But the prophet is not necessarily a servant and mouthpiece of God, any community, idea, and philosophy can speak through his mouth. The artist's prophetic path is more about individual self-elimination, about moving away from egocentric inflation. It is akin to scientific work, with collective innovation, iteration, and succession of achievements. After all, genius is a social construct that is impossible outside the context of society; there are no geniuses in a vacuum. Therefore, even the sharply individual features of the artist — style, poetics, voice — acquire value only in the eyes of the beholder.

The glamouring of creative careers overshadow the real meaning of artistic work and misleads the search for that meaning. As we abandon the hopes that science can answer moral and ethical questions, that scientific Jehovah will

someday arm academic Moses with "true" commandments, art seeks answers that lie beyond the science's scope. Art brings us closer, and creates new languages both to archive the piling knowledge and deepen it. Art examines human nature and the human condition. Art introduces, adapts, and breaks down philosophical ideas turns into palatable artifacts, and tests them on the public. Art later harvests the fruits of collective philosophizing to start a new cycle of cultural innovation in uncovering universal human truths. Art is a microscope that humanity uses to study itself. Art is arguably the only place where we can be both incredibly subjective and painstakingly objective, since the rules of the game allow, and even encourage it.

Some researchers say that "The Prophet" divides Pushkin's creative career. "Light" Pushkin, Pushkin the hooligan, and rake will remain behind the "The Prophet," and a more mature, integrated artist will march ahead. For comparison: before 1826, Pushkin wrote 16 poems with obscene language, and after 1826 — only 5 (he did not stop being a human, after all).

Pushkin created the majority of his famous works after 1826. In 1827, he began to write the first major work in prose about his grandfather of African origin, a servant and pupil of Peter I, who later became a military engineer and general. Of course, on top of everything else, Pushkin simply matured, in 1826 he turned 27. But some changes were evident, like a new perception of reality, which emerged in Pushkin's work in the late 1820s, which led him to the in-depth study of history: in it, he searched for the origins of the fundamental issues of his time.

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky also had a similar experience of a spiritual turning point when he was sentenced to death for participating in a circle that, according to the authorities, was saturated with "a spirit repugnant to the government." 15 convicts were tied to poles, executioners read them the death sentence, ordered the squad to aim, and... told the poor souls about the mitigation of the sentence. The organisers knew about the mitigation in advance but decided to torture convicts with a mock execution. One of the criminals lost his mind, and this experience made an unforgettable impression on Dostoevsky. Researchers argue about what effect on Dostoevsky had the feigned execution and the subsequent colony labor. Some argue that without it

there would be no writer, some believe that the influence was harmful (possibly lamenting the hard "right" turn of the liberal views of the writer).

But, for example, the literary critic Y. Aikhenvald wrote, "The mere fact that Dostoevsky, a swimmer of terrible human depths, a seer of darkness, a miner of the soul, survived the psychology of the death penalty, the incredible horror of its expectation — this alone makes him an infernal being as if coming out of the grave and wandering in a shroud among the living people..." Here again, we see the themes of rebirth, death for the world (akin to monastic vows), removal from people, and a look from the outside.

Interestingly, Dostoevsky himself spoke of Pushkin in a speech he gave in 1880 at the opening of the monument to the poet: "no single Russian writer, before or after him, did ever associate himself so intimately and fraternally with his people as Pushkin."

I can't say for sure which mission strengthened Pushkin's heart after the events of 1826 — I don't have enough information to do that. But researchers and the people see Pushkin's innovation in the rise of the common people's language to the level of great literature and, thus, in the democratization of poetry, expanding its audience. Before Pushkin, poetic language was arrogant, pompous, and complex, which made it elitist. Pushkin's poems, especially fairy tales, have since been read to young children all over the country. Pushkin is the only, not-for-kids poet whom Russian children know better than many for-kids authors. It is quite possible that Pushkin realized the significance of this work as an artist, and saw the importance of preserving and strengthening that spark of the Russian folk epic that his nanny planted in the poet. After all, all of Pushkin's fairy tales (except one) were written after 1826.

I don't wish to revitalize the compulsion to investigate the artist's life. I'm not reanimating the author who Roland Barthes buried and I agree to approach the text as if there is no author. I want to discuss not the audience's but the artist's perspective, artist's, who is very much alive. Artist may very well be merely a mouthpiece and an instrument of the contemporary. Environment does determine a path, but an author still walks it.

The author's life is still important to the author. It sounds like a damn truism, but I see writers run away from life, write sterilized texts devoid of personality, and escape into creativity. Some — to please the market, some — to maintain detached neutrality, playing Switzerland, playing socially dead. I know how to hide from life in my words. I know how to bury my head in paper and shield my heart from reality with a typewriter. Life distracts me from art, I think sometimes. That is another extreme: self-expression for the sake of self-expression. Sometimes a writer's most fertile environment is his insides, but even notorious self-diggers like Bukowski did not turn a blind eye to the surrounding social reality.

Nor did the blockbuster directors. Under the mainstream, "theme park" narrative of big hits like *Jaws* and *The Godfather* for example, one might find a deeper social stance. *Jaws* is about a shark, but it's also about the battle between the "glasses" and the "muscles". The "glasses" win and it's important for post-Vietnam America. *Godfather* is perhaps the best depiction of the dangers of family values, taken to the extreme. Russian director Boris Khlebnikov once said that if classics of the 70th, Spielberg, Coppola, Scorsese had government funding they'd make "Sluggish, dark, gloomy movies about how shitty everything is in the country." Maybe he is right and this is not a moral and ethical problem, but a business one.

Not everybody will face the firing squad and live to tell about it, or learn of their friends' execution, or go through camps — and that's the world we want to build. But hardship gives plenty of reasons to speak up. War, systemic injustice, discrimination, and pain are natural — or, rather unnatural — talent hotbeds. They say, an artist should be hungry, but this is not necessarily physiological hunger. Hunger for peace, justice, equality, or freedom gave us a battalion of great artists and it will give us more.

At least from the outside, Pushkin's life seems difficult and bleak. He knew fame, people's love, and admiration, but his relations with the authorities remained strained, the service did not allow him to fully immerse himself in literature, and he could not leave, because he was threatened with a ban from the archives. He struggled with censors who did not let his best works go into print, and fought eternal financial difficulties: after his death in a duel in 1837, Pushkin left significant debts, which Emperor Nicholas I paid off himself. I

never know if almost every artist's life was that hard or our craving for struggle forces us to exaggerate and paint portraits of martyrs who have walked a difficult path. On the other hand, few lives are easy, but the lives of public people reveal a little more detail to us. However, one of the most fruitful periods of Pushkin's work was "autumn in Boldino" — the time between the accepted proposal and the wedding of Pushkin in love.

One of the rebels hanged twice that July morning, Kondraty Ryleyev, wrote one year before the execution, addressing the closest friend, metaphorically speaking about Ryleyev's poems:

Apollo's son, I'm sure in them,
You will not see artistic knitting:
Instead, you'll find a heart that's beating —
Not poet speaks, but citizen.

I do not believe that art is only an instrument of moral stance. Nor do I believe that we must abandon one in favor of the other. Various combinations are possible. A citizen, but not a poet. A citizen and a poet. But who is a *poet* without a *citizen*?

It has been a long morning. Doctors catch swaying hands, feel for a pulse. It's over. All five are dead. The soldiers pile bodies in the once white shrouds on a cart next to the now unnecessary parts of the gallows — the lost driver finally got to the right place. The sun is high and the soldiers are afraid to take the bodies through the city: a whole procession of people would follow the criminals and reward them with unacceptable honors. They put them in the abandoned school, which lent barefoot the benches to fall from. At night a new guard shift will bury five rebels in a mass grave. No tombstone, no sign. Together, free and equal in their anonymity.

Liberté. Égalité. Fraternité.