PUŠKIN AND BELINSKIJ: THE ROLE OF THE “OFFENDED PROVINCIAL”

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The persona-author is one of the most interesting devices Puškin used in his journalism. By using such a device — a fictional character with an independent personality — Puškin could accomplish tasks which would have been difficult to achieve had he written under his real name, with a pseudonym, or simply anonymously. The persona-author was a device Puškin employed on three occasions in his journalism, twice in articles by “Feofilakt Kosičkin” that appeared in 1831 in *The Telescope (Teleskop)*, and once in an article that appeared in 1836 in Puškin’s own journal, *The Contemporary (Sovremennik).*¹

In the earlier articles, which were directed against the minor novelist and police spy Faddej Bulgarin, the identity of Puškin’s persona had been relatively transparent; the identity of his 1836 persona, however, was such a carefully kept secret it did not become generally known until the 1920’s.² The reasons why Puškin chose to conceal his identity behind a persona, as well as the functions that this persona helped fulfill, may be found within the journalistic context of the day and, in particular, within the fabric of his relationship with two other notable figures of Russian letters, Gogol’³ and Belinskij.⁴

Although there is a substantial body of data and scholarly material relating to Puškin and Gogol’⁵, the available evidence on Puškin’s relationship with Belinskij is slight and susceptible to a variety of interpretations. The references Puškin has to Belinskij make to Belinskij represent a crucial piece of evidence that is frequently adduced to support the claim that Puškin’s interest in having the young critic (Belinskij was then 25 years old) write for his journal had positive ideological implications with respect to Puškin’s development. What Puškin’s persona says about Belinskij in *The Contemporary*, however, is both positive and critical.⁶ In an effort to find an ideological kinship between Puškin and Belinskij, previous scholarship has not given enough attention to the possibility that Puškin, through his persona A. B., was instructing or educating both Belinskij and Gogol’ about his role as editor, and was not necessarily making any significant ideological commitment to Belinskij. An analysis of the function and character of Puškin’s persona in *The Contemporary* will provide a framework through which we can assess the fascinating and problematic issue of Puškin’s relationship with Belinskij.

The appearance of Puškin’s persona in *The Contemporary* was preceded by the following series of events. For the first issue of the journal in 1836 Gogol’ wrote a major review of the leading periodicals of the day. This review, entitled “On the Trend of Journal Literature,” was understood by readers and journalists working for other periodicals as a statement of *The Contemporary’s* program, as an expression of Puškin’s aims for his new journal; Gogol’⁷’s review was under-
stood in this way principally because it appeared anonymously. Since there was nothing else in the issue that might be construed as an editorial statement or program, the public reasonably assumed that Gogol’s essay constituted the journal’s program. For the third issue of The Contemporary of that year Puškin composed and had printed a “letter to the publisher”; the author of this letter was identified only as “A.B.” from Tver. In the letter, Puškin’s persona discussed Gogol’s provocative review and referred to it as the program of The Contemporary. This reference of A.B. to the journal’s program gave Puškin the opportunity to deny tactfully, in an editorial note, that the review article was in any sense programmatic. Puškin’s editorial note will be cited in full below.

By using a note and his persona’s letter Puškin could thus disavow Gogol’s essay, and even criticize it without offending the psychologically fragile Gogol’ and without giving the impression that there were internal problems relating to the direction of the new journal. The persona’s letter served yet another function by making reference to Belinskij, whose name had not been mentioned in Gogol’s survey:

“I regret that you didn’t mention Mr. Belinskij in speaking about The Telescope. He shows talent which offers great hope. If to independence of opinion and his wit he unites more scholarship, more knowledge of books, more respect for tradition, more prudence — in a word, more maturity — we would have an extremely remarkable critic.” (210)

What makes A.B.’s letter especially interesting is this characterization of the young critic, but what complicates interpretation is the fact that Puškin describes Belinskij through a persona whose views need not necessarily reflect his own. Moreover, if the characterization of Belinskij is positive, it is also very cautious and qualified. A.B.’s remarks have been taken to reveal something of Puškin’s attitude toward Belinskij, and have usually been considered in conjunction with letters indicating that Puškin, in the summer and late fall of 1836, took steps in the direction of inviting Belinskij, who was then writing for The Telescope, to join The Contemporary. The plan was never realized. Belinskij’s difficulties resulting from the publication of Čaudaev’s controversial letter in The Telescope, and Puškin’s well known personal problems at the end of 1836 may explain why negotiations between the two were broken off. It was not until 1847, ten years after Puškin’s death, that Belinskij came to The Contemporary, then under the editorship of Nekrasov and Panin.

Puškin’s desire to have Belinskij write for The Contemporary is suggested in two letters, one written in late May from Puškin to his personal friend and assistant with the journal, P. V. Naščokin, and one written at the end of October or the beginning of November from Naščokin to Puškin. The relevant section of the first letter reads:

“... Now let’s talk about business. I left you two extra copies of The Contemporary. Give one to Prince Gagarin, and send the other to me from Belinskij (N. B.: but keep it secret from the Observers), and have him tell that I regret very much that I didn’t succeed in seeing him...”

From this letter it is apparent that Puškin attempted to meet Belinskij in Moscow in May of 1836, and from the later letter to Puškin we learn that Naščokin made inquiries about Belinskij’s willingness to work for Puškin. What can be said beyond all this is largely speculative. Pogodin recalled in his memoirs some time later (1869) that Puškin was initially attracted by Belinskij’s “Literary Reveries” (“Literaturnye mečtania”), which appeared in 1834, and that he saw in Belinskij an influential and brilliant polemicist. The fact that copies of The Telescope in Puškin’s personal library were cut only for Belinskij’s writings strongly supports the contention that Puškin followed Belinskij’s career rather closely in 1835 and 1836.

Why Puškin should wish to keep secret his personal “gift” to Belinskij may be explained by reference to the journalistic situation of the day. In reviews throughout 1835 and 1836 Belinskij often criticized, using the pejorative terms svetskost’ and aristokratizm, the overly refined, superficial, and snobbish opinions of The Moscow Observer (whose editors and associates Puškin called “Observers” in his correspondence). Public knowledge of plans for an alliance between Puškin and their severest critic and polemical opponent might jeopardize the relationship Puškin had with this group. His letters to his wife from Moscow in May of 1836 suggest that he thought it was important for the success of The Contemporary that he maintain amicable relations with the “Observers.” Perceiving that they were already somewhat cool toward him and his new enterprise in St. Petersburg, and yet apparently desirous of having avenues open for possible contributions and allies in Moscow, Puškin understandably showed concern about needlessly provoking them.

Ironically, while Puškin throughout 1836 was quietly laying the groundwork for inviting Belinskij to join him, his two close associates and assistants with the second issue of The Contemporary — Knevskij and Odoevskij — were, for their own reasons, plotting with the “Observers” (behind Puškin’s back) for the establishment of a new journal.

In this very complicated and surely frustrating situation, Puškin was badly in need of allies. To make matters worse, the article by Gogol, which was understood by the public as the new program of The Contemporary, adopted an antagonistic stance against the most widely read journal of the time, The Library for Reading (Biblioteka čtenija), edited by the Polish émigré-scholar O. I. Senkovskij.

Gogol’s article had dealt briefly and not too kindly with The Moscow Observer, despite the fact that his friends Pogodin and Ševyrev were closely
associated with it. His basic criticism — and this accusation he leveled at most journals of the time — was that The Moscow Observer did not criticize The Library strongly enough. Because Gogol’s article, which appeared anonymously, was generally understood as setting the tone of Puškin’s new journal, opposition to The Library was assumed to be an essential component of the program of The Contemporary. Puškin’s persona notes this at the beginning of his letter:

“The essay ‘On the Trend of Journal Literature’ justly attracted general attention. It is a topic that is witty, cutting, and straightforwardly set forth very many just observations. But I confess that it does not correspond to what we expected from the trend that you are going to give your criticism. Reading through this somewhat inconsistent essay carefully, the thing that I saw most clearly was great bitterness toward Mr. Senkovskij. In your opinion our entire literature revolves around The Library for Reading. All other periodical publications were examined only in relation to it.” (206-07)

Much of the persona’s letter dealt with Gogol’s accusations about The Library. These accusations mostly concerned the journal’s editorial policies and the editor’s capabilities as a critic. The rebuttal of specific charges against The Library was expressed by someone from the provinces with special significance, for The Library was apparently designed to appeal to readers in the provinces. Under the editorship of Senkovskij The Library had become an enormously successful periodical with a variety of departments and a readership far surpassing that of other journals. Belinskij attributed much of this success to the fact that The Library was a provincial journal. In a long article on the subject he explained the journal’s popular success by reference to its editor’s skill, cleverness, punctuality, and practical abilities; the main reason for its success, however, was that it was designed for and answered the needs of a provincial readership. Implicit in Belinskij’s account was disdain for the taste and intelligence of readers in the provinces. Gogol showed to some extent a similar attitude in his essay. It could hardly be an accident that Puškin chose to make the author of his letter to the editor an offended provincial; the letter could then serve as a rebuff to the specific charges of Belinskij and Gogol by exemplifying the wit, understanding, judgment, and intelligence of a provincial. The following discussion of the letter’s principal features should shed some light on Puškin’s relationship with other journals and journalists of the time, including Belinskij.

A.B.’s letter, including Puškin’s editorial response, was relatively long, almost 1500 words. The letter covered a variety of topics and gave ample evidence of the persona’s distinct personality. He begins with a reference to a moral principle extracted from a sermon of Georgij Koniskij, a Belorussian bishop whose writing Puškin had favorably reviewed in the first issue of The Contemporary: teachers have an obligation to heed their own words before preaching to others. Since Puškin made no reference to this principle in his review, we are to assume that A.B. himself read Koniskij’s works — an accomplishment which is presumably a credit to provincials. Turning this principle on Gogol’s essay, A.B. points out that the essay contained criticism of other journals of the day for lacking a definite goal, but offered no such goal for The Contemporary. In the main A.B.’s criticism of Gogol’s essay focuses on inconsistencies.

Throughout the letter, A.B. gives the impression of impartiality and moderation by balancing praise with criticism, avoiding as far as possible a polemical tone. For example, in the lines cited earlier, he first praised Gogol’s piece for its style and then became more critical, pointing out its bitterness toward The Library. Gogol had not said that the goal of The Contemporary was to criticize The Library; but this is apparently the implication he gave the essay, with some assistance from Senkovskij who was expecting such a goal. A.B. first lists, in summary fashion, Gogol’s accusations against The Library (just as Kostičkin had done in his battle with Bulgarin), and then analyzes each one:

1. Mr. Senkovskij took exclusive control over the critical section of the journal published in the name of the bookseller Smirin.
2. Mr. Senkovskij corrects essays which he receives for publication in The Library.
3. In his critical judgments Mr. Senkovskij does not always observe a tone of seriousness and dispassionateness.
4. Mr. Senkovskij does not use the pronouns sej and onyj.
5. Mr. Senkovskij has about five thousand subscribers.” (207)

Gogol had shown considerable concern for The Library’s monopolistic power and Senkovskij’s domination of the journal’s tone (“From the publication of the first book, the public saw that in the journal reigned the tone, opinions, and thoughts of one person . . .”) and had also stressed the fact that Senkovskij, in his habit of “correcting” works submitted to him for publication had even put his own ending on Fonvizin’s The Minor.

A.B. relegates the first two points to the “domestic, so to speak, arrangements of the bookseller Smirin” which “do not concern the public.” The virtue of this move is in its subtlety: A.B. does not attempt to disprove the charges that Senkovskij is a virtual dictator in his journal’s policies and that he has the presumption to “correct” the work of others, but simply says that these points are not relevant to the reading public. It was, however, primarily upon these points that Gogol wrote. The effect of A.B.’s first mentioning the points and then explicitly refusing to comment on them is that of reinforcement through repetition. Even though these two points may truly be irrelevant to public concern, they are not irrelevant to prospective contributors to journals.
In reference to the third issue — maintaining the proper tone in reviews — A. B. first advances the principle that works should be judged with a tone appropriate to their quality, and then turns Gogol’s argument against him by pointing out that in the same issue of The Contemporary in which his essay appeared, Gogol had used a tone far from serious in describing a new periodical of the day:

“And allow me to inquire: What is the meaning of your critique of the almanac My New Home (Moe norose’te’), which you so felicitously compared to a scrawny cat miaowing on the roof of the emptied house? A very amusing comparison, but I don’t see anything serious in it. Physician! Heal thyself! I confess, some of the funny critiques which have dotted The Library for Reading pleased me unutterably, and I would have been very sorry if the critic had preferred to maintain a majestic silence.” (208)

The fourth issue relates to the controversy then over the use of the pronouns sej and onyij. Senkovskij believed that since these words were no longer used in conversation in polite society they had no place in the literary language. On this particular point Belinskij tended to agree with Senkovskij, for he too avoided them and on occasion even made fun of them. A. B., however, appears not to have taken the controversy seriously: “Mr. Senkovskij’s jokes about the innocent pronouns sej, siu, sic, onyj, onoc, onoc are nothing but jokes.” This line, it turns out, is only the introduction to A. B.’s serious reservations about Senkovskij’s views:

“The public, and even a few writers, were free to take them [the pronouns] as the real thing. Can the written language be exactly like the spoken one? No, just as the spoken language can never be exactly like the written one. Not just the pronouns sej and onyij, but the participle in general and a multitude of essential words are usually avoided in conversation. . . . But it does not follow from this that the participle should be expunged from the Russian language. The richer the language is in expressions and turns of phrase, the better it is for a clever writer. The written language is constantly animated by expressions born in conversation, but it should not renounce what it has invented in the course of centuries. Writing solely the spoken language means not knowing the language.” (208-09)

A great deal was accomplished by A. B. in these lines. Not only did he manage to toss some sharp barbs at Senkovskij (and his knowledge of Russian), but he also was able to demonstrate, by means of rational argument, the logical and literary sophistication of provincials. The linguistic argument A. B. boldly offers here serves as a contrast to the pompously expressed linguistic idealism of Senkovskij.

What is also of interest here is A. B.’s subtle strategic shift in approach. It seemed at first that A. B. intended to defend Senkovskij against what he thought were unjustified attacks by Gogol. But instead of defending the fourth point, viz., that Senkovskij did not use the pronouns in question, A. B. refers to Senkovskij’s efforts to justify his position as “jokes.” If they were only jokes, however, what purpose was served by discussing them? A. B. apparently does not really regard them as jokes, for he offers a convincing counter-argument to Senkovskij’s claims. Thus A. B. is now in the position of attacking him in arguments which are considerably more substantial and persuasive than those of Gogol. After offering the kind of argument that Gogol should have presented, A. B., in a brilliant stroke of irony, ends the paragraph with the pronoun onyij.

A. B.’s comments on the fifth issue, concerning the number of subscribers to The Library, need no discussion: “As for the fifth point, i.e., the 5,000 subscribers, allow me to express the sincere wish that next year you can deserve precisely the same accusation.”

Further remarks characterize positively Senkovskij’s work as editor (for example, his industry and punctuality), but A. B.’s final two sentences on Senkovskij conceal a subtle criticism:

“We humble provincials are grateful to him — for the variety of his essays, for the thickness of the volumes, for the fresh European news, and even for the report on miscellaneous literature. We regret that many writers whom we respect and love have refused to participate in Mr. Smirne’s journal and we hope that The Contemporary will make up for this shortcoming for us; but we desire that the two journals not try to hurt each other and that each act in its own way for the general good and for the pleasure of a zealous reading public.” (209)

This appeal for cooperation between the two journals is double-edged. A. B. does not thank Senkovskij for the articles and fiction of Baron Brambeus (his nom de plume), presumably the work which Senkovskij himself most esteemed, but for editorial matters like variety, news, and thickness of volume. And the fact that established writers, including Puškin,89 refused to contribute to The Library is of course discrediting.

Other journals besides The Library were dealt with in Gogol’s essay. A. B. continues by offering comments on Gogol’s essentially critical views of three periodicals: The Northern Bee (Severnaja pčela), Supplements to the Invalid (Pribažemka & Russkomi invalidu), and The Telescope.

Turnig first to The Northern Bee Puškin, through A. B., is able to present his own criticism of the journal’s editor, Faddej Bulgariin (whose reputation today lies primarily in his polemical battles with Feofilakt Kosčkin), criticism
of which Kosčiński would have been proud. Bulgărin’s attacks on Puškin’s work had continued sporadically, though not so sharply, up to this time, regardless of his defeat at the hands of Kosčiński four years earlier. Again the “offended provincial” theme stands out:

“It is not for advertisements that The Northern Bee should be rebuked, but for the inclusion of boring essays with the signature F. B. which (in spite of your disdain for the taste of poor provincials) we have long since evaluated according to their merit. Be assured that it is extremely vexing for us when we see that Messrs. the journalists suppose they can interest us with morbid issues filled with the most childish thoughts and banal little jokes — which The Northern Bee probably inherited from The Industrious Bee.”

(210)

Although the allusion to advertisements constitutes an indirect attack (The Northern Bee could not legally sell advertising space — but sold it anyway), the evaluation of Bulgărin’s literary and critical work is explicit.

A. B. refers to Supplements to the Izvěstia only to point out an apparent contradiction in Gogol’s argument, his praise for exactly that manner of writing (humorous critiques) which he condemned in Senkovskij. A. B.’s remarks about The Telescope, quoted earlier, relate only to Gogol’s failure to mention the young Belinskij.

Summarizing A. B.’s discussion of Gogol’s essay, we can conclude that he objected to its inconsistencies; but far from giving the kind of defense of Senkovskij one might expect from a provincial, A. B. actually strengthened Gogol’s arguments where he could, particularly in the matter of the pronouns sej and onyj. After all, A. B. had initially described Gogol’s article only as being slightly inconsistent and “bitter” toward Senkovskij. Of the five issues A. B. selected as Gogol’s accusations against Senkovskij, only the third and fourth were seriously considered in the letter and of these two, one turned out to be a consideration not of Gogol’s errors but of Senkovskij’s whole theory of language.

The fifth point was a rather curious one: neither Gogol nor Belinskij was blaming The Library for having too many readers; their difficulty came in explaining the phenomenon. After seeking such an explanation, they naturally came to the same conclusion: the reading public that supported The Library could not be very perceptive and discriminating. And it was in this way that Gogol’ and Belinskij unwittingly prepared for A. B.’s entrance. With the berating of the provincial landowner by these two journalists, A. B. was conceived.

Puškin chose to use a persona to dispel widespread misconceptions about his journal. The kind of a character this persona had was determined to a great extent by the essays of Gogol’ and Belinskij. Obviously someone from the provinces would be an ideal defender of the taste and judgment of provincials and, as a persona, he could serve polemical purposes relating to Puškin’s taste as well. These purposes included openly criticizing the infamous Bulgărin, and laying before the public reasonable views about language. 22

In character A. B. showed himself to be an indefatigable reader, very much concerned about recent developments in journalism. He has his own opinions and when called upon to support them he demonstrates his point in a logically convincing manner. He writes well, is able to stylize, to be serious, to be amusing, and to be cutting. He conceives of literary criticism as a serious activity with a tone determined by the nature and quality of the work being considered. He reads sermons as well as journalism, though he is bored with the petty moralizing of Bulgărin. He also shows himself as being aware of current editions of poetry as well as new poets when he responds to Gogol’s claim that the public had recently shown signs of indifference to poetry: “But isn’t poetry always the pleasure of a small number of the elect, while stories and novels are read by everyone everywhere?” (210) As a counter-argument he refers to the great number of editions of Deržavin and Krylov that have come out, and also the recent excitement over Kukučnik, Benediktov, and Kolčov.

In his tactics A. B., following in the footsteps of Kosčiński, turns the arguments of his opponents against them, and is very quick to point out inconsistencies. Finally, on a different level, he is a very subtle writer, leaving traces of irony everywhere, particularly with regard to his being a “humble provincial.”

Though A. B. and Belinskij, in contrast to Gogol’, could recognize that to achieve such a striking success with the public Senkovskij had to possess some skills as an editor, A. B. and Belinskij could not but disagree on the fundamental reason for The Library’s success, viz., its appeal to the low standards of provincials. Puškin is clearly using irony at the expense of Belinskij when he has his persona say in his opening remarks about Gogol’s article: “You in it formulated wittily, sharply, and straightforwardly very many just observations.” (206-07) Belinskij had written, in his basically positive review of the first issue of The Contemporary, that the author’s (Gogol’s) “judgments were formulated not only sharply, wittily, and clearly, but even impartially and nobly,” and that “in general this article contains many just observations, expressed intelligently, wittily, nobly, and directly.” 3 In that the persona’s letter was dated by Puškin “April 23,” which suggests that it was written before Belinskij’s review appeared, perspicacious readers would see that A. B. arrived at a characterization of Gogol’s article nearly identical to Belinskij’s. Such a similarity in judgment could only enhance the reputation of provincials.

Whatever the merits of Gogol’s individual opinions, his essay created a controversy and undoubtedly stimulated subscriptions. There is no evidence that Puškin regretted having placed Gogol’s essay in the first volume; there is reason to believe, however, that he did not find it desirable to have his journal identified with a program centered on countering the influence of The Library.
Although Puškin showed himself as quite willing to have his journal carry on polemics (especially against Bulgarin and The Northern Bee), he indicated that full and direct warfare with the most popular periodical of the time was not a prudent course for a new journal. In any case, there was no need for him to become personally identified with the ignoble position of “following at the heels of The Library,” and for that reason he appended his editorial note to A.B.’s letter. The concluding lines of the letter and Puškin’s editorial statement are given below:

“And finally: You reproach our journalists for not saying to us: what was Walter Scott? What is present-day French literature? What is our public? What are our writers?

Indeed, extremely interesting questions! We hope that in the future you will resolve them, and that in your criticism you will avoid the shortcomings you so sternly and so justly condemned in the essay which we are right to call the program of your journal.”

And from the editor:

“*Including A.B.’s letter here with pleasure, I find it essential to give my readers a few explanations. The essay, ‘On the Trend of Journal Literature’ was printed in my journal, but it does not follow from this that all the opinions expressed in it with such youthful liveliness and straightforwardness are completely in accord with my own. In any case, it is not and could not be the program of The Contemporarv.” (211)

The strong editorial stance taken here demonstrates that Puškin wished to establish that he was an editor independent of the views expressed in his journal. His editorial comment was designed to indicate that the views of his contributors did not necessarily reflect his own. Thus, his use of a persona served a didactic function (among others): both Gogol’ and Belinskij were tactfully informed of the editor’s policies in regard to contributors, and A.B.’s “expectations” (that the sphere of activity of The Contemporarv would be broader and nobler than was suggested in Gogol’s essay) were implicitly affirmed. The key to Puškin’s editorial position was that he could not be accused of denying or subscribing to the positions of his contributors. By using a persona, Puškin created a context appropriate for the expression of his editorial position with respect to contributors and The Contemporarv’s program. The effect on the sensitive Gogol’ of his reservations about Gogol’s essay was cushioned, since criticism of individual points did not come directly from Puškin, and the denial that the essay represented the program of The Contemporarv was given in a note that showed respect for the views of contributors, yet expressed adherence to the principle that the editor’s views were fundamentally independent of those of contributors. Offsetting the effect of the essay on the public — especially its impli-
"Even though it's common knowledge, I have to tell you this and, if possible, help. Belinskij was getting 3 thousand from Nadeždin, whose journal has already been closed down; The Observer offered him 5 — Greč also called him. Now if you want, he's at your service — I haven't seen him — but his friends, including Šeplkin, say that he will be very happy if he has a chance to work for you. Give me the word and I'll send him to you." 26

What is interesting here, aside from the fact that Puškin apparently never "gave the word," is that The Moscow Observer also wished to employ Belinskij, despite his having been its sharpest antagonist.

It is not difficult to determine why journals would be interested in acquiring a controversial polemicist like Belinskij. The Contemporary had about 800 subscribers in 1836 (compared with The Observer's 400-600, The Telescope's 400-600, and The Library's 5000). Judging by the number of copies of each issue of his journal that Puškin had printed (2400 of volumes 1 and 2, 1200 of volume 3, and 1900 of volume 4), one can conclude that Puškin had been extremely hopeful of success at the outset. 27 His early letters also reflect this hope. Figures available on his expenses, however, indicate that he was losing money. Although it is certainly true that Puškin had to make some changes in order to increase his journal's circulation, there is too little evidence to warrant claims that the changes involved his ideological and esthetic views in any significant way. Belinskij's virtues as a critic could draw a large audience — people who were presumably reading The Telescope but not The Contemporary — could outweigh any ideological differences he might have with the editor, as long as it was clear (and Puškin made it clear in his editorial note to his persona's letter) that no contributor necessarily spoke for the editor or determined the program of the journal.

There is little doubt that Puškin valued Belinskij as a critic. It was reported by Annenkov (who heard it from Belinskij) that Puškin had once said: "Belinskij had lessons even his rivals could afford to learn." 28 On the other hand, differences in ideology and sensibility between Puškin and Belinskij were not negligible. Puškin's persona A. B. referred to the critic's talent, independence of mind, wit, and promise, but also to his need for more knowledge, prudence, and maturity. 29 Even though Belinskij was the only critic to say anything good about Puškin in the 1830's, it was he who announced that Puškin's star was fading and that Gogol had replaced Puškin as the "leader of Russian poets." Belinskij in reviews and articles had been highly critical of Puškin's predecessors, and had praised recently printed books (such as Polevoj's historical works) which we know Puškin did not highly value. In addition to this, Belinskij's well known affinities for German idealism in this period of his development were not shared by Puškin. Moreover, Belinskij had announced, in his review of the second issue of The Contemporary, that his worst fears had been realized and that Puškin's journal had succumbed to the same upper-class arrogance and condescension (swetskost' and aristokratizm) exhibited by The Observer. Puškin could not run a journal successfully, in Belinskij's opinion, because he did not have the all-embracing genius of a Goethe. 30

Evidence usually offered to support the case that Puškin was drawing nearer to Belinskij in aesthetic and social views seems, on analysis, to be rather weak. For example, much has been made of Puškin's so-called "defense" of Belinskij in his article entitled "M. E. Lobanov's Opinion About the Spirit of Literature, Foreign and Our Own," which was printed in the third issue of The Contemporary (without Puškin's name). The minor writer and dramatist Lobanov had recently made a speech to the Russian Academy in which he criticized contemporary literature and literary criticism, and called for stronger censorship. Quoting extensively from the printed version of the speech, Puškin challenged most of Lobanov's arguments in his article. He was less critical, however, of Lobanov's assessment of literary criticism. Lobanov said:

"Criticism, the modern instructress and conscientious friend of literature, had turned into street-corner bussleonym nowadays, into literary piracy, into a way of making a living from the pocket of weak-mindedness by means of audacious and violent sallies — often even against men of the government, celebrated both for civil and literary services. Nothing is respected — neither rank, nor intelligence, nor talent, nor age." 31

Lobanov's indignant speech on the immorality of literature and criticism could be explained, at least in part, as his reaction to Belinskij's very unfavorable review of his tragedy, Boris Godunov (1835). Belinskij was particularly immoderate and patronizing in his criticism of this work: not only did he regard the play as dated, artificial, and unnatural, but he considered the author pitiable: "He works honorably, conscientiously, but he is laughed at; he understands no one, and no one understands him. I cannot imagine a more horrible position." 32 Furthermore, Belinskij's well-known negative views of eighteenth-century writers could have served as a target for Lobanov's charges that literary critics had no respect for the past.

If Lobanov's remarks about the immorality and even criminality of recent literature and criticism, and his call for more censorship, could be so construed as to apply to Belinskij, then Puškin's article could be read as a defense of the critic. The fact remains, however, that Puškin seemed to agree that recent literary criticism tended to be immoderate and to have little respect for tradition. In his article on Lobanov's speech Puškin noted that Russian literature, which is still relatively young, "rarely maintains the solemnity and decorum peculiar to it; perhaps its decisions are often inspired by calculation and not by conviction. Disrespect for names sanctified by fame (the first sign of ignorance
and weak thinking) is unfortunately not only considered permissible among us, but even praiseworthy boldness." (189-90) Unless it can be demonstrated that Puškin, speaking anonymously and cautiously because of the severity of the censor, was not giving his real opinion, his reply to Lobanov’s speech can only in an extended sense be seen as a special defense of Belinskij. \footnote{33}

Even though Belinskij and Puškin may have agreed on general issues relating to censorship and immorality in recent literature, this agreement did not necessarily extend to their opinions of recent books. Their views markedly diverged, for example, on the merits of Silvio Pellico’s On the Duties of Man, a collection of pious reflections that had just been translated into Russian. Belinskij’s review, which appeared first, treated the book in a mock serious fashion, punning first and then calling the author “a grown child who, with his commonplaces, could be useful to the many grown-up children in Russia.” \footnote{34} In an article later in 1836 Belinskij briefly discussed Ševyrev’s positive review of the same book (in The Moscow Observer), and reaffirmed his own position that Pellico’s commonplace were childish. Ševyrev’s argument, that Pellico had the right to offer truisms and moral lessons because he had suffered a great deal in prison, was countered by Belinskij’s comment that commonplaces are commonplace, no matter who writes them.

Puškin’s review of the book, like Ševyrev’s, was extremely positive. \footnote{35} He even quoted several lines from the latter’s review in The Moscow Observer. Referring to Ševyrev’s arguments about the book’s value, Puškin remarked that Pellico did not need the excuses offered by The Moscow Observer, for his book could easily stand on its own. Though Puškin’s reservations about Ševyrev’s “excuses,” his position on the general merits of the book was basically the same as Ševyrev’s and diametrically opposed to that taken by Belinskij. Moreover, without identifying him by name, Puškin described Ševyrev as “a writer of true talent, a critic who deserves the confidence of enlightened readers.” \footnote{36} Whether we should take all of Puškin’s words here at face value may be open to question, but there can be little doubt that on the surface they do not support Belinskij’s views of Pellico’s book. Evidence that Puškin wished to set himself apart from other members of his class and align himself with “democratic” factions represented by Belinskij can hardly be found in his very mild criticism of Ševyrev here.

The point of introducing examples of apparent differences between Puškin and Belinskij is to illustrate that the sharing of similar views was not, to Puškin, a precondition for successful collaboration. To be sure, they were substantially in agreement on more important issues such as the merits of Gogol and the shortcomings of Benediktov. Nonetheless Puškin’s efforts to bring Belinskij to The Contemporary could not be said to constitute his personal acceptance of Belinskij’s esthetics, which were then strongly idealist. This is not to say that Belinskij’s views would not have had an effect on Puškin had they begun to collaborate. \footnote{37} One can speculate on whether Puškin’s patience would have survived the critic’s trek from Schelling to Hegel and then to Saint Simon. If Puškin had made an offer to Belinskij, it would have implied above all his desire to have working for him a talented and energetic young writer who could attract more readers to the journal. That an offer would imply no more than this was the message sent by way of Puškin’s persona and his editor’s note. In addition to avoiding polemical warfare with The Library for Reading and showing good will toward provincial readers, Puškin and his persona tactfully set out a basic rule for participation in his journal: contributors do not necessarily speak for the editor. Taking advantage of the situation created by misinterpretations of the significance of Gogol’s essay, Puškin turned what could have been understood as a mistake in editorial judgment into an illustration of a modern editorial policy. These goals could not have been achieved easily without the help of a secret persona-author.

The preceding analysis of Puškin’s persona has sought to provide some understanding of the complexity of the journalistic situation and an appreciation for the difficulty of drawing conclusions about ideological matters. Puškin used A. B. as a means of educating Belinskij and other contributors; this education was part of Puškin’s tactical plan to enlist Belinskij’s support as a contributor but not at the same time to make clear his independence as editor. Even allowing for Puškin’s recognition of the growing importance of raznoobrazny in Russian letters, and his sensitivity to changing social currents, there is hardly sufficient reason to conclude that he was prepared to let Belinskij carry the ideological banner of The Contemporary.

The analysis was also designed to provide a better understanding of Puškin’s creativity as exemplified in his journalistic creation, the provincial A. B. The offended provincial played an important role in the expression of The Contemporary’s editorial policy, and indirectly Puškin’s esthetics, and provided us with suggestive material pertaining to the relationship of two of the most prominent figures in nineteenth-century Russian letters.

2. Puškin’s authorship was first discovered by V. P. Krasnoselskij in 1916, but his arguments were published only posthumously in 1924, “Novaja stať Puškina (Puškin o Gogole),,” in Naši trud. I-II (Moscow, 1924), 106-19; Krasnoselskij’s arguments were substantially reworked by Ju. G. Oksman in “Pis’ma k izdatelju g. A. B.,” in Atenej, I-II (Leningrad, 1924), 15-24.


5. Prijma (38), Sergievskij (278), and Berezina (293) see A. B.’s remarks as essentially positive, while Eremin, though seemingly agreeing in this assessment, is more cautious, mentioning but not explaining the possibility that Belinski indeed did not have Puškin’s maturity with respect to literary matters (406-07). All further references to Eremin will be to the second edition (1976).

6. The text of Gogol’s “O dvizheni i zaralnjago literaturo v 1834 i 1835 godu” may be found in vol. VIII, 156-76, of his Polnoe sobranie sočinenij (Moscow: AN SSSR, 1938-42). Berezina (284) describes initial reactions to the essay.

7. Puškin prepared the way for A. B.’s letter by announcing in the second issue of The Contemporary that he had received an article from Kosčikin and a letter from A. B., and that both would be printed in the third issue. The article from Kosčikin never appeared.

The texts used in this study are from the seventeen-volume edition of Puškin’s works, Polnoe sobranie sočinenij (Moscow, Leningrad: AN SSSR, 1937-59). Puškin’s letter may be found in XII, 94-99. English translations of his critical writings are from The Critical Prose of Alexander Puškin, ed. and trans. by Carl Proffer (Indiana University Press, 1969). Page numbers in the text refer to this edition. Unless otherwise noted, other translations in this study are my own.

8. The reasons why Gogol’ did not mention Belinski in his survey are discussed by Sergievskij (315n), Eremin (384), and Berezina (298). Gogol’ may have felt that it was indecent to speak of a critic who had praised his work.


10. Načočin’s letter may be found in Puškin, Polnoe..., XVI, 181.

11. Podgelf’s remarks concerning Puškin and Belinski are given in M. Poljakov’s short article in Ogoniek, 60 (1950), 24. Also relevant here are Belinski’s recollections (in a letter to Gogol’ in 1842) of favorable comments Puškin made about him to others; V. G. Belinski, Polnoe sobranie sočinenij, XII (Moscow: AN SSSR, 1938-42), 109.

12. Sergievskij demonstrates convincingly that Puškin was well aware of Belinski’s writings (224-29).

13. See especially Belinski’s “O kritike i literaturnym mnenijax Moscovskogo nabлюдatelyja” (1836), II, 125-77.


15. See, e.g., Ju. G. Oksman, “Perespectiva Belinskogo: Kritiko-bibliograficheskij ozer”, in Literaturnye nesledstvia, 56 (Moscow: AN SSSR, 1950), 233-34; Eremin, 408-10; Sergievskij, 313 ff; and Prijma, 45.

16. Referring to the readers of The Son of the Fatherland, Gogol’ said: “These readers and subscribers were respectable and elderly people living in the provinces, for whom something to read was as essential as taking a nap for an hour after dinner, or shaving twice a week.” (VII, 164).

17. Belinski’s letters of November 3, 1842, 7-70, was even more strident: “I said that the secret of the constant success of The Library for Reading lies in the fact that this journal is essentially provincial, and in this regard it is impossible to be surprised at the craftsmanship, and the intelligence, at the art with which it adapts itself to and satisfies itself with the provinces.” (19)

18. Belinski’s tone becomes more and more sarcastic as he proceeds in this article to characterize the typical provincial family and the manner in which it dutifully follows the different departments of The Library for Reading.

19. Eremin, 397-400.

20. Eremin’s statement (402) that Puškin and Belinski were basically in agreement here is somewhat misleading. Strictly speaking, the editor’s relationship with contributors is a “domestic” matter; nevertheless, this does not mean that Puškin himself was not concerned about what “corrected” or “improved” works of contributors, and, Eremin aside, it is doubtful that he viewed complaints about this editorial practice as reflecting only the limited perspective of Gogol’ and the editors of The Moscow Observer.

21. See Prijma’s discussion of Belinski’s views on this issue (39-41); these pronouns have since fallen from use in the literary language.

22. Puškin speaks of his refusal in a letter to Načečin in early 1836: “My financial circumstances are bad – I have been forced to undertake a journal. I don’t know yet how it will go. Smirnov is already offering me fifteen thousand to renounce my undertaking and become again a collaborator of his Library. But though that would be profitable, I nevertheless cannot agree to it. Smirnovskij is such a fool that one cannot have anything to do with him.” (The Letters..., 748.)

23. Puškin had published in The Library before (e.g., “Pikovaya dama” in 1834).


25. Distinguishing between Puškin’s and A. B.’s views may pose some problems, but there is much that is clear. Obviously Puškin is not himself a “humble” provincial, although Puškin shares with his persona a fondness for irony; Furthermore, A. B.’s views of literature, various periods of the day, and writers associated with these periods may be identical. Where their views presumably differ is on the issue of Gogol’s article as a program for The Contemporary. To say that in the matter of the “five points” A. B. shows his true character...
as a somewhat simple-minded provincial (Berezina, 296) is to misjudge A. B.'s (if not Puškin's) irony and polemical powers.
24. Berezina (285) noted the similarity in wording, but no one has noted the possibility that Puškin was being ironic here at Belinskij's expense.
26. Puškin, Past. ... XVI, 181.
27. Smirnov-Sokol'skij, 446-47.

Annenkov also says the following about Puškin and Belinskij:

"Both Puškin and Gogol' were regarded with extreme favor by the critic but they maintained an obstinate silence about him practically throughout their lives. The former, as reported by Belinskij himself, merely secretly sent him issues of his Contemporary and remarked about him: 'That strange fellow for some reason is very fond of me.' " (5)

29. Interpretation of A. B.'s assessment of Belinskij is a complex issue. Berezina (293) views the comments as essentially positive, since they seem more favorable than what Gogol' had planned to say in his essay. Sergeyevskij (277-78) argues, however, that Puškin and Belinskij were in basic agreement on all the fundamental literary issues of the day, but Puškin as a tactical move had A. B. state conventional reservations about the critic which had been expressed in even stronger terms by Belinskij's enemies. Eremin, with perhaps the most balanced view of the matter, states that A. B.'s remark represented Puškin's true feelings, that the remark was benevolent, that it was offered in a tone not at all like the one in which A. B. expressed his views of Bulgakov and Sengovskij, that it represented criticism of the verbal attacks on Belinskij by Bulgakov, Senkovskij, and Vjazemskij, and that it contained friendly advice (which Belinskij could learn from) relating to the "deep historian" of Puškin's later literary views (407). Even though Eremin is virtually alone in suggesting that it was Puškin's views that largely prepared the way for the later views of Belinskij, and that Belinskij lacked the "deep historicism" of the mature Puškin, he nonetheless maintains that their ideological affinities (390-91) inevitably (za kononeno) led to their mutual desire to collaborate (414).

30. Sergeyevskij, in an extensive discussion of the views of Puškin and Belinskij, states that they agreed more often than not on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russian writers, that they had basically the same aesthetic views (despite Belinskij's philosophically "idealistic" phraseology), and that their views were "embryonically" related to the materialist aesthetics of Čerajevskij (250-51). Puškin, according to Sergeyevskij, was moving in the direction of Belinskij (321), and inviting him meant that Puškin was asking not only for a contributor but an ideologue of The Contemporary (216). In a similar vein, Berezina (393-96) discusses the ideological affinities of the two: also see Okman, "Puškin...", 460, and "Perepiska...", 233.

The obvious problem is the difference in philosophical provenience of the two which of course determined their essentially different aesthetic views. For a discussion of the esthetics of Puškin and of Belinskij (in his Schelling period) which suggests that they have little in common, see Viktor Teras, Belinskij and Russian Literary Criticism: The Heritage of Organic Aesthetics (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), 34-35, 54-59.

31. Puškin cited this passage in his article on Lobanov; see The Critical Prose... 189.
33. Cf. Sergeyevskij, 279-84; Okman, "Puškin...", 46-61; and Eremin, 397. Eremin suggests that Puškin was actually arguing with Gogol' and Odovskij, not Belinskij.
34. Belinskij, II, 88-89.
35. The Critical Prose... 203-05. Previous scholarship (e.g., Berezina, 296) has tended to emphasize Puškin's distance from his aristocratic acquaintances, in this case Sevryev. In view of the fact that Puškin valued good criticism charitably expressed, it is possible that he regarded the personal nature of Belinskij's critical style as an indication of the critic's lack of "maturity."
36. There is no evidence, however, that their relationship would have involved significant mutual compromise, as Sergeyevskij (205) and Prijsma (46) state.