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# The Roman Emperor as Russian Tsar: Tacitus and Pushkin<sup>1</sup>

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The government of any nation is unusually vulnerable at times of transition in its leadership, whether occasioned by death, resignation, or even a prescribed constitutional process of renewal. The situation is naturally exacerbated when power is concentrated in the hands of a despot or monarch, however benevolent. It is exacerbated further when a monarchy is still young, and no precedent exists for the process of succession. The empire of Rome that had taken shape under the Republic passed into the hands of one man after a long civil war that ended with the death of Marc Antony, and although that man presented himself as no more than the first among peers, the *princeps* in a government called the Principate, he was in fact an emperor. In his long life he managed to consolidate his powers and stabilize the extensive Mediterranean world over which he ruled. But no Roman was fully prepared for what might happen at his death. The cracks in this newly created imperial edifice were never more apparent than in the dangerous moment of transition, and it is with that moment that I propose to begin. The circumstances will be familiar to many, but certainly not to all, and they are fundamental for understanding the discussion that will follow.

At Nola in Italian Campania, south of Rome, on 19 August of the year 14 the first emperor of the Roman Empire, Caesar Augustus, died. His adopted son and designated successor, Tiberius, had been summoned back from Illyricum for the event, and it is not known whether he arrived at Nola in time to find Augustus still alive. His mother, the powerful and ambitious Livia, who happened to be the late emperor's last wife, had taken the initiative to recall Tiberius to Italy. There had never before been a dynastic succession at Rome. Even with the formal adoption and

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<sup>1</sup> A much abbreviated version of this paper was presented on 26 May 1998 before the joint meeting of the Swedish Academy of Sciences and the American Philosophical Society in Stockholm. A draft of the full text served as the basis of the annual Tracy Lecture at the University of Illinois at Chicago on 17 April 1998, and a revised form of the full text constituted the annual Syme Lecture at Wolfson College, Oxford on 5 November 1998. I am deeply grateful to Caryl Emerson for valuable comments on this paper.

conferral of the tribunician power that Augustus had chosen to indicate the choice of his stepson as his heir, uncertainty reigned at the end. Although the news of Augustus' death was promulgated at the same time as the accession of Tiberius, there were weeks of anxious talk and waiting in the capital. The designated heir showed himself modestly reluctant to assume so vast an authority as Augustus had wielded, and the voices of possible rivals to the throne were heard in the debates. It was not until nearly a month later, on 17 September, that the senate decreed divine honors for the deceased emperor.

Various constitutional proprieties were observed during the time of transition. The Roman consuls, magistrates, senate, army, and populace all swore an oath of allegiance to the new ruler. The will of Augustus was produced and implemented, and arrangements for the funeral were discussed. But the summary execution of Tiberius' most serious rival, Augustus' own grandson Agrippa Postumus, was nowhere publicly acknowledged. It was said that the aged Augustus had gone personally to visit the bluff and popular young man on the island of Planasia, to which he had been removed during the ascendancy of Tiberius. There had been reports of a tearful and affectionate reunion. The murder of Agrippa soon afterward seemed to some to reflect the anxiety and ruthlessness of Livia, eager to smooth the path for Tiberius. By this time her son was already a man of middle age, born fifty-five years earlier and seasoned in warfare and in politics. He knew perfectly well that Augustus would have preferred others to him, but the gifted general Agrippa (Postumus' father) and Augustus' two grandsons, Gaius and Lucius, had all died before the emperor himself. Unsure of the talents of the young Agrippa and doubtless moved by the insinuations of Livia, Augustus had settled upon Tiberius. But his death could easily have renewed the options for succession. Augustus himself had identified three categories of senators who might be candidates for his role as *princeps*: those who were not up to the job but wanted it, those who were up to it but did not want it, and finally those who were both up to it and wanted it. Those were the ones that Tiberius had to worry about in attempting to establish his power.

About a century after that perilous transition from the reign of Augustus to that of Tiberius, the greatest of all the Roman historians, Cornelius Tacitus, wrote an ironic and eloquent account of the events of August and September of the year 14.<sup>2</sup> He himself had the opportunity in his own lifetime to observe several changes of regime, and he knew how to interrogate the sources available to him, which were largely self-serving memoirs by members of the family of interested parties, or histories based

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<sup>2</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* 1. 5-15.

on such memoirs. When the emperor Trajan died in 117, a powerful wife seemed again to have secured the succession, and there was reason to believe that the news of the emperor's death was withheld until Hadrian could be proclaimed the new emperor in the same announcement that publicized Trajan's death. Such maneuverings are hardly unusual in the history of autocratic regimes. Tacitus, in his *Annals*, may well have been writing his account of the succession to Augustus under the impact of the recent succession to Trajan. At least this is an attractive hypothesis, most vigorously supported by Tacitus' most astute reader in modern times, Sir Ronald Syme.<sup>3</sup> The parallels in the two episodes were undeniably close.

The character of Tacitus' account of the reign of Tiberius can be deduced at once from the words with which he introduces it: "The first crime (*primum facinus*) of the new regime was the murder of Agrippa Postumus. Although unware and unarmed he was firm in spirit, and a centurion had difficulty in dispatching him. Tiberius said nothing about this in the senate." The confusion and mixed emotions of the senators at this time are marvelously evoked by the historian. They wished neither to seem glad at the death of Augustus nor unhappy at the elevation of Tiberius. Tears and rejoicing, lamentation and adulation were all mixed up together. When Tiberius himself spoke in the senate about his reluctance to assume so awesome a burden as the rule of the Roman world, he discoursed variously about the size of the empire and his own inadequacy (*ille varie diserebat de magnitudine imperii, sua modestia*). He had received direct experience of only part of the responsibilities to which he was now called. Only Augustus had the capacity to undertake so great a task. Tacitus comments perceptively that the only fear the senators felt in hearing all this was that they might actually appear to show that they understood what was going on (*unus metus si intellegere viderentur*).<sup>4</sup> A grotesque debate followed in which Tiberius was invited to say which part of the imperial power he would wish to have, if he felt unequal to assuming all of it.

Once established on the throne of Augustus, Tiberius discovered that his anxieties would not end. Tacitus relentlessly chronicled his problems. Chief among them was the extraordinary popularity of his own nephew, Germanicus, who enjoyed what Tacitus called an amazing popularity with the people (*mirus apud populum favor*). The elimination of Agrippa Postumus had removed a direct heir to Augustus, but the personal charisma of Germanicus raised up another rival in Agrippa's

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Syme, *Tacitus*, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1958), chap. 37 ("Tacitus and Hadrian"): 494-503, especially 492-96.

<sup>4</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* I. 11.

place. Nor was Agrippa himself forgotten. One of his devoted slaves called Clemens, who bore an uncanny resemblance to the dead man, presented himself as the living Agrippa, whose demise was alleged to have been reported in error.<sup>5</sup> The false Agrippa acquired a considerable following, and Tiberius was terrified. He had the pretender apprehended and brought before him. In a memorable moment immortalized by Tacitus, the false Agrippa was brought bound into the palace. When Tiberius asked him how he became Agrippa, the clever slave shot back in reply, "In the same way you became emperor."<sup>6</sup> Tiberius had him executed, and the whole episode was covered up in silence. There was no investigation of any possible co-conspirators.

The Tiberius in Tacitus is a secretive, fearful, ruthless ruler, whose public statements were invariably obscure or ambivalent and whose decisions appeared to be dictated by his domineering mother. Yet Tacitus is scrupulous to describe actions and policies that might cast doubt on this unflattering portrait. For example, when the senate, in a servile mood, proposed to award extravagant honors to Livia in 14, Tacitus records that Tiberius rejected them as inappropriate. But he cannot resist observing at the same time that the emperor was fearful that the ascendancy of a woman might diminish his own authority.<sup>7</sup> The recent discovery of a long inscription of some 176 lines, found eight years ago in no less than six copies in Spain, has served to underscore the discretion of Tacitus in compiling his history from archival material.<sup>8</sup> Among many revelations this document includes an explicit statement that the senators exempted a guilty party from punishment in the matter of the mysterious death of Germanicus solely because Tiberius asked them to do so at the express request of his mother.<sup>9</sup> Tacitus sees the worst in the history of the early Roman empire, but it is increasingly apparent that he did so because the worst was in fact what happened. The struggle of Tiberius to retain his integrity and his authority was perhaps not the dissembling and mendacity that Tacitus proposed as an explanation. He may have been genuinely trapped in a system and society he could not handle. His ultimate withdrawal to a life of solitude and debauchery on the island of Capri

<sup>5</sup> Tacitus describes the episode in *Annals* II. 39-40.

<sup>6</sup> *Percunctanti Tiberio, quo modo Agrippa factus esset, respondisse fertur 'quo modo tu Caesar'* (Tacitus, *Annals* II. 40).

<sup>7</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* I. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Werner Eck, Antonio Caballos, Fernando Fernández, *Das senatus consultum de Cn. Pisone patre*, Vestigia: Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte, Bd. 48 (Munich, 1996) and Antonio Caballos, Werner Eck, Fernando Fernández, *El Senadoconsulto de Gneo Pisón Padre* (Seville, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Line 113: *...pro Plancina rogatu matris suae deprecatus sit.*

could be explained in these terms and make of Tiberius' life something more tragic than criminal.

Tacitus' portrait of Tiberius and the uneasy transition to imperial rule has engaged students of history and literature ever since the manuscript of his *Annals* was first published in the late fifteenth century. From Lipsius and Scaliger in the Renaissance to Syme in the twentieth century opinions of both emperor and historian have varied widely. The declamatory and epigrammatic style affected by Tacitus has put many readers on their guard. The tragic unfolding of the narrative of Tiberius' reign has seemed to some more like artifice than fact. But one of the most intelligent and thoughtful readers of Tacitus has somehow escaped notice almost entirely. This is all the more surprising since that reader stands among the few towering writers of modern literature. He is Alexander Sergeevitch Pushkin, best known for his Byronic verse novel, *Yevgeny Onegin*, and his drama, *Boris Godunov*. For Europeans and North Americans the adaptations of these works into operas by Tchaikovsky and Mussorgsky respectively are better known than the originals. But no one who has read at all extensively in world literature could deny Pushkin a place alongside Goethe, Dante, and even Shakespeare. It is therefore of no little interest or significance that he read and annotated the *Annals* of Tacitus.

Most of the observations on Tacitus were written in 1825 in a single notebook, which was partially published in 1855, then rediscovered and republished in 1899. One additional comment in a different notebook and written a year or two later was made known separately in 1884.<sup>10</sup> Although the notes can be found in the standard multi-volume editions of the complete works of Pushkin, they have rarely attracted attention. A few Soviet Pushkin scholars took account of them in connection with the play *Boris Godunov*, which was written at the same time—in 1825, but to my knowledge, apart from a seriously ill-informed summary in an American journal of Slavic studies<sup>11</sup> and an inaccurate translation incorporated in a volume of references to Tacitus in modern literature,<sup>12</sup> there has been no attention to Pushkin's notes in the West and none anywhere by a classical scholar. Even a magisterial volume of nearly three

<sup>10</sup> Notes 6, 7, and 8 were first published in *Materialy dlya biografii Pushkina* (1855), pp. 170-71, and notes 1-5 in *Vestnik Yevropy* (1874), II. pp. 537-38. The ninth note was first made public in *Russkaya Starina* 5 (1884), 352. I have studied the notes in the 1936 *Academia* edition of the complete works in six volumes under the editorship of M. A. Tsyavlovskii, 5: 267-69. See further I. D. Amusin, "Pushkin i Tatsit," *Vremennik Pushkinskoi Komissii* 6 (1941): 160-80.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Kahn, "Readings of Imperial Rome from Lomonosov to Pushkin," *Slavic Review* 52 (1993): 745-68, with 763-68 on the Pushkin notes.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Mellor (ed.), *Tacitus: The Classical Heritage* (New York, 1995), 206-08.

hundred pages, published in English in 1989, on the origins and influence of the Boris play has nothing to say about Tacitus.<sup>13</sup> Pushkin's annotations, nine in number, are responses to passages in the first book of the *Annals*, although they show close acquaintance with other parts of that work.

There is little room for doubt that Pushkin read the *Annals* in Latin. We know that he possessed a French translation that included the original Latin text *en regard*,<sup>14</sup> and he may well have used the French rendering to help him over difficult passages. But, as we shall see, the notes show unambiguously that the poet was operating with Tacitus' own words. As for Pushkin's Latin, the memorable opening stanza of the eighth chapter of *Onegin* contains a luminous account of the epiphany of his muse in his schoolboy's cell at the Lyceum, where he says he preferred Apuleius to Cicero. (Let us not forget that the Latinity of Apuleius is considerably more challenging than that of Cicero.) Naturally not everyone in Pushkin's day had such good Latin or precocious taste, least of all Onegin himself, who is described early in Chapter One of Pushkin's novel as barely able to read an epigraph or puzzle out a line of Juvenal—although he did know enough to end a letter with *vale* or recite two lines of Virgil's *Aeneid*, albeit with mistakes. Interestingly a canceled draft of those very lines about the hero's Latin asserts explicitly that Onegin was altogether unable to read Tacitus. But a letter to Pushkin's friend Anton Delvig of 23 July 1825 shows the poet enthusiastically reading the *Annals* with perfect comprehension. It is obvious that Pushkin was thinking hard about Tacitus' depiction of the emperor Tiberius precisely when he was at work on his dramatic representation of the Tsar Boris at the end of the sixteenth century. The tragic dilemma of both of these tormented rulers led Pushkin to reflect on the nature of autocratic power and to offer reinterpretations of the reigns of emperor and Tsar that are at once fresh and mutually supportive. There could be no better illustration of the confluence of historical analysis and literary creativity.

When Pushkin wrote his letter to Delvig, he had been reading the fourth book of the *Annals*, from which he cites the notorious case of Vibius Serenus. The man's own son denounced him to the state for treason, and Tacitus describes the ugly spectacle of the older man bound

<sup>13</sup> Caryl Emerson, *Boris Godunov: Transpositions of a Russian Theme* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1986). By contrast, Lotman, in his commentary on the Pushkin play, is fully aware of the relevance of Tacitus: A. S. Pushkin, *Boris Godunov*, with introduction and textual preparation by S. A. Fomichev, and commentary by L. M. Lotman (St. Petersburg, 1996), 140–42.

<sup>14</sup> *Tacite, traduction nouvelle, avec le texte latin en regard*, ed. Dureau de Lamalle (Paris, 1817–18).

in chains before his elegantly attired young accuser. The senatorial court found against the father, for whom exile on a barren and waterless island was proposed. But Tiberius, rejecting so harsh a penalty, observed that in a case where there was no capital punishment any place of exile should at least provide the means for sustaining life.<sup>15</sup> Pushkin was profoundly impressed by Tiberius' judgment and characterized the emperor's words as reflections of a noble and humane spirit. In fact, wrote Pushkin, "the more I read Tacitus, the more I come to like Tiberius. He was one of the greatest administrative minds of antiquity." The resolute refusal of Pushkin to absorb Tacitus' sardonic view of the emperor shows an unusual disposition to separate what the historian reports from what he insinuates. In the case of Vibius Serenus, Tacitus drew the conclusion that the emperor was encouraging the spread of informers by allowing the unedifying denunciation of a father by his own son. But for Pushkin, who was clearly prepared to accept the father's guilt, it was the emperor's tempering of the penalty that had the greatest impact.

This disposition to read beyond the implications of Tacitus' narrative to a quite different interpretation of the facts he records is the dominant feature of all the annotations on the first book of the *Annals*. Tacitus' portrait of Tiberius had been an icon of liberal intellectuals, and Tiberius himself a paradigm of tyranny. Yet each of Pushkin's nine notes presents a startlingly new and largely positive assessment of that Roman emperor as head of a monarchic state. The notes were written in the final months of the reign of Alexander I, whose success against Napoleon and whose relatively enlightened policies had doubtless shaped Pushkin's thinking about kingship. Yet this same Tsar had kept the poet in exile for five years for the free thinking expressed in his epigrams. Pushkin's attitude to Alexander was understandably complex, and it varied over time. In 1824, the year immediately before the notes on Tacitus, he had written a grandiose poetic tribute to the Tsar as liberator of Europe. His view could, of course, be considerably more hostile, even in writings of the same general period. He is known to have referred to Alexander by the very name of Tiberius, and that was not meant as a compliment. Yet, unlike some of his friends, Pushkin was never a revolutionary (despite the best efforts of Soviet scholars to turn him into one), and even in 1830, in the surviving fragments of the discarded tenth chapter of *Onegin*, the poet could acclaim Alexander as the leader of all rulers at the same time as ridiculing him as crafty, lazy, and bald. The notes on Tacitus written in

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<sup>15</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* IV. 30: *Gallus Asinius Gyaro aut Donusa claudendum censeret, id quoque aspernatus est, egenam aquae utramque insulam referens dandosque vitae usus, cui vita concederetur.*

1825 can only imply that at that moment his assessment of Alexander was no less positive than it was of Tiberius. Pushkin is evidently trying to separate statecraft and administrative skill from faults of character. This is a fundamental point, and it is as timely an issue today as it was then.

Particularly important for Pushkin's interest in Tacitus' treatment of monarchic rule was the recent publication of the tenth and eleventh volumes of the *History of the Russian State* by Nikolai Karamzin. This work offered an eloquent justification of the Russian monarchy without shrinking from detailed exposition of the most horrifying excesses of some of its rulers (notably Ivan the Terrible). Karamzin knew his Tacitus well and had even written a poem about him. In his *History* the troubled aftermath of the reign of Ivan was extensively narrated on the basis of Russian chronicles. The story of Boris Godunov, brother-in-law of Ivan's feeble-minded successor, Fyodor, and regent for the young man, captured the imagination of Pushkin. When Fyodor died, Boris assumed the succession after a period of uncertainty and ambivalence. Pushkin had read in Karamzin's history that Boris had caused the nine-year-old Dimitri, another son of Ivan and the true successor to Fyodor, to be put to death in the town of Uglich seven years earlier. (Whether this is historically accurate, as it may well not be, is irrelevant here.) In short Pushkin learned from Karamzin that Boris had eliminated a rival of the blood to prepare the way for his own accession to the throne. Since his drama on Boris's tragic rule was dedicated to Karamzin, it is worth noting that Pushkin's friend Ryleev, who was subsequently hanged as a radical member of the Decembrist conspiracy, had once described the historian in a letter as "our Tacitus." When Pushkin wrote his play in 1825, we know that he had taken up reading the real Tacitus. The parallel with Tiberius must have leapt to his eyes. Pushkin's engagement with Karamzin's Boris propelled him to a new and sympathetic view of autocratic power.

The first of the notes on the *Annals* was inspired by the account of the murder of Agrippa Postumus. Here are Pushkin's words:

Tiberius was in Illyricum when he received the news of the illness of the old Augustus—it is not known whether he found him alive or dead. His first crime, Tacitus notes, was the murder of Agrippa Postumus, the grandson of Augustus. If murder can be guiltless in an autocratic state when it is for reasons of political necessity, then Tiberius was justified. Agrippa, the natural grandson of Augustus, had a rightful claim to power, and the people liked his unusual strength, audacity, and even his simple mind. Such persons can always gain the greatest number of adherents, or else serve as an instrument for a cunning revolutionary. Tacitus says that it was unknown whether Tiberius or his mother Livia

had ordered that murder. It was probably Livia, but Tiberius too would not have held back.

Pushkin's formulation of the potential opposition between people and ruler and the rationale he provides for assassination both go to the heart of the reign of Tsar Boris, at least as Karamzin conceived it and, through him, Pushkin. In the celebrated monologue beginning "I have reached the highest power" (*dostig ya vysshei vlasti*), Boris lashes out against the failure of the Russian people to appreciate his generosity and care, and in that same monologue he confesses that his conscience can never rest because of the one terrible crime for which he was responsible, the murder of the Tsarevitch Dimitri. The fickle enthusiasms of the people that Pushkin invoked for Agrippa Postumus reappear in Boris's bitter line, which follows his anguished recalling of all he had done for the Russian people, "This is the judgment of the mob: look for any love in it." The Russian word here is *lyubov*, "love," or, as it would be in Latin, *amor*. For this seems to echo what Tacitus had written in generalizing terms about Tiberius' problems with the much loved Germanicus: *breves et infaustos populi Romani amores*, "short-lived and ill-omened are the loves of the Roman people,"<sup>16</sup> a text that perhaps left its mark upon Pushkin.

After commenting on the death of Agrippa Postumus, Pushkin went on to write a series of four notes inspired by material in chapters 8 to 15 of Book One of the *Annals*. These chapters are all concerned with the weeks immediately after Augustus' death and the uncertain position of Tiberius. Although oaths of allegiance had already been sworn, Tiberius continued to behave as if he were not sure he was capable of undertaking what he described, echoing Virgil, as the great burden of empire (*tantae molis capax*). He was, in Tacitus' phrase *ambiguus imperandi*, unclear about whether or not to rule. Pushkin addressed several individual points in the process of establishing the new regime. First of these was Tiberius' handling of a request from the senate concerning the arrangements for Augustus' funeral. Tacitus characterized the emperor's conduct with the ironic expression, "arrogant moderation" (*adroganti moderatione*). These words struck Pushkin so forcefully that he wrote out a literal Russian translation (*s nasmeshlivoi skromnostiyu*), to which he appended an observation that although the emperor was decisive (*reshitel'nyi*) in his actions he appeared to be confused and secretive in some of his relations with the senate. Pushkin, however, found this to be commendable statecraft, and we may have an echo of his opinion in the lines that the

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<sup>16</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* II. 41.

dying Boris addressed to his son: "Keep your silence. The imperial voice ought not to be spread upon the air on any paltry matter."

Another phrase in Tacitus' Latin caught Pushkin's attention. The historian had suggested that Augustus' designation of Tiberius to succeed him reflected a desire to seek glory for himself by comparison with an inferior successor (*comparatione deterrima sibi gloriam quaesivisse*). Pushkin utterly rejected so ungenerous an interpretation and, as in the previous note, made a literal Russian translation of the key Latin words (*dlya nevygodnogo sravneniya*).<sup>17</sup> The capacity of a clever monarch to recognize the value of a superior rather than inferior successor is another of the topics that Boris, as he is dying, is made to present to his son and heir: "I had to destroy people, to punish them. You can be different. They will bless you, just as they blessed your uncle when he took over the throne from Ivan the Terrible." It is clear once again that, despite the tragedy that brought down Boris, Pushkin invests the Tsar with principles of government that he admired and that he learned in his debate with Tacitus.

Naturally Pushkin was much interested in the charade in which Tiberius proposed that he might assume part of the imperial power but not all of it. In his notebook the poet carefully recorded the dangers that befell those whose misplaced servility led them to ask which part Tiberius might like. But, at the same time, he took note of the emperor's resolve in disallowing extravagant honors to Livia, and he rebuked Tacitus for suggesting that envy (*invidia*) lay behind the imperial restraint. Here again Pushkin translated literally into Russian the offending Latin word—*zavist'*. The apparent reluctance of Tiberius to become emperor is thus deeply probed in the first five of Pushkin's notes. We can be certain that the poet knew these early chapters of the *Annals* extremely well, and if we look at the structure of Tacitus' text at this point and compare it with the opening scenes of Pushkin's play we will see just how profoundly his reading of the Roman historian influenced his dramatization of the narrative of Karamzin.

After the report of Augustus' funeral, Tacitus introduces two extraordinary chapters in which he recreates the gossip at Rome at that precarious time. These include both positive and negative assessments of Augustus himself, as well as of the significance of his designation of Tiberius to succeed him. Next, says Tacitus, entreaties were directed to Tiberius. This is the point at which Tiberius, after receiving the prayers of his people, delivers his speech on the magnitude of the empire and his own

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<sup>17</sup> Pushkin's French translation gave *par le plus effrayant contraste*, which leaves no doubt that the poet was working from the Latin text.

inadequacy (*de magnitudine imperii, sua modestia*). As we saw earlier, when the speech was over, the senators did their best not to show that they understood what was going on. This memorable scenario is re-enacted in Russian terms at the beginning of Pushkin's play. The first scene, written in the Shakespearean manner,<sup>18</sup> brings on two courtiers who gossip about the uncertainty surrounding the succession to Fyodor. They comment on the prayers and entreaties to Boris to take over the rule, and one of the courtiers, Prince Shuiskii, argues that the whole episode of reluctance has been staged in order to strengthen the Tsar when he finally agrees to take over. This is the gossip of the interregnum.

Boris finally agrees to accept the power, and in an extraordinary scene he delivers a speech before the boyars that is strikingly similar to Tiberius' speech before the senators: "You, reverend patriarch, and you, boyars—my soul is stripped bare before you. You see that I am assuming a great power with fear and humility. How great a burden is my responsibility." The speech is short and concludes with a request to the boyars to make a formal decision: "I await confirmation from you, boyars. . . ." The boyars declare that they maintain their oath, already given. After Boris goes forth to honor the graves of past Russian rulers and to offer a feast for the people, the two courtiers from the opening scene are left on stage. Shuiskii is told that everything was indeed turning out as he suspected it would. But he responds incredulously, "What?" "Right here, not long ago. Don't you remember?" "No, I remember nothing. . . . Now is not a time to remember. I advise you too to forget. Besides I was merely trying to test you with a pretense of malicious talk, to know the true, secret outline of your thoughts. But look, the people are welcoming the Tsar. They might notice my absence. I'll follow them." There could be no finer dramatization of Tacitus' epigrammatic words, *unus metus si intellegere viderentur* ("Their only fear was to appear to understand").

Once Pushkin had registered his observations on the accession of Tiberius, he added further notes to his notebook on Tacitus only sporadically. But these notes are no less instructive than the earlier ones. They are largely occupied with the threat posed by the popular Germanicus to the stability of Tiberius' reign. The only one that is not concerns the death of Augustus' exiled daughter Julia, whom Pushkin correctly, but without any correlative reference in Tacitus, connected with a scandal that also sent Ovid into exile. Ovid, as a fellow poet banished from the capital by his emperor, was naturally an important figure in

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<sup>18</sup> The influence of Shakespeare on Pushkin's Boris is important: cf., for example, Monika Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion: Fragment, Elegy, Orient, Irony* (Stanford, 1994), chapter 4, brought to my attention by Caryl Emerson.

Pushkin's classical world.<sup>19</sup> The libidinous Julia was said to have died of starvation—an explanation that Pushkin found highly implausible. No doubt remembering Tiberius' desire to provide adequate life support for the exile Vibius Serenus, Pushkin drily observed that Julia could just as easily have been starved to death in a prison. He obviously judged Tacitus' account a tendentious effort to smear Tiberius. After all, Pushkin knew from personal experience the difference between a productive life in exile and being put to death.

In his extensive notes on Germanicus, Pushkin once again showed an uncanny ability to read beyond the interpretations of the historian and to rethink the events he describes. Germanicus, as general of the legions on the Rhine, was faced with a revolt that he had great difficulty in containing. Pushkin, unlike Tacitus, suggested that Germanicus brought the revolt to an end by making excessive concessions, which only served to reinforce his popularity. In other words, he believed Tiberius, who has been criticized from antiquity to the present for being jealous of Germanicus, had every reason to be wary of the young commander as irresolute and militarily incompetent.

This unflattering opinion of Germanicus allows Pushkin to offer a most surprising interpretation of a famous episode during the course of the revolt in Germany. The commander, unable to quell the uprising, took his sword, in a theatrical gesture, and appeared about to commit suicide in front of the troops. At that moment one of the soldiers held out his own sword to Germanicus and cried out, "This one is sharper." Tacitus uses this incident to build sympathy for the commander, and he suggests that so ill-mannered an offer even offended the soldiers themselves. Pushkin once more literally translated the Latin at this point (*saevum id malique moris etiam furentibus*)<sup>20</sup> and then went on to denounce the Tacitean interpretation. Arguing on the basis of several other instances in the *Annals* that suicide was a noble recourse for a Roman under such circumstances, Pushkin saw the offer of a sharper sword as a friendly and supportive act from an admirer of Germanicus. He explicitly compares the propriety and dignity of suicide in antiquity with the practice of the duel to death in his own day. The poignancy of this comparison is deepened not merely by our memories of the death of Lenski in the famous duel

<sup>19</sup> See D. P. Yakubovich, "Antichnost' v tvorchestve Pushkina," *Vremennik Pushkinskoi Komissii* 6 (1941), 92-159, especially 138-43 on Ovid as a poet in exile and with discussion of Pushkin's poem "To Ovid" of 26 December 1821.

<sup>20</sup> Pushkin's French translation only paraphrases these words: *Cette atrocité les révolta, tout furieux qu'ils étaient*. But the poet's Russian carefully renders the Latin: *zlobno i zhestoko samym yarostnym myatezhnikam*.

with Onegin but by the death of Pushkin himself in a duel only twelve years after he wrote this note.

Even though Germanicus remained loyal to Tiberius his immense popularity undoubtedly increased the emperor's insecurity. But the slave of Agrippa Postumus, Clemens, actually undertook to overthrow Tiberius, with the result that only two years after becoming emperor he was confronted with a pretender in the guise of the murdered legitimate heir. The Clemens episode, which Pushkin undoubtedly read in his traversal of the *Annals*, provides another strong link between the careers of Boris and Tiberius. The murder of Prince Dimitri at Uglich and the murder of Agrippa Postumus, although carried out at different times in relation to the accession, left an inextinguishable stain upon their reigns, as Boris is explicitly made to recognize, for his part, in the monologue on the highest power: *yedinoye pyatno* ("one blot"). Both rulers had later to contend with pretenders—a false Agrippa and a false Dimitri. Tiberius was fortunate to be able to capture and eliminate his pretender, whereas Boris was himself destroyed by the rising popularity of a young monk who was inspired to impersonate Dimitri. By his age and appearance he persuaded many, both inside and outside Russia, that Dimitri had truly not died.

Twice in Pushkin's play Boris tries to assuage his anxiety over the successes of the false Dimitri by appealing to the argument that all the youth had in his favor was a name. After a frightening meeting with Shuiskii in which Boris pleads for eyewitness confirmation of the boy's death, Boris asks himself, "But who is he, my terrible adversary? Who is he to me? An empty name, a shadow. Will a shadow tear away the purple robe from me or will a mere word deprive my children of the succession?" And again in the farewell to his son the dying Tsar says, "He is dangerous, that miraculous pretender (*samozvanets*). He is armed with a horrifying name." For anyone who knows Roman history and literature—and Pushkin did—these lines are unmistakable echoes of Cicero's famous words, written shortly before his death, about the young upstart Octavian, to whom Julius Caesar had given his name by testamentary adoption and who was to become the future Augustus: *o puer . . . , qui omnia nomini debes!* ("O youth, who owe everything to a name"). Pushkin knew perfectly well that Boris could not take any comfort from the apparent insubstantiality of a name.

The irrational forces that overwhelmed Boris brought on his tragic end. After Tiberius' first few years the parallels with Boris end. The Roman emperor lived to rule for another two decades. But Pushkin clearly saw in Boris many of the monarchic virtues he found in Tiberius. This made his death all the more moving. The notes on Tacitus can leave the reader in no doubt that Pushkin found as much to admire in Boris as he

did in Tiberius. It is therefore wholly misguided to argue, as Soviet critics apparently felt obliged to do, that the Tsar was condemned in Pushkin's drama. One Soviet writer, who was fully acquainted with the Tacitus notes, went so far in 1969 as to assert that Pushkin had a favorable view of the Roman emperor because he had murdered an adult heir to the throne, whereas the poet condemned the Tsar because he had murdered a child.<sup>21</sup> The simple fact is that Pushkin sympathized with both rulers when he was writing in 1825.

But later in that same year a sudden turn of events must have compelled him to think again. On 19 November Tsar Alexander I died without surviving male issue, and the expected successor, his younger brother Konstantin, refused the throne, which then passed to his third and youngest brother Nicholas I. These events provided the background for one of the most dramatic and influential liberal conspiracies in the entire history of Tsarist Russia, the plot of 14 December organized by a group of highly educated men (many of whom were Pushkin's friends). The so-called Decembrist uprising was savagely cut down in St. Petersburg in the shadow of St. Isaac's cathedral and led to the execution of several conspirators and the exile of hundreds of others. Even today the mention of Decembrists is enough to evoke traditions of free thinking, constitutional government, and courage in Russian history. Although Pushkin himself had felt the chill of banishment under Alexander, he had not passed his time in the inhospitable wastes of Siberia that were prescribed for the surviving Decembrists. Nor was he himself involved in their plot, but good friends of his were.

It is therefore of the greatest interest that the ninth and last of the notes on Tacitus' *Annals* should be utterly different in character from the others. It was written after 1825 and in a different notebook. It shows a much more positive assessment of Tacitus' opinions and describes the historian with a liberal tag as the "scourge of tyrants." We are suddenly far removed from the polemic against Tacitus in the earlier notes. In this last and ninth note Pushkin wrote that it was not surprising Napoleon had no liking for Tacitus, but that it was indeed surprising he was candid enough to say so. For the people would easily recognize the hatred of a tyrant for a long dead writer who implicitly denounced him. Pushkin's note goes on to paraphrase, with no apparent disapproval, Tacitus' belief that Tiberius did not wish to give an opportunity to many senators to advance their careers and so he therefore simply prolonged the terms of appointees already dispatched to the provinces. Pushkin's attitude to Tiberius'

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<sup>21</sup> B. G. Reizov, "Pushkin, Tatsit i 'Boris Godunov,'" *Russkaya Literatura* 1969, no. 4, 79-83.

administrative skill seems oddly different here, and in his paraphrase he translates Tacitus' *callidum ingenium* ("devious disposition") with the more negative *zlaya dusha* ("malevolent spirit").

In one of the more bizarre turns of Pushkin criticism a Soviet writer in 1941 alleged that the tyrant who was candid enough to admit his dislike of Tacitus was not Napoleon but Alexander I, whose name Pushkin is imagined to have represented by a code-word beginning with the letter N.<sup>22</sup> Soviet critics consistently had problems with Pushkin's more appreciative assessments of Tsar Alexander (and hence badly misread the Tacitus notes), but this particular emendation, implausible on its face, would make syntactical nonsense of the text. Nonetheless it is important to acknowledge that there is a striking change in tone here, which can only reflect Pushkin's experience of the Decembrist uprising. A similar explanation undoubtedly lies behind the cancellation of some lines he wrote about Tacitus in an essay on popular education from 1826 or 1827. The draft of the piece had originally contained a sentence that seems in complete accord with all the notes from 1825: Tacitus, wrote Pushkin, "was a great satirical writer, but a dangerous rhetorician, full of political prejudices." This sharp remark was eliminated in the final version of the essay. The deletion would again seem to reflect Pushkin's reaction to the events of 14 December.

But the drama of Boris already contained such a nuanced and subtle portrait that any second thoughts that Pushkin may have had about Tacitus as a historian had no bearing on his dramatic treatment of the Russian Tsar. His deep reading in the *Annals* had produced issues of universal importance on the practice of statecraft in an autocratic regime, and these transcended the fierce response to the Decembrists. Ultimately the tragedy of Boris was not only a personal tragedy but a tragedy for the people as well. The pretender was, after all, really a pretender, a charismatic and incompetent ex-monk. The death of Boris was a grievous wound to the Russian state. Pushkin made this unforgettably clear in the stage directions at the very end of his play. After the agents of the false Dimitri go offstage to invade the tsar's palace and brutally kill his wife and son, whose screams can be heard outside, one of them returns to the stage and proclaims a barefaced lie to the assembled crowd: "People! Maria Godunova and her son Fyodor have taken poison. We have seen their dead bodies." Pushkin's stage direction at this point is "The people are silent in horror." The speaker continues, "Why are you silent? Shout 'All

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<sup>22</sup> V. Gippius, "Aleksandr I v pushkinskikh 'Zamechaneyakh na .Annaly Tatsita,'" *Vremennik Pushkinskoi Komissii* 6 (1941), 180-81.

hail to Tsar Dimitri Ivanovitch!” Pushkin’s final stage direction is “The people say nothing.”<sup>23</sup>

In adapting this great play for his opera, Mussorgsky first produced a version that ended with the death of Boris and emphasized the personal tragedy. This was drafted at St. Petersburg in 1869, which was coincidentally just one year before the first performance of the play itself after decades of censorship. But in 1872 and 1874 Mussorgsky constructed a revised and fuller work that ended with the acclamation of Dimitri by the people. For operatic reasons the far subtler final scene in Pushkin probably seemed unworkable to the composer, but the meaning of Mussorgsky’s conclusion was undoubtedly the same. The removal of the tsar was a tragedy for Russia. Had Tiberius died far earlier than he did, a similar disaster would probably have befallen the Roman state. After all, when the emperor finally did expire at an advanced age after twenty-three years of rule his successor was none other than Caligula, possibly the most monstrously evil emperor in the entire history of the Roman Empire. Despite the best efforts of philosophers, counselors, and wise monarchs, the situation in Rome and in Russia never really changed. Sadly an autocratic state was—and is—ill equipped to ensure the accession of a competent ruler.

#### APPENDIX: CORRELATIVE PASSAGES IN TACITUS FOR PUSHKIN’S NINE NOTES

Note 1: *Ann.* I. 6. 2

Note 2: *Ann.* I. 8. 5

Note 3: *Ann.* I. 10. 7

Note 4: *Ann.* I. 12. 1-3; 13. 4-6; 14. 1-4

Note 5: *Ann.* I. 15. 1

Note 6: *Ann.* I. 35. 4-5, XI. 38. 1, XV. 63. 1-2

Note 7: *Ann.* I. 52. 1-3

Note 8: *Ann.* I. 53. 2

Note 9: *Ann.* I. 8

<sup>23</sup> In the first (1825) version of *Boris*, which exists in a fair-copy autograph as well as in another authorized copy, the play came to a close with the people (*narod*) shouting exactly what they had been instructed to shout. But in the first published edition (1831) the text appears as translated here. The change has been much discussed and was often attributed in the nineteenth century to interference from the censor, who was, in Pushkin’s case, Nicholas I himself. But the result of a vast literature on this subject now seems to be a vindication of Pushkin’s authorial decision in transforming the ending. For varying explanations of his decision, cf. M. P. Alekseev, “Remarka Pushkina ‘Narod bezmolstvuet’” in id., *Pushkin: Sravnitel’no-istoricheskie issledovaniya* (Leningrad, 1984); also V. S. Listov, N. A. Tarchova, “K istorii remarki ‘Narod bezmolstvuet’ v ‘Borise Godunove,’” *Vremennik Pushkinskoi Kommissii* 17 (1979), 96-101. There is a good discussion of the issues and ample bibliography in the commentary cited in note 13.

〈Замечания на „Анналы“ Тацита〉

〈1〉

Тиберий был в Иллирии, когда получил известие о болезни престарелого Августа — Неизвестно, застал ли он его в живых — Первое злодеяние его (замечает Тацит) было умерщвление Постумы Агриппы, внука Августова. Если в самодержавном правлении убийство может быть извинено государственной необходимостью, — то Тиберий прав. Агриппа, родной внук Августа, имел право на власть и правился черни необычайною силою, дерзостью и даже простотою ума — Такие люди всегда могут иметь большое число приверженцев — или сделаться орудием хитрого мятежника. Неизвестно, говорит Тацит, Тиберий или его мать Ливия убийство сие приказали. Вероятно Ливия — но и Тиберий не пощадил бы его.

〈2〉

Когда сенат просил дозволения нести тело Августа на место сожжения, — Тиберий позволил сие с *насмешливой скромностию*. Тиберий никогда не мешал изъявлению подлости, хотя и притворялся иногда будто бы негодовал на оную — Но и сие уже впоследствии. В начале же, решительный во всех своих действиях, казался он запутанным и скрытым в одних отношениях своих к сенату.

〈3〉

Август, вторично испрашивая для Тиберия трибунства, точно ли в насмешку и для невыгодного сравнения с самим собою хвалил наружность и нравы своего пасынка и наследника?

В своем завещании из единой ли зависти советовал он не распространять пределов империи, простиравшейся тогда от — до —

〈4〉

Тиберий отказывается от управления государством, но изъявляет готовность принять на себя ту часть оно, которую на него возложат.

Сквозь раболепство Галла Азиния видит он его гордость и предпримчивость, негодует на Скавра, нападает на Гатерия, который подвергается опасности быть убиту войнами и спасен просьбами Августы Ливии.

Тиберий не допускает, чтобы Ливия имела много почестей и влияния, не от *зависти*, как думает Тацит; не увеличивает вопреки мнению сената число преторов, установленное Августом (12).

〈5〉

Первое действие Тибериевой власти есть уничтожение народных собраний на Марсовом поле — следственно, и довершение уничтожения республики. Народ ропщет. Сенат охотно соглашается. (Тень правления перенесена в сенат.)

〈6〉

35. Германик, тщетно стараясь усмирить бунт легионов, хотел заколоться в глазах воинов. Его удержали. Тогда один из них подал

ему свой меч говоря: *Он вострее*. Это показалось (говорит Тацит) слишком злобно и жестоко самым яростным мятежникам. По нашим понятиям слово сие было бы только грубая насмешка; но самоубийство так же было обыкновенно в древности, как поединок в наши времена, и вряд ли бы мог Германик отказаться от сего предложения, когда бы прочие не воспротивились.

Мать Мессалины советует ей убиться. Мессалина в нерешимости подносит нож то к горлу, то к груди, и мать ее не удерживает. Сенека не препятствует своей жене Паулине, решившейся последовать за ним, и проч. Предложение война есть хладнокровный вызов, а не неуместная шутка.

⟨7⟩

52. Тиберий не мог доволься быть Германиком, оказавшим много слабости в погашении бунта [легионов]. Германик соглашается на требования мятежников, ограничивает время службы, допускает самовольные казни, даже междоусобную битву. Блестящие поражения неприятеля при Марсорских селениях не заглаживают столько явных ошибок. — Тиберий в своей речи старался их прикрыть риторическими украшениями — меньше хвалил Друза, но откровеннее и вернее. Счастливые обстоятельства благоприятствовали Друзу, но сей оказал и много благоразумия, не склонился на требования мятежников, сам казнил первых возмутителей, сам водворил порядок.

⟨8⟩

53. Юлия, дочь Августа, славная своим распутством и ссылкой Овидия, умирает в изгнании, в нищете, может быть, но не *от нищеты и голода*, как пишет Тацит — Голодом можно заморить в тюрьме.

⟨9⟩

С такими глубокими суждениями не удивительно, что Тацит, *бич тиранов*, не правился Наполеону, удивительно чистосердечие Наполеона, в том признававшегося, не думая о добрых людях, готовых видеть тут ненависть тирана к своему мертвому карателю. —

Тацит говорит о Тиберии, что он не любил смешать своих проконсулов ⟨и⟩ наместников, однажды назначив. Ибо, прибавляет он важно, злая душа его не желала счастья многих. —