

Title: Historical Distance as Poetic Laboratory: Pushkin's Experiments in Charting the Poetic Self

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Quite a few studies have been done on Pushkin's historical thinking in diverse works of all genres, from the lyric to the narrative poem and the drama to the novel. Scholars have considered the evolution of his views on such issues as chance and fate, the nature of historical agency, and the role of exceptional individuals in historical causality. Yet scholarship on Pushkin's historical and political thought often (though not without exception) assumes a distinction between Pushkin-the-intellectual and Pushkin-the-poet, and between historical thought and poetic thought, and thus tends to leave aside the poet's own private, poetic concerns. In this paper, I propose that we bridge this gap and consider the ways in which Pushkin projects his own poetic self and poetic concerns into the historical and semi-historical characters he treats in works such as *Boris Godunov*, the *Little Tragedies*, and *Egyptian Nights*. As I shall argue, these works take advantage of their topical distance from the present moment to enact an experimental merging of the personal and poetic with the historical and political, in order to explore the complex interplay between creative freedom and historical constraint. In this exploration, the historical masks that Pushkin dons serve not only as self-protective camouflage, but also as openings for creative risk-taking at a time (his own historical present) when the poetic principle appears to be in jeopardy, with the lyric mode losing ground to the civic mode, and the poet caught between the demands of commercialism on the one hand, and political pressures and censorship on the other. The ingenious strategy of "channeling" the historical thus affords Pushkin a relatively safe, because depersonalized (displaced), perspective from which to consider the questions that are of fundamental poetic and personal importance to him: what is the poet's place in history, and what is it that makes a poet a poet.