

“Why Pushkin Refers to Unknowable Texts”

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Like many of his contemporaries, Pushkin often makes references in his published works to unpublished, private texts that very, very few of his readers could know. For example, in “Zhenshchiny,” he quotes two lines from a Del’vig poem which was published only 90 years later and which perhaps 30 people at most had ever seen or heard in Pushkin’s lifetime. The “how” and “what” of this odd phenomenon have been addressed by various scholars (e.g. Lotman, Peschio and Pil’schikov). But we still lack a convincing explanation of the “why.” What motivations, aesthetic considerations, and literary-social dynamics stood behind the practice? This paper argues that Pushkin (and other poets who were doing the same thing) had essentially three reasons for referring to unknowable texts. First, in so doing, he sought to redefine literary discourse as intimate interaction between equals. This was, at root, an assertion of the autonomy of literature from the state, high society and, later, the literary marketplace. Second, because “domesticity” (домашность) was regarded by Pushkin and his literary allies as the most authentic of the social contexts in which writers operated, weaving thoroughly domestic texts into the fabric of public works like *Eugene Onegin* imparted to them a certain authenticity, albeit one that was fully accessible only to a select few. Third, as Bourdieu and others have argued, aesthetic elites are not only engines of aesthetic innovation, but also a tricky business, for to survive and propagate, any elite must be open enough to make sure that outsiders are aware of it and aspire to join it, but mysterious enough to ensure that it can retain its exclusivity. By dangling unknowable referents in front of his readers, often very demonstratively, Pushkin sought to strengthen and preserve the elites on which he, ultimately, counted for his literary existence.

References:

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