PUSHKIN AS DRAMATIST

Pushkin’s aim with *Boris Godunov* was to write a historical drama on the Shakespearean model. He didn’t achieve this. What he did achieve is, I take it, what we should consider this afternoon. As the mole-like translator, I’ll try to get at it my way by burrowing through the topsoil of Pushkin’s text.

Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov* is mostly in blank verse, with a small but key proportion in prose. In my experience some people genuinely don’t know what blank verse is, and some don’t want to know, possibly because they don’t like the term and think it’s too technical. Recapping: it’s unrhymed iamboic pentameters, five-stress lines, in a continuous sequence, not divided into stanzas: the standard medium for drama and epic and meditative verse in English from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Free verse, of course, is quite a different matter, it’s unrhymed and unmetrical. Most verse written in English today is in watered down free verse.

Shakespeare’s blank verse already gets quite irregular metrically.

To be, or not to be; that is the question:
Whether ’tis nobler in the mind …

In blank verse written in English after World War Two, speech rhythms, syllables outside the metric count, grow freely on the trellis of the five-stress line. T. S. Eliot’s comedy *The Cocktail Party*:

Well, Edward, as I am unable to make you laugh,
And as I can’t persuade you to see a doctor,
There’s nothing else at present that I can do about it.

Pushkin’s first use of blank verse, which had only just been introduced in Russia and has not been widely used by Russian poets since, was in *Boris Godunov*. He imitated the 12-syllable French alexandrine, observing the midline caesura, pause, though he later thought he’d been wrong to do so, because, he said, the caesura ‘deprived his verse of its distinctive variety’. Here’s the caesura in a line from Molière’s *Tartuffe*:

Il faisait des soupirs, || de grands élancements …

It doesn’t even have to be marked by a comma, it’s a gap in the phrasing or the unit of meaning:

…Et baisait humblement || la terre à tous moments.
Pushkin’s places his caesura after the second foot of the pentameter:

Uzh okhladev. || skuchaem i tomilsya …
But soon to cool. || and grow oppressed and bored …

Of course, whatever a writer does, a translator can undo. In translating Boris I didn’t give a thought to the caesura, which is totally alien to English tradition. But as English words are shorter than Russian, you find you quite often have a caesura anyway. My translation of Boris Godunov keeps the five metrical stresses of the pentameter but with some looseness – not as much as in the T. S. Eliot bit I’ve quoted, but with some extra syllables and inverted stresses to keep pace with natural speech rhythms in English.

Largely owing to the caesura, Pushkin’s blank verse in Boris Godunov moves more slowly and deliberately than the blank verse he wrote five years later which doesn’t have a caesura, in the Little Tragedies. In The Stone Guest, scene 3, here is Don Juan in response to Doña Anna’s invitation to join her in prayer at her dead husband’s tomb, where Don Juan is lurking. This speech is pure rhetoric, spun in the mind; Don Juan might as well be thinking these words as uttering them to Doña Anna. His words flow on in a torrent of abstract rhetoric, however sensual it might be.

I – pray –
With Doña Anna – pray! I am unworthy.
My unchaste lips shall not presume to speak
Your saintly prayer … My part to watch with reverence
While quietly you bow your head and spill
Black hair on alabaster – then it seems
An angel comes in secret to this tomb,
And in my wild and reckless heart I find
No prayer, but silently I contemplate
The happy lot of him whose frigid marble
Is warmed with tears of love, with heavenly breath […]

I’ve said that on the whole I’ve not bothered with the caesura in my translation of Boris Godunov, but even so, it does come through at times. Here is the Pretender, who has just revealed to Marina that he is not Dimitry:

Yes, I am guilty: urged by boundless pride,
I have deceived God, Tsar, and all the world.
You have no cause, however, to condemn me,
For I have been, Maryna, true to you.
You I could not deceive; before my shrine
I could not, and I cannot now dissemble,
Love – blind, jealous love has spurred me on
To tell you all.

The Pretender is not only aware of his listener, his beloved, but is clearly engaging in earnest explanation to her; this is real speech, he has time to pause and take thought, emphasise and focus.
With *Boris Godunov*, Pushkin wanted to have his cake and eat it. On the one hand, he wanted the ‘free’ treatment he saw in Shakespeare – free treatment of sources, of characters, of utterance; and on the other hand, he aimed to recreate a particular historical period and its people. It was impossible to do both fully. What Pushkin does very convincingly and powerfully in *Boris Godunov* is to bring the 17th century and its people to life. In order to write this drama, he made a very careful study of the language of the early 17th century, especially Church language. He researched old church chronicles in the Svyatogorsky Monastery near the family estate of Mikhaylovskoye in the province of Pskov where he was exiled. He asked a friend to send him details of the attested utterance of a holy fool of the period. In a draft letter-article he shows enormous affection for those whose language he has been studying.

The character of Pimen is not my invention. In him I drew together those characteristics of the ancient chronicles which captivated me: the innocence of soul, the disarming humility, the almost child-like quality which is at the same time combined with wisdom, the pious devotion to the Divine Right of the Tsar, the complete absence of self-regard and partiality, which breathe in these precious memorials of past days […]

The impact made by the Pimen scene when Pushkin read his new play to friends is well known from the journalist Pogodin’s account.

The scene between the chronicler and Grigory [the novice who will become the Pretender] staggered everybody. It seemed to me that Nestor had risen from the grave and was speaking through Pimen’s lips, I heard the living voice of the ancient Russian chronicler […]

*Pimen*

*(writing by icon-lamp)*

One record more, the last of all – and then
This chronicle of mine is done, fulfilled
The task that God has laid on me, a sinner.
[…]
Now in old age I live my life anew,
The past unfolds before me – can it be long
Since, agitated as the stormy ocean
And heavy with events, it hastened by?
Now it is hushed and peaceful, few the faces
I still recall, the voices still I hear,
And all the rest is vanished utterly …
It’s dawn, the lamp is low. One record more,
The last of all.

*(Writes.)*

But here’s the miraculous thing about *Boris Godunov*. A layer of archaism there may be in the speech not only of the Church characters but also of the leading secular characters, Boris and the boyars, from whom we hear archaic words. In the very first lines of the first scene, for example, Prince Vorotynsky uses the obsolete word *dosele*, meaning ‘up till now’. But something else struck Pogodin at the same time: ‘Instead of the high-flown language of the gods we heard language that was simple, lucid and everyday, and at the same time poetically enchanting!’ On the linguistic plane, Pushkin *does* have his cake and eat it, recreating the spirit of Godunov’s time but at the same time making the characters seem to speak in a natural, direct way, whether on a sophisticated and cultured level, as with the boyars and political leaders, or on a demotic level, as with the crowd, the soldiers and the tavern hostess. Despite – or is it because of – the impediment
of the caesura, the language of *Boris Godunov* is flexible enough to meet all occasions, more so than the more closely welded blank verse of the Little Tragedies, where the whole character and psychology of a protagonist is expressed in the verse he (usually he) speaks; the plodding Salieri and the quicksilver Mozart; Don Juan, bursting with sexual rhetoric.

In the *raznoobraznyi slog*, the multiform verse style of *Boris*, the different stylistic elements coexist uncompound, and are assembled in each scene, and sometimes reassembled in the same scene, to suit character and situation. The first three scenes, for example, display three distinct stylistic levels one after the other. First, the level of intimate conversation. Shuisky is justifying himself to Vorotynsky:

*Shuisky*

But what was I to do?  
Tell Fyodor everything I knew? The Tsar  
Saw all things through the eyes of Godunov,  
Heard all things through the ears of Godunov:  
Even had I convinced him of it all,  
Boris would very soon have unconvinced him,  
I’d have been quietly put away, and then  
In due course, like my uncle, put to death.

In scene 2 we have the weighty formality of a public announcement:

*Shchelkalov*  
*(standing on the main Porch)*  
Tomorrow the most holy Patriarch  
Will lead a solemn prayer; and then set forth,  
Preceded by the holy gonfalons  
And icons of Vladimir and the Don,  
Accompanied by the boyars of the Council,  
The magnates and select provincial gentry,  
And all the Christian populace of Moscow […]

And in scene 3 the crowd speaks:

*Another*  
If only we had an onion  
To rub our eyes with.

*Second*  
Have to make do with spit.

In scene 11, The Tsar’s Palace, Pushkin’s blank verse goes into half a dozen distinct gears – most strikingly when Shuisky reports to Boris that Dimitry has turned up in Cracow. Boris panics into immediate action mode. The verse suddenly changes rhythm and leaps headlong across the line-ends:

*Tsar*  
You must take measures, prince, immediately:  
Muscovy must be sealed from Lithuania  
By guards and barriers. Not a single soul
Must cross that border; not a single hare
Must get to us from Poland, not a raven
From Cracow. Act now.

The variety and flexibility of Pushkin’s blank verse is counterpointed by the scenes in prose. The five and a bit prose scenes in Boris Godunov are mostly highly comic and/or ironic. They tend to parodically fulfil or emphasise the main drift of the play. In the first prose scene the Father Superior of the monastery from which Grigory Otrepiev has just run away reports to the Patriarch. Pushkin uses straight history here, but his focus is deftly satirical. The Patriarch and the Father Superior see the political threat in strictly ecclesiastical terms: ‘This is heresy, is it not, father?’ – ‘Heresy indeed, Holy Father, outright heresy!’

The prose crowd scenes (18, The Cathedral Square and 25, the last, In Front of Godunov’s house) go with the first crowd scene in verse (3, On Maiden’s Field – ‘Anyone got an onion?’), and acclaim for the new Tsar Boris at the end of the early Maiden’s Field scene is echoed for the next tsar at the end of the play. The Cathedral Square scene immediately follows the Tsar’s Council scene in which Boris has been severely discountenanced by the Patriarch’s plan – quashed by Shuisky – to display the dead Dimitry’s bones to the people, the ‘saintly relics’, in order to disprove the Pretender’s claims to his identity. (Pushkin makes the Patriarch much too stupid; he doesn’t notice the political side to this, that it would remind people of the manner of the young prince’s death, as it so embarrassingly does Boris during his speech.) In this scene the people hold a strong idea: they believe that Dimitry, the real Dimitry, the Tsarevich who should have succeeded his father and now be tsar, is alive. But the whole dramatic impact of the scene comes when the Holy Fool turns the boys’ mockery to chilling political comment: ‘The little children have insulted Nikolka … Have their throats cut, as you cut the young Tsarevich’s […] No-one must pray for King Herod […]’. So we have two completely incompatible views of reality in this short scene. How true to life! And it is the people’s belief that Dimitry is alive, is the real Dimitry, and did not die when heir to the throne, that is gathering strength. Shuisky keeps pouring scorn on the fanciful, fairytale nature of the people’s opinions. But paradoxically, it is the fairytale that is coming true.

Characteristically, the scene in which the Pretender wins a battle that is a turning point in his fortunes, A Plain near Novgorod-Seversky, is one of high comedy, so that we don’t really take in the implications of what has happened: that with foreign help Dimitry has defeated Boris’s forces three times the size of his. Pushkin presents the soldiers who win the day for the Pretender as funny foreigners mocked by the fleeing Russians for their Quoi, quoi?.

The prose scenes and passages in Boris Godunov parodically footprint the path towards tragedy. It is significant that the last scene and the last words of the play are prose. It is the people who register the tragedy of the Time of Troubles, and we witness the Time of Troubles, lasting longer for Russia than both world wars put together, beginning at this moment.

I have seen three Russian stage productions of Boris Godunov. The first was Yury Lyubimov’s production which came to Britain about 15 years ago. It was intense and taut, and full of expressionist stage effects: a continuous humming from the crowd (Belinsky lives; his idea of a brooding crowd threatening future retribution), and the auditorium lights momentarily flickered on in references to the people. Boris and the Pretender actually came onstage together and wrestled for possession of a symbolic staff of power. What I took to be Pushkin’s conception didn’t come across to me: the interaction of realised characters in human space.
Nor was I convinced by Declan Donnellan’s 2001 production which I saw at the Pushkinskie Gory theatre near Mikhaylovskoe. This was a vigorous transposition of the drama into modern terms – with news TV screens, water torture, Boris walking about in a presidential posse – all the tricks. The scene with the Pretender and Marina in the garden, the love-scene that isn’t a love-scene, was played as a tease-love-scene in which each of them repeatedly drew back at the very last moment from touching each other. The two ended up in the water, a fashionable touch with British directors at the time. And Shuisky was parodied as a mocking bully with an unpleasant manner of speaking through his nose instead of the infinitely more subtle and sinister politician of Pushkin’s creation. Again, the world of Pushkin’s Boris Godunov didn’t come over to me.

Both these productions, however, had more going for them than a third one I saw in St Petersburg soon after Declan Donnellan’s. It was at the Aleksandrinsky, which in the 19th century was the largest dramatic theatre in Europe. The stage was a vast, balletic expanse. This production was without any new and urgent ideas, the familiar text dutifully and resoundingly spoken, at a leisurely tempo (as distinct from the fast modern tempo of the other two performances). What killed it was the huge stage space. The actors were so far apart from each other that there was no spark of contact between them. There was much use of stage machinery to liven things up. One character – was it Vorotynsky? – shinned up and down a rope while talking with his companion … which took away from the conversation. And there was much hopping over a set of bulwarks front-midstage, the whole thing being raised at the end to become a triumphal arch when Dimitry became tsar.

The most effective Russian Pushkin production I’ve ever seen was a puppet performance of Mozart and Salieri at the annual Pushkin Theatre Festival in Pskov. On a small, simple stage, with the audience close up, a young actor took the part of Mozart; he towered over the small puppet figure of Salieri, whom he held. The symbolic disproportion was powerful. The compassionate, rather Christ-like face of the actor as he spoke the lines seemed to be offering comfort to Salieri and to humanity. Here was a brilliant and moving way of dramatising Pushkin’s words, every syllable of which could be clearly taken in.

Pushkin decided to write Boris Godunov because he found the historical story so absorbing. He began to write it in the same year, 1824, as he read the major part of Karamzin’s newly published account of events, ‘palpitant comme la gazette d’hier’, ‘as exciting as yesterday’s newspaper’ (today we would say ‘today’s newspaper’). And all Pushkin’s extant statements about what he was aiming at indicate, as I have said, his desire to bring the story and its characters to life. In tragedy, or in ‘comedy’ in the old sense that he used it of his play, there was no Russian model for what he was after. What Pushkin did have, however, was the inspirational memory of the performances of the great tragic actress Yekaterina Semyonova who reigned supreme on the St Petersburg stage in the second decade of his life. She created a new style of acting in which gesture and timbre of voice were combined in an expressive unity, so-called ‘melodious tragedy’. Pushkin was full of praise for her in an essay on the Russian theatre written in 1820.

Whether Semyonova’s acting had any significant impact on Pushkin’s ideas about tragedy, or shall we say serious drama, seems undocumented. One grasps eagerly at such a figure in the absence of anything much else going in Russian drama at the time. What I feel more sure of is that the way Pushkin wrote drama, the almost miniature scale of his nuances and dynamic range, means that an audience is best being as close as possible to the actors’ lips. When I have
experienced this in a Russian theatre, never in the best and the biggest, Pushkin’s drama works and moves.