

Reflection Statement

The project arose primarily out of a personal interest and passion for Pushkin I discovered in Year 11. It was, therefore, always going to be an essay. I was adamant about wanting to write an “Exploration” of the poet, using the analogy of casting an all-encompassing net around him rather than ploughing through on the impetus of a singular argument. I was inspired in this venture by Catriona Kelly’s brilliant *A Very Short Introduction to Russian Literature*. I wanted to recreate that introduction/exploration for the uninitiated, balancing accessibility with academic merit. Unfortunately, I immediately encountered the greatest hurdle of the project – how was I to structure, let alone write, a decent essay without a thesis to give me momentum?

My solution (and salvation) lay in my cry of frustration – “Pushkin is too complex to define!” I thought that maybe I could turn this into a thesis, and I found the English Advanced and Extension courses cultivated this idea. In Extension, my module is “Genre.” This led me (by way of P. Barry’s *Beginning Theory – An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*) to the literary theory behind my essay – Structuralism. The creation of higher structures to impose meaning on texts and to guide readers through them, be those structures context or genre. I recognised that the assumption behind Structuralism was that texts were, by themselves, too chaotic to understand. It was a tenet I was led to by my studies of Relativism and Postmodernism in History Extension, refined by Representation and Text in the English Advanced course. Eventually I wound up at Post-Structuralism, which articulated this chaos, and threw my loyalties behind it. The die was more or less cast.

The focus was now on literary theory, but I was still left with the problem of structure. “Texts and authors are too chaotic to comprehend” and “the author is dead”

was all well and good, but I had no hope of building an essay around chaos. I seized, however, on the Structuralist principles in tandem with my own work on contexts in History and English. I decided to use my own structures to navigate my way through the complexity, then discard them to prove a point. It was an abomination of both Structuralism and Post-Structuralism – in a way, I felt like I was making a study of the schisms and paradoxes by pretending they made sense. Set up my dualities, then collapse them. Argue, in a way, against myself. If anything, I take a certain pride in that audacity.

When I sat down to do a burst of reading over Christmas, I had naught but the vaguest outlines of the essay plan. Research helped me narrow my field, define my concepts, pick my genre and, alongside other factors, informed my tone. For example, Nabokov's description of the 19th Century as a "double-purgatory" was a major catalyst for my dualities idea, whilst also kicking me off on the "Historical Context" concept. Nabokov also embarks on a lengthy examination of the Classical/Romantic tensions in Pushkin in his introduction to his translation, but I had encountered this previously. Kelly practically opened her introduction with a challenge to Pushkin's legacy as the "Father of Russian Literature." That challenge underpinned her exploration of that legacy itself, but I adapted the concept as a convenient duality to conclude on.

Armed with these concepts, I embarked on the writing. I wrote my first draft in two consecutive sittings – to be honest (and I know this may seem presumptuous), the essay practically wrote itself. In retrospect, I attribute this to my own passion for the subject material. It was this same passion that informed my readership and, subsequently, style. I always viewed the project as a fairly intimate affair – I didn't write it with, say, the *New Yorker* in mind. My audience was, for the most part, my

friends, or those in the years below who had their own fledgling interests in poetry or Russian literature. It thus became something of a bricolage of genres. I borrowed heavily from the personal essay in the way of tone (credit goes to Lopate's *The Art of the Personal Essay* on that one). My literary influences were my favourite essayists and historians – Montaigne, Gibbon, Macaulay, Pushkin himself, James (later Jan) Morris, Kelly to name a few. Relativists, Romantics, Whigs – those who weren't afraid to infuse their tone with personality. I found (from making a study of it in my History Major) that those who wrote with conviction, though their method might suffer, almost always produced works of fiery eloquence and passion. Works that were, in short, fun to read.

Accessibility was therefore in the forefront of my mind. Few and far between are the High School students who would find themselves seduced by the writing style of the dusty Oxbridge empiricists. Neutrality is all well and good, but the sterility it breeds is insufferable. At the same time, I was writing for HSC English, so I met certain expectations in way of analysis. What I did, therefore, is try and compromise – a personal essay on an external subject (I'd explore my passion by letting it seep into my style). I retained the firepower of rigorous analysis (particular attention to techniques – anaphora, sibilance, apostrophe, imagery, majuscule and so forth) and strived to weave around it, in a personal, light-hearted tone, the conceptual framework. The end-product is rigorous enough to be suitable for an English journal – *Metaphor*, for example, or at most *Southerly* – but I would hold no higher aspiration.

The process of composition was an interesting one. As I mentioned earlier, the essay practically wrote itself. One paragraph flowed into another, and so forth. This proved a double-edged sword – on the one hand, it was rather fun to read, whilst on the other it lost focus in places. At times, I was also wont to overdo the authorial

intimacy – I found myself traipsing atop the fine line between enthusiasm and pretentiousness. I toned it down accordingly. Moreover, concept would beget concept. I started with the Historical Duality – “I” explored the State/Radical dual influences on Pushkin. *The Bronze Horseman* was an overwhelmingly convenient example, though it became rapidly clear that I would never be able to manage both prose and poetry within the word-count. I abandoned the former. “Pushkin was altogether too mercurial and too independent for them to trust”¹ was the main idea of this first concept – Pushkin as complex was what passed for my Post-Structuralist thesis, and I aimed to illustrate that by setting up this dichotomy and placing him, impossibly, in the middle of it. Ultimately, it’s a comment both on the poet and on the flimsiness of dichotomies.

I knew I wanted to cover Thematic and Tonal Dualities, but had no idea how to get there. The writing led the way – I had to somehow resolve the impossibility of Pushkin writing in the dichotomous world I present, and Kelly presented salon culture while she was setting up social context. It was perfect for my needs – “Pushkin was artistically trapped within a society of sweet nothings.”² It built on my History work – writers as agents by context, both shaping and being shaped. Pushkin was so much a product of high society that he was the greatest authority on it, yet he was ambivalent. I could examine through this prism the Thematic Duality – the crushing restrictions of high society vs. a willing thematic subscription to its “sweet nothings.” His ambivalence also encroached upon the concept of Tonal Duality, though the structure demanded that I separate that out. I turned, therefore, to the emotional rollercoaster of *Eugene Onegin*.

¹ Major Work, p.4

² Major Work, p.7

This very emotion, however, was the perfect springboard into the Classical/Romantic duality. *Eugene Onegin* deals with some very heavy themes – nostalgia, regret, death and the societal yoke next to bantering light-heartedness on the part of the author. Indeed, this was partly inspiration for my experiment of placing rigorous analysis within a playful conceptual frame. *Eugene Onegin* is also a very balanced novel, and sonnet form is one of the most draconian forms in existence. I found the novel especially rich as a result, and was driven to adapt it for my essay.

In reflection, I am satisfied. I delivered my Proposal before I began writing, and in it I talked about “weaving a net around Pushkin.” I had yet to seize upon the theoretical focus or articulate my concepts, let alone envisage some sort of path through the material. I was, however, certain of my audience, and thus of my style – I have remained loyal to that, and I think it is to the essay’s benefit. I have also stayed loyal to my passion, which I believe comes through in my tone (without, I hope, crossing that very fine line). All in all, I think I succeeded in weaving the net. I have nursed a worry that my essays tended towards the formulaic – all analytical firepower with links to context, then links to modular/elective level thesis. Having the liberty to forge my own path away from that systematic approach has been deeply rewarding.