One of the finest of Leningrad's tourist attractions is the two-hundred-year-old equestrian statue of Peter the Great (1672-1725) commissioned by Catherine II and executed by a French sculptor, E. M. Falconet. For all its splendour this statue, known universally as "The Bronze Horseman" after Pushkin's narrative poem in which it appears, is a curious work of art. It was intended as a tribute to Peter, and in particular to his almost superhuman achievement in building a new city on the inhospitable swamps of northern Russia. A spirit of dynamism and domination, consciously infused into the scheme from the earliest sketches, was perpetuated through the enormous difficulties which Falconet himself overcame during the twelve years of design and construction, and it survives in the resulting monument. Nevertheless, a closer look at the statue cannot fail to reduce the sense of admiration with which it is at first approached. To begin with, three incompatible visual metaphors are mixed together. Peter is depicted, astride his massive Orlov charger, riding uphill and about to surmount the crest. This hardly corresponds to the base of the statue, a 1500-ton granite block called "The Thunder Stone" which has been hacked into the shape of a breaking wave. Neither of these images squares with the swamp serpent which the horse is trampling in mid-gallop with its hind hoofs. This necessary constructional device was introduced at a late stage to provide an extra anchor-point and it looks like what it is, an irreconcilable afterthought. Besides this, the tsar himself has been given some less than regal attributes, a squat figure, a puffy face, a quizzical gaze and a puzzling right-hand gesture about which there has been much speculation. How far is Peter really in control of his mount? Is he about to fall back, recover himself, even soar up into space? Is he urging the steed on or restraining it in the face of some catastrophic hazard?

Whether by accident or design Falconet has created an ambiguous monument which qualifies its praise of the addressee even as it is bestowed by calling attention as much to the tsar's human deficiencies as to his transcendent qualities. This ambiguity evidently held a special appeal for Pushkin for he has used the selfsame property as a source of enrichment for his poem Mednyi vsadnik. Pushkin's ambiguity owes nothing to vagueness, indecision or force majeure; it is a deliberately chosen policy based upon a desire to set out a series of antitheses in such a way that their ultimate irreconcilability should be disguised. The idea worked so well that the poem exactly matches the statue in its ironical combination of conflicting interests into an appealing and harmonious whole. The reconciliation of opposing forces on a number of different levels is the greatest claim to fame of The Bronze Horseman.
So high is this pinnacle of fame that there is now nothing controversial about
the greatness of the poem. Critics, when they pronounce upon it, find that their
main task is to avoid repeating already used superlatives. The least that is normally
said of the poem is that it is Pushkin's finest; it is commonly rated the leading poem
in the Russian language and has recently been described as "the most remarkable of
nineteenth-century poems,"\(^1\) presumably in any tongue. The praise seems extrava-
gant and a subsequent translator of the poem, perhaps with that remark in mind,
describes *The Bronze Horseman* as "overpraised by some" and then as "perhaps the
most significant of Pushkin's narrative poems."\(^2\) The warning against an excess of
enthusiasm is useful and timely, although the limitations implied by the word "per-
haps" seem as excessive in the opposite direction. There is no real case for reducing
*The Bronze Horseman* in rank. From all points of view and by any standards this is
an exceptional piece of poetry deservedly occupying a distinguished place in
Russian literature and outstanding in the context of Pushkin's own noteworthy
work. The purpose of this article is briefly to restate some of the qualities of the
poem, while avoiding as far as possible the contrary risks of tedious recapitualtion
on the one hand and simplified generalisation on the other, and then to present new
material which should serve to underpin the argument in favour of its acceptance as
a work of unusual distinction.

II

The simple but tragic story of the flood of St. Petersburg and its effect upon
Evgenii, whose mind turns when he realizes his fiancée Parasha has been drowned,
is tightly packed with a number of competing themes, some peculiarly Russian,
some universal. One of the first secrets of its success is the sheer density of *The
Bronze Horseman*. As well as being the last of Pushkin's narrative poems it is also
the shortest of the serious ones; none of the various versions exceeds five hundred
lines which makes it one third the length of *Poltava* and only just over half as long
as *The Caucasian Captive*. It is the only one (excluding *Count Nulin* and *The Little
House in Kolomna* which are comic tales) with a contemporary, recognizable situa-
tion and even a brief foreword emphasising the reality of the events described.
Thus, at a stroke, Pushkin has updated, intensified and authenticated his material.

The meanings of *The Bronze Horseman*, overt and inferential, can scarcely be
pinned down; they add to themselves and contradict each other, run off into new
directions and find constant renewal, prompted by all manner of references. These
range from straightforward statements and questions about human affairs to a quite
new system of symbolism, itself covering a broad range with the immediately obvi-
ous (like the symbolic horseman himself) at one end and minute half-hints of other
worlds and deeper issues at the other. The ideas are grouped in a way traditionally
beloved by the Russians, in polarities. Most of the main antithetical preoccupations

\(^1\) J. Bayley, *Pushkin: A Comparative Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press,