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Categorical Dreams and Compliant Reality: 
The Role of the Narrator in The Tales of Belkin

In "The Snowstorm" ("Metelet"), one of Pushkin's The Tales of Belkin (Povesti Belkina), the young hero and heroine, experiencing the thrill of a love which must advance in secret—she is a wealthy heiress, he a poor young officer—decide their only recourse is to elope. Governed by expectations they derive from no single source, but from all those occasions for romance which seem to radiate before them, they await the moment when the girl's parents will forgive their disobedience and permit their return to the family. Preparing for their marriage, the young man rides out to seek the necessary witnesses to the ceremony. In doing so he visits those as yet untouched by his hopes, his companions among the neighboring landowners. So inviting is his candid impulse to rely upon impetuous sentiment, that his first choice immediately agrees, cheered by the promise of a diverting episode, and urges the young man to venture no further in his search, but to await the inevitable arrival of the others. These new accomplices are not long in coming; when they appear they not only consent as swiftly as their host but, captured to an even greater degree by the daring of the young man's project, they pledge their unwavering allegiance.

Vladimir had been driving about all day. In the morning, he visited the priest at Zhadrino and after some difficulty persuaded him to officiate at the proposed wedding; he then went out to seek witnesses from among the neighboring landowners. The first he visited, Dravin, a forty-year-old retired cornet, consented with pleasure. The adventure, he declared, reminded him of his younger days and his pranks in the Hussars. He persuad Vladimir to stay and dine with him, assuring him that he would easily find two other witnesses. And indeed, immediately after dinner, moustached and with spurs on his boots, the surveyor Schmidt appeared with the son of the captain of the police, a boy of about sixteen who had recently joined up with an Uhlan regiment. They not only accepted Vladimir's proposal but vowed to lay down their lives for him. Vladimir embraced them with delight and returned home to make his preparations. [pp. 85-86]1

1. All translations of The Tales of Belkin are from The Complete Prose Tales of Alexander Pushkin, trans. Gillion R. Aitken (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1966). Slight revisions have been made in conformance with American usage and spelling. Page numbers are indicated in the text.
The fact that one sworn knight is a landsurveyor, his German name and occupation at variance with his moustache and spurs, and the other, of similar station, has not yet reached an age where discretion might balance ardor is only a mark of that comic irony which pervades The Tales of Belkin. The passage, in fact, beautifully illustrates the premise upon which the comic structure of The Tales is based: that experience does, upon occasion, amply supply all the imagination demands. The key to success in pursuing the dictates of one's fancy thus lies in the collaboration of events over which one has no apparent control, exemplified by the ease with which Vladimir engages the services of like-minded confederates; at such moments easy distinctions between appearance and reality vanish, since the one so generously corroborates the other. Yet soon after Vladimir discovers that events which seemed to conspire on his behalf may also willfully obstruct him. The disastrous storm, which sets him wandering through snowdrifts in hopes that each false turn will carry him to his destination is one such event, while the people during the course of that evening respond to him with maddening slowness, at their own tempo rather than his (the old man who periodically thrusts his beard out the window as Vladimir desperately seeks direction through the storm, for example). At this point circumstances no longer conform to romance, and we mark that cruel juncture when a benign fortune revokes its patronage, a moment crucial to Pushkin's intentions in these brief prose pieces. For it is the flow, the counterpoise of imperative fantasy and sensible demands which attracts him; it is mutation, an unforeseen shift from one to the other, which he proposes to chart.  

Pushkin's career as a prose writer differs from his development as a poet. If he solemnly foresaw, in chapter six of Eugene Onegin, that he would in all probability soon turn to prose, it was not until some four years later that his first published prose works, The Tales, appeared; though Pushkin finally resolved to cast off the shelter of anonymity, as one contemplates the numerous screens through which these stories must filter before they may reach the reader—an editor, Belkin himself, Belkin's friend and neighbor, his servants, his miniscule provincial arena, as well as that suggestive series of initials which comprise Belkin's sources—one senses both a diffidence on Pushkin's part and an absorption with the act of narration itself. These brief stories, though perfectly accommodating to their subject, are clearly experimental, designed to verify the potentialities of prose narrative. They both retain those properties of brevity and immediacy notable in Pushkin's poetic works and hold to an economy of line quite unlike the fuller, richer, more variegated style of his

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2. For a more detailed discussion of "The Snowstorm" (indeed, a "literary anthropology" of the work), see Wacław Lednicki, Bits of Table Talk on Pushkin, Mickiewicz, Goethe, Turgenev and Sienkiewicz (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956), pp. 33-59.