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THE TWO FACES OF A VILLAIN: PUSHKIN AND ESENIN'S PERCEPTION OF PUGACHEV

No single work of Esenin monopolized so much of his time and demanded such a concentration of all his spiritual resources as did “Pugachev.” Almost everyone who has written memoirs about the poet makes reference to this. The manuscript of the poem is full of corrections and variants. Esenin’s work on the poem occupied almost the entire year 1921. The initial idea to write “A Poem about the Great Campaign of Emilian Pugachev” was altered with time, and the text became more and more a personal confession of the poet. The voices of Pugachev and Esenin gradually intermingled. The narrative mode of the dramatic poem was transformed into a lyrical monologue in which the voice of the implied author and the voices of literally all the heroes were subjugated to the central themes of tragic disintegration, agony, and slow death. The space between the author and the hero narrowed, which contributed to the creation of a type of narration comparable to the so-called “theater of one actor,” where a many-voiced work is monologized by a single performer. This assertion is supported by accounts of Esenin reading his own poem; he literally keened and cried out every word from his soul.1

“Pugachev” illustrates the break in Esenin’s attitude toward the revolution. Hope for a peasants’ utopia had been dying, and it was necessary to say farewell to it. For a poet of such spontaneous lyrical power, this type of farewell was to a great extent a farewell to his homeland and to himself. The excessive, many-layered, complex yet varied imagery of the poem which has repelled many critics and readers, in reality achieves its goal.2 “Pugachev” is one of a few works of Russian poetry which by its intonational unity, depth of imagery, and melodic variation, may be compared to a fugue.3 Only a few

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3. Fugue: “a polyphonic musical style or form in which a theme or themes stated sequentially and in imitation are developed contrapunctually” (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language).
contemporaries of Esenin understood the poem’s innovation and internal turmoil as well as the author did himself.  
Esenin admired the historical Pugachev (considering him to be “almost a genius”), and connected the dreams of freedom and self-rule for a unified Russian folk with his name. For Esenin, Pugachev was the embodiment of the Russian peasant mentality, in which Europe and Asia, Christianity and paganism, coexisted organically.

According to Mariengof, the first and almost single printed source to which Esenin referred in his work on “Pugachev” was the writing of Pushkin. Travel to the Urals probably helped the poet to find the right inspiration for his work. In Esenin’s archives, there is no trace of folkloric, ethnographic source materials related to this trip. There is also no reference to such materials in the memoirs about him. It has become a general observation that Esenin related to historical evidence very freely and intentionally did not conform to historical reality.

Esenin expressed many times his disagreement with Pushkin’s interpretation of Pugachev’s character. The conversation recorded by N. Rozanov to some extent concretizes Esenin’s view. First of all, Esenin protested against the love intrigue in The Captain’s Daughter, and repeated many times that there would not be any in his work, and that, in general, “there will be no single female role.” As a good example of what he intended, he referred to the writing of Gogol’. That Gogol’’s books were among those read by Esenin in 1921, is significant in itself. Esenin’s last wife, S. A. Tolstaia, noted that during the work on “Pugachev,” Esenin had been reading Gogol’ and Dead Souls in particular. It is reasonable to hypothesize about the influence of Taras Bulba on Esenin’s understanding of the ethics, everyday life, and self-rule of the Cossacks. The folk song about Stepan Razin’, who threw the Persian princess in the Volga, and also the fate of the young Kharlova described by Pushkin in his History of Pugachev could add to this source material. It is very significant that in his argument with Pushkin, Esenin chose to cite Gogol’ in his own

7. Розанов, op. cit., p. 43.