Joe Peschio


Joe Peschio’s study, a significant revision of his 2004 dissertation, attempts to demonstrate where, how, and why misbehavior was shaped in aesthetic practice of the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Chapter 1 lays out the theoretical (sociological and literary) underpinnings of his analyses, discusses the historical and social contexts in which prankish behavior emerged, and defines the verse prank (*shalost’*), which is the focus of the remaining chapters. Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate the occurrence of the *shalost’* in Arzamas (the theme of rudeness) and The Green Lamp (the theme of sexual banter). Chapter 4 presents *Ruslan and Liudmila* as a synthesis of these two impolite, often hysterically offensive strains of discourse. The epilogue carries the themes into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as debate engulfs what should, or should not, be published today of the Pushkin *oeuvre* in the latest edition of his “complete” works.

The archival materials Peschio utilizes bring critical force to his arguments. For the first time, for this reader, we are able to observe moments when culture shifted, how it did so, why it did so, and why it is that the story has been suppressed for so very long. The way it played out was an indelicate matter, a combination of the impudence (towards power as well as group outsiders) and intimacy (with friends). Peschio captures these dynamics succinctly at the end of the final chapter: “By casting [in *Ruslan i Liudmila*] his reader as his intimate, Pushkin simultaneously offends those who are not (and who do not wish to be) and pays a compliment to those who are (or wish to be)” (p. 114).

Peschio argues against the tradition that lays out the aesthetic struggles of the early nineteenth century in restrictive terms. Recounting the frightening trouble visited upon Polezhaev after the Decembrist Revolt for his burlesque, “Sashka,” he states in no uncertain terms a key theme of his study: “The story of Polezhaev and ‘Sashka’ gives the lie to the entrenched literary-historical notion that strident civic verse was the real voice of social change and that this makes it somehow more significant than the ‘light’ verse of the period. In fact, the more trenchant challenge to the legitimacy of the regime and of the social order it created and oversaw is to be found in the formal innovations forged in the lightest genres: the friendly epistle, the burlesque, the familiar letter, the comic narrative poem, the epigram, the prose parody. This is the curious and mostly unacknowledged fact to which this book is devoted” (p. 5).

Peschio’s contribution comes by turning his attention to yet another unacknowledged light genre of real importance: the *shalost’*. It is in the verse prank
that social behavior and aesthetic principles meet: “A shalost’ ... flaunts the pre-
scriptions of literary propriety, adhering instead to the behavioral codes and
semantics of domesticity [domashnost’]” (p. 6). It engages readers in disparate
ways depending upon their predispositions, prejudices, and station in society
(for the most part), and invites readers “behind the curtain” (p. 6). Some read-
ers did not and, even today, do not wish to go there. The affront to such readers
is precisely the point of the genre.

Three moments are of importance in Peschio’s analysis: domesticity, society,
and state, meaning in the first instance the sphere of activity “isolated from
larger structures of social power,” in the second, “the realm of social elites,”
and in the third, “service, the church, and the court” (pp. 16–17). A shalost’
might operate in and against any one of these spheres, or in any combination
of them. Depending upon the audience/readership, it would often operate in
all three simultaneously, particularly since “Russian society had practically no
independence from the state in the early nineteenth century” (p. 17). All the
more reason to keep a space of domesticity completely private, as a realm to be
experienced as freedom—“shalosti were things that people did when they knew
the audience well—that is, under the assumption that they were being observed
only be certain people” (p. 21) and that those people would not spill the beans.
When privacy of this type could be maintained, shalosti could build and sustain
the social bonds of specific groups. Enter Arzamas and The Green Lamp, two
groups dedicated, in part, to the production of literature for the members of the
group alone. Here “the readership is divided not by factors like education and
erudition, but by social proximity to the author and his immediate milieu. It is
not the clever who ‘get it,’ but those who are privy to the domestic discourse of
the author’s immediate circle—in a word, his friends [and] the friends of his
friends” (p. 31). It is a world of inside references, jokes, and allusions. It stood
outside both broader society’s social-aesthetic norms and the state’s control.

Peschio’s modus operandi is to examine letters (personal and public) and,
most instructively, differing versions of single texts in order to locate the shalost’
at the point where projected audiences differ. Two variants of two poems
are discussed initially, Rodzianko’s “Ligurinus” and Del’vig’s “Fanni,” the latter
of which Peschio sees as a “prime example of the literary shalost’, a poem
addressed to a close social circle the meaning of which was inaccessible to
readers it might offend” (p. 93). In chapter 4, the author focuses on Pushkin’s
“Ruslan i Liudmila,” around which “the single most voluminous, spirited, and
even vicious literary polemic” of the early nineteenth century took place (p. 94).
Pushkin’s intimates understood the rudeness and sexual banter of the mock
epic as a performance of the domestic within the public sphere, a transgression
(of the establishment’s social and aesthetic norms) of a transgression (of the