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## **Marquette University Slavic Institute Paper NO. 12**

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## INTRODUCTION

This essay will attempt to clarify the mysterious dedication of Pushkin's poem, *Poltava*, without reviving the endless discussion of the merit of the biographical method, which (like everything under the sun) has good and bad points.<sup>1</sup> To some extent, I use the biographical method in the following work, although I do not agree with the notion that a work of art can be a copy of the author's life, a naive simplification to which some opponents try to reduce the whole problem. The poet quite often might be stimulated to creativity by his personal experiences. And yet, nobody but the poet himself can truthfully say where in his work there is *Dichtung* and where *Wahrheit*. Nevertheless, in some cases, it is interesting and useful to try to evaluate an artistic work as a reflection of the author's actual experience. There is always margin for error, of course, but there also can result a clarifying illumination. I do not intend to make a fetish of the biographical method. On the other hand, neither am I afraid to seek its aid merely because it is not the literary vogue nowadays. Waclaw Lednicki, the eminent Pushkinist of the University of California at Berkeley, in his letter of August 21, 1961, wrote me amusingly about one gentleman who, in his modest writing, had paid homage to the biographical method all his life, but in his autumnal days he became a fierce enemy of this method, because it is no more fashionable. Obviously, this is not a worthy example to follow.

## ii Introduction

The opposition to the biographical method is not a new phenomenon among literary critics. For instance, two score years ago, Alexander Brückner of Berlin University, justly wrote: "As the legendary King Midas changes everything he touches to gold, so does the poet . . . His artistic concepts are not the facts of life, and it is not proper to confuse them . . . ." Nothing could be more true than the words of the distinguished Polish slavist. But one also cannot dismiss the apt statement of Lednicki, who in retort to Brückner, said, "without a biographical interpretation, one learns only a façade of a poet's or writer's creativity. How can one disregard the influence of life experiences in Pushkin's lyric, which is so truthful, sincere, and direct?" Much earlier the Russian representative of "organic criticism," Apollon A. Grigoriev (1822-1864) also stressed "the simplicity, truth, and sincerity of Pushkin's poetry in comparison to all the contemporary poetry." Thus, we can consider the poet's autobiographical remarks as a source of additional information about himself, although we should always be critical and on guard, in order to distinguish fact from poetical stylization.

There is already an old and strong tradition in the literature on Pushkin, which regards Princess Mariya Volkonskaya as the poet's "secret" platonic love—a love, which undoubtedly left a permanent imprint on his lyrical poetry. Even the opponents of the biographical method cannot deny completely that imprint. Of course, one should be cautious enough not to identify Volkonskaya with Mariya in *Poltava*, or Tatyana in *Onegin*, without reservation. Volkonskaya could serve as a prototype for Pushkin's positive heroines, which received some physical and moral qualities of that unusual woman, who was highly revered by the poet, but *licentia poetica* and some moral stylizations can never be excluded. Pushkin was too supreme in his art to simply mirror personal experiences.

The importance of Volkonskaya in Pushkin's life is not a new problem in the poet's biography. But I would like to review it here in connection with the poet's dedication of *Poltava*, offering some new evidence derived from details of Pushkin's letters and from his poetic descriptions of his heroines. Pushkin's poem about the portrait of Volkonskaya, painted in 1826 by Sokolov, to my knowledge has never been considered in the treatment of the poet's feelings toward Volkonskaya. However, I can hardly claim to present here a completely exhaustive research, due to the unavailability in America of all the literature on the subject. Yet, I believe this to be the first over-all concise treatment of this question in English.

JOHN P. PAULS

University of Cincinnati  
October 27, 1961



Princess Mariya Nikolayevna Volkonskaya  
with her son, Nikolenka

(From a watercolor by Sokolov, 1826, engraved by W. Unger in Vienna.)

PUSHKIN'S DEDICATION OF POLTAVA  
AND PRINCESS MARIYA VOLKONSKAYA

Erwin Koschmieder  
zum 65. Geburtstag

Mariya, the heroine of Alexander Pushkin's historic poem *Poltava* (1828, published 1829), was a historical character, and her real name was Matrena Kochubey.<sup>5</sup> Why then did Pushkin change her name in his epic? The prominent Soviet Pushkinist, Boris V. Tomashevsky, in his annotations to Pushkin's works, insists that the name, Matrena, "carries with it associations not fitting for the heroine of an epical poem."<sup>6</sup> To prove his point, Tomashevsky quotes three variations from Pushkin's first draft, which the poet rejected, after trying the names Nataliya, Matrena, and Anna. It is possible that the name, Matrena, which is rather common among Russian peasants, did not sound right to the poet's ear. However, it is hard to believe that such a great master of rhythm and rhyme as Pushkin would reject all three of them because of their poor euphony, and in the final draft accept the name, Mariya, out of aesthetic or technical reasons only. Tomashevsky himself mentions that "the dedication of the poem in the first draft was accompanied by an annotation: [in English] 'I love this sweet name.'" Why was the name, Mariya, so sweet to Pushkin and why did he love it? Certainly not out of devotion to the Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus, about whom seven years earlier he had written a sensuous poem, *Gavriliada* (1821), irreverent, although not militantly anti-Christian in tone, in the style of Voltaire and Parny. The answer to this question can be found only in Pushkin's poetry, letters, biographical data, and in the writings of his contemporaries.



## 2 Marquette University Slavic Institute Papers

In the dedication of *Poltava*, written on October 27, 1828, Pushkin speaks sadly about his former love, which was once passed by unacknowledged and unanswered by some modest soul—so he wonders now whether the poet's dedication would touch her ear or pass it by again.

*Tebe—no golos muzy tyomnoy  
Kosnyotsya l' ukha tvoyego?  
Poymyosh li ty dushoyu skromnoy  
Stremen'ye serdtsa moyego?  
Il' posvyashcheniye poeta,  
Kak nekogda yego lyubov',  
Pered toboyu bez otveta  
Proydyot, nepriznannoye vnov'? (IV,253)\**

“Recognize at least the sounds once so dear to you,” begs the poet, “and think that in the days of separation, in my changeable fate, your sad desert, the last sound of your voice is the only treasure, the only sanctuary, the only love of my soul.”

*Uznay, po krayney mere, zvuki,  
Byvalo, milye tebe—  
I dumay, chto vo dni razluki,  
V moyey izmenchivoy sud'be,  
Tvoya pechal'naya pustynya,  
Posledniy zvuk tvoikh rechey  
Odno sokrovishche, svyatynya,  
Odna lyubov' dushi moyey. (IV,253)*

These words are too affectionate, too deep, too desperate, to be regarded merely as a poetical phrase. I think that only some-

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\*The Roman numeral and Arabic figures within parentheses in the text refer to volume and page number of Pushkin's works, as explained in Footnote 6.

The Russian text has been transliterated into the Latin alphabet, using the system of the Library of Congress with slight modifications, to allow for the use of standard American type and facilitate pronunciation.

one who had once loved that "modest soul" so deeply and tragically, could have written such a dedication. But the poet's words are not only an expression of his own disappointment in love. There is also an immense compassion for the tragic fate of the beloved one, because the phrase "your sad desert" implies the poet's concern for her present unhappiness.

In the rough draft of the dedication, the original line for "your sad desert" (*Tvoya pechal'naya pustynya*) was "the cold desert of Siberia" (*Sibiri khladnaya pustynya*). On this ground, P. E. Shchegolev,<sup>7</sup> in 1911, decided that *Poltava* was dedicated to heroic Princess Mariya Nikolayevna Volkonskaya, nee Rayevskaya (1805-1863), who on December 27, 1826, left Moscow for Siberia to voluntarily join her exiled husband, Major General, Prince Sergey G. Volkonsky (1788-1865), who had been deprived of title, property, and civil rights. He was sentenced there to twenty years of hard labor in the mines of Nerchinsk and life-long exile to Siberia for his part in the Decembrist uprising (1825). Furthermore, Shchegolev, after painstaking research, concluded that Mariya Volkonskaya was Pushkin's well-concealed but often mentioned platonic "secret love" (*utayonnaya lyubov'*), about whom there was and still is so much controversy among his biographers. Tomashevsky, however, thinks that, "such a conclusion one cannot regard as convincing, and that here 'the cold desert of Siberia' has more metaphorical sense than geographical meaning. In any case, we do not have a satisfactory explanation as to whom the dedication was actually addressed." (IV,564)

Ernest J. Simmons, in his biography of Pushkin, also insists (following Tomashevsky) that: "Whether his famous dedication to *Poltava* refers to Mariya and her unhappy fate will perhaps always remain a mystery."<sup>8</sup> Henri Troyat, another Western Pushkin biographer, when speaking of the time Pushkin lived in the Crimea at Gursuf with the Rayevsky family, says that Pushkin's first poems date from this period, in which he emphasized

the adored, unknown woman character, who does not respond to him, and whom he tries desperately to forget. "He immortalized the childlike playfulness of the little Mariya in his *Yevgeny Onegin*; gave her name to the heroine of *The Bakhchisaray Fountain*, and her features to the heroine of *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*. There is reason to believe that he also dedicated his poem *Poltava* to her."<sup>9</sup> In another place, Troyat simply stated that Pushkin wrote "a dedication for *Poltava* to Mariya Rayevskaya."

Nikolay A. Nekrasov was the first, who in his poem *The Russian Decembrist Women*, under the sub-title *Princess M. N. Volkonskaya* (1872), in chapter four, described Pushkin's love for Mariya, following her *Memoirs* to the letter and allowing her to speak for herself.

*Ya ne budu skryvat',  
Chto Pushkin v to vremya kazalsya  
Vlyublyonnym v menya . . . no, po pravde skazat',  
V kogo on togda ne vlyublyalsya.<sup>10</sup>*

Thus, Nekrasov actually initiated in literature a hypothesis of the "southern" origin of the "secret love" of Pushkin a hypothesis for which good arguments were found by one of the most brilliant Pushkin biographers, P. E. Shchegolev, who discredited the previous suggestions of the "northern" possibility of that love.

The controversy surrounding Pushkin's "secret love" began when his biographers tried to unveil the poet's so-called "Don Juan List." In 1829, in Moscow, Pushkin wrote in the album of a young girl, Yelizaveta Ushakova, a long list of the first names of women he had loved "seriously" and "casually." The biographers later identified all these names with reasonable certainty, except for one name from the "serious" group, which was concealed under the initials "N. N." From the many women Pushkin loved in his life,<sup>11</sup> the anonymous "N. N." became known later

as his "secret love." Some of his biographers tried to locate her in the North, and others in the South of Russia. The poet, Nekrasov, could thus be regarded as the first advocate of the "southern" theory. Ten years later, A. I. Nezelyonov (1882) suggested Princess M. A. Golitsyna of Petersburg as a possible "secret love" of northern origin, and this was later advocated by M. O. Gershenson (1908). Still later in 1923, P. K. Hubner, supporting the "northern" hypothesis, came up with the name of Princess Nataliya V. Kochubey (married name, Countess Stroganova).<sup>12</sup> The reason there were several names suggested for the "northern" hypothesis was because, before meeting Mariya Rayevskaya, Pushkin had frequently written about his "great" loves. But that was merely a poetical device because persistence and depth were lacking. It is on this ground, I am rejecting these names.

Returning to the "southern" theory, it should be mentioned that before Shchegolev, as early as 1890, G. O. Bulashev had proclaimed Mariya Volkonskaya as the "secret love" of Pushkin.<sup>13</sup> After Shchegolev (1911), B. Sokolov<sup>14</sup> (1922), and A. Brückner (1922), also came out for Mariya. The latter did not mention Mariya's name, however, but, referring to her as "one" of Rayevsky's daughters, said: "her figure appears in the album of erotic poetry over a period of many years like the Maryla of Mickiewicz; for her he dedicated *Poltava* also, without mentioning her name at any time."<sup>15</sup> The finest insight into Pushkin's love for Mariya Volkonskaya and her influence upon his creativity was given by W. Lednicki (1926).<sup>16</sup> Also, M. A. Tsyavlovsky, another prominent Soviet Pushkinist (according to Lednicki), supported the "southern" theory. The Russian Diaspora accepted Shchegolev's "southern" theory as well.<sup>17</sup>

Pushkin met the Rayevsky family in Yekaterinoslav in 1820. Lieutenant General Nikolay Nikolayevich Rayevsky, a national hero of the War of 1812, was going to the Caucasus. With him were his younger son, Nikolay, whom Pushkin had already

befriended at Tsarskoye Selo, two of his younger daughters, Mariya (15), and Sofiya (13), an English governess, and the general's personal doctor. The young Nikolay found his exiled friend, Pushkin, "in a Jewish hut, in a delirium without a doctor, and with only a pitcher of iced lemonade" at his side (X,17). With the consent of his father, Nikolay asked the ill Pushkin to join them on their trip to the mineral springs at Goryachevodsk. Pushkin accepted this kind invitation with tears of happiness. This was one of the most joyful events in his life. The warm friendship of that affectionate family, the trip to the most romantic and picturesque regions of Russia, the company of the adorable Rayevsky daughters, remained forever in the memory of the sensitive and thankful poet. Pushkin's happiness is revealed in his letter of September 24, 1820, from Kishinyov to his brother, Lev Sergeyeovich: "The happiest moments of my life I spent with the honorable Rayevsky family . . . All his daughters are charming; the eldest is an unusual woman. Judge for yourself whether I was happy: a carefree and sheltered life within the circle of a kind family, a life which I love so much and which I never enjoyed before; the happy southern sky, wonderful country, nature that delights the imagination—mountains, orchards, the sea; my friend, my most cherished hope is to see once more the southern shore and the Rayevsky family . . ." (X,19).

After a two month trip to the Caucasus, at the Crimean estate of the Rayevskys in Gurzuf, Pushkin first met Nikolay's two older sisters, Katerina (23), and Yelena (17), and their mother Sofiya Alekseyevna, grandchild of Lomonosov. This highly cultured family exerted a strong and lasting influence on Pushkin's life and creativity. With their help the poet read Byron's poems in English. Katerina, who in 1821 married M. F. Orlov, spoke English perfectly and helped him to understand the more difficult passages. She was an attractive young lady with a rather domineering character (nicknamed "Martha, the Magistrate")<sup>18</sup>

who later served as the model for haughty Marina Mnishek in Pushkin's tragedy *Boris Godunov* (1825, published 1831). "My Marina is a great woman," wrote the poet on September 13, 1825, to his friend, Prince P. A. Vyazemsky, "a real Katerina Orlova. Do you know her? But don't tell this to anyone" (X,181). Of course, Pushkin was in love with her too, and he put her name on the "Don Juan List" under the "casual loves," under the name "Katerina III" (VIII,529), so that some critics wanted to identify her as the "secret love." But the role of Marina Mnishek and the epithets given her by the poet, such as, "haughty Marina, proud Polish maiden (*gordaya polyachka*), rebellious, viper," could hardly have been associated with the object of his greatest love. Besides, Katerina definitely does not fit the description in the dedication, nor in *Poltava* itself, in which the physical description of Mariya seems to be in accordance with all opinions of Mariya Rayevskaya.

As the most serious argument against Mariya Volkonskaya, some biographers quote her own misgivings about the poet's love for her, expressed in her *Memoirs*. I think, however, we can easily understand the caution and mistrust of a young perceptive girl when we realize what a Don Juan Pushkin was at that time, so much so that women even called him the "Arabian devil." "As a poet," wrote Mariya, "Pushkin thought it his duty to be in love with all the pretty women and young girls whom he met." And here Mariya described how, as a fifteen-year-old girl, on a trip to the Caucasus with her family and Pushkin, she had stopped near Taganrog by the seashore to play with the waves, and Pushkin later immortalized this in *Yevgeny Onegin*, chapter one, stanza XXXIII, in the beautiful verses:

*Kak ya zavidoval volnam,  
 Begushchim buynoy cheredoyu  
 S lyubov'yu lech' k yeyo nogam.  
 Kak ya zhelal togda s volnami  
 Kosnut'sya milykh nog ustami. (V,24)*<sup>19</sup>

“Later,” wrote Mariya, “in the poem, *The Fountain of Bakhchisaray*, he said:

[*Vokrug lileynogo chela*  
*Ty kosu dvazhdy obvila;*]  
*Tvoi plenitel'nye ochi*  
*Yasneye dnya, cherneye nochi.* (IV,181)

“In fact,” continued Volkonskaya, “he worshipped only his muse and poetized everything he saw.”<sup>20</sup>

It seems to me, that if Mariya recognized in that poem the description of her own eyes, “lighter than day and darker than night,” she probably had heard that compliment from Pushkin himself. Then, it would not be presumptuous to suppose, that the final digression in that poem: “I remember similar tender eyes,” was also devoted to Mariya.

*Vse dumy serdtsa k ney letyat,*  
*Ob ney v izgnanii toskuyu . . .*  
*Bezumets ! polno ! perestan',*  
*Ne ozhivlyay toski naprasnoy,*  
*Myatezhnym snam lyubvi neschastnoy*  
*Zaplachena toboyu dan'—*  
*Opomnis' ; dolgo l' , uznik tomnyi,*  
*Tebe okovy lobyzat'*  
*I v svete liroyu neskromnoy*  
*Svoyo bezumstvo razglashat' ?* (IV,194)

These ten lyric lines were always omitted from print during Pushkin's lifetime at his insistence. In a letter to his brother, Lev Sergeyevich, of August 25, 1823, Pushkin raged against the indiscretion of his friend, the poet V. I. Tumansky, by saying: “I read him excerpts of my new poem, *The Fountain of Bakhchisaray*, and told him not to print it because there are many references to a woman whom I have loved long and stupidly. The role of Petrarch does not suit me” (X,64). In the post-

script to the same letter, Pushkin wrote: "So be it, I will send Vyazemsky *Fountain*, regrettably skipping the love delirium" (X,65). In a letter to A. A. Bestuzhev on February 8, 1824, Pushkin wrote: "I am happy that my *Fountain* is splashing. The lack of plan is not my fault. I superstitiously translated into verse the story of a young woman." And then in French, he added, "I adjusted to the law of verse, the sounds of her amiable and naive lips." Then a practical remark: "Incidentally, I wrote it only for myself and I am publishing it only because I need money" (X,82).

In another letter to A. A. Bestuzhev on June 29, 1824, Pushkin wrote angrily to his friend: "Some time ago I fell into an overwhelming love. Usually in such situations, I write elegies . . . God forgive you. But you embarrassed me terribly in today's *Polar Star*, by printing the last three lines of my elegy. Imagine my despair when I saw them printed. The journal could land in her hands. What would she think seeing how eagerly I chatter about her with one of my Petersburg friends. I admit that one thought of that woman is more precious to me than the opinion of all the journals in the world and of all of our reading public." (X,94)

These three lines of the elegy *Redeyet oblakov . . .* (1824) are:

*Kogda na khizhiny skhodila nochi ten'—  
I deva yunaya vo mgle tebya iskala  
I imenem svoim podrugam nazyvala.* (II,23)

B. V. Tomashevsky thinks that Pushkin meant here Katerina Rayevskaya (II,399), which is quite possible, because it would be hard to imagine fifteen-year-old Mariya, who still had an English governess and a Russian nurse with her constantly, as seeking out the so-called "Arabian devil" in the mist of the evening. On the other hand, we do not need to be too suspicious here, because Pushkin posed as a Don Juan only to easy con-



quests, but when it came to someone whom he respected, he lost all his confidence. The more he loved, the more timid he became. Here Pushkin was attracted by the gracious young girl who was developing into a lovely woman before his eyes. Mischievous but cautious Mariya, probably just flirted with the gay poet, who at that time, did not think too highly of himself:

*A ya, povesa vechno prazdnyi,  
Potomok negrov bezobraznyi, . . . (II,44)*

He hardly suspected himself that his childish play would be later for him:

*Odno sokrovishche, svyatynya,  
Odna lyubov' dushi moyey. (IV,253)*

and that her "sweet name"—Mariya—would appear so often in his later works. Her physical features, her spiritual qualities, her devotion to duty, these he distributed among many of his heroines. A sensitive and imaginative reader cannot help but recognize the reflection of Mariya Volkonskaya, drawn so painstakingly with such great love, delight and enthusiasm in *Poltava*:

*I to skazat': v Poltave net  
Krasavitsy, Marii ravnoy.  
Ona svezha, kak veshniy tsvet,  
Vzleleyannyi v teni dubravnoy.  
Kak topol' kievskikh vysot,  
Ona stroyna. Yeyo dvizhen'ya  
To lebedya pustynnykh vod  
Napominayut plavnyi khod,  
To lani bystrye stremlen'ya.  
Kak pena, grud' yeyo bela.  
Vokrug vysokogo chela,  
Kak tuchi, lokony cherneyut.  
Zvezdoy blestyat yeyo glaza;  
Yeyo usta, kak roza, rdeyut.*

*No ne yedinaya krasa  
 (Mgnovennyi tsvet!) molvoyu shumnoy  
 V mladoy Marii pochtena:  
 Vezde proslavilas' ona  
 Devitsej skromnoy i razumnoy. (IV,255-6)*

All who were acquainted with Mariya Volkonskaya were in agreement that she had unusual physical charm and spiritual nobility; their descriptions almost parallel Pushkin's picture of Mariya Kochubey. Baron A. Rosen, a Decembrist, wrote that she was "a graceful, rather tall brunette with burning expressive eyes, ivory complexion, and a slightly turned up nose. She had dignified and harmonious movements—we used to call her *la fille du Gange*—'the maiden of the Ganges.'"<sup>21</sup>

Her sister-in-law, Princess Zinaida A. Volkonskaya (nee Princess Beloselskaya), an accomplished poetess, singer and actress, whom Pushkin called, "the Tsarina of muses and beauty," (in whose house in Moscow the poet saw Mariya for the last time before she left for Siberia),<sup>22</sup> speaks also about her "majestic stature," and her "gracious movements as if they flowed into a melody, which the ancients attributed to the heavenly bodies," about her "eyes, hair and complexion like those of a maiden of the Ganges."<sup>23</sup> The Polish poet and friend of A. Mickiewicz, Count Gustaw Olizar (1798-1864), a marshal of the Kievan nobility, who was hopelessly in love with Mariya at the same time as Pushkin was and desperately wanted to marry her, but who was politely rejected by her father because of a difference in faith and nationality,<sup>24</sup> also left a similar description of her. Mariya's "ivory complexion was stressed by her dark and thick locks, by her sad yet burning eyes framed by long lashes and black eyebrows. Her tall slender figure swayed gracefully when she walked. Mariya Rayevskaya became the decoration of all gatherings and balls. Her brilliant mind and talent for singing made her the object of admiration and

delight."<sup>25</sup> Thus, Pushkin's description of Mariya in *Poltava*, "Her motions are reminiscent at times of the gliding movement of a swan in the waters of the wilderness, at others, of the quick rushing of a doe," and "around her high forehead the curls loom like black clouds, her eyes shine like stars . . .," or "everywhere she was regarded as a modest and sensible maiden," are the same qualities which her contemporaries saw in Mariya Volkonskaya. Furthermore, a critic of *Poltava* from *The Fatherland's Son* (1829), objected to "the curls like clouds" as "too strong hyperbole" and correctly observed that "in the time of Mazeppa, curls were not worn in the Ukraine."<sup>26</sup> Of course, this anachronism was made by Pushkin only because, in his imagination, he was describing, not Matrena, but most probably Mariya Volkonskaya. And if we look at her portrait, we are astonished at how fitting Pushkin's description is:

*Vokrug vysokogo chela,  
Kak tuchi, lokony cherneyut. (IV,256)*

Finally, if we compare the pictures of both sisters, Katerina and Mariya, there is no doubt that Pushkin's expressions in *Poltava* can only refer to Mariya.

Of course, we should not look for an analogy in every line about Mariya, because after all, Pushkin wrote about historical characters, Matrena Kochubey, Hetman Mazeppa, and their love, which is a historical fact. And yet, although Pushkin had nothing but cursing epithets for the old Hetman Mazeppa, such as: "villain, thief, Judas, viper, old hawk, destroyer of tender innocence, cruel lover, etc . . ." he suddenly shows him very human, very considerate when he contemplates Mariya's future with him:

*Akh, vizhu ya: komu sud'boyu  
Volnen'ya zhizni suzhdeny,  
Tot stoy odin pered grozoyu,  
Ne prizyvay k sebe zheny. (IV,282)*

This tenderness is absolutely inconsistent with the character of Pushkin's *Mazeppa*. Besides, Mariya, in *Poltava* is not Mazeppa's "wife" but only a mistress. The word "wife" is no doubt but an allusion to Prince Sergey Volkonsky, who while imprisoned in the fortress, or working in the mines of Siberia, in the poet's imagination could have had such reflections about his beloved wife, Mariya, who was pushed into that marriage (1825), by her parents, and had not even known of his activities in the Decembrist conspiracy. Mariya's family, and probably Pushkin too, as their devoted friend, could not forgive Prince Sergey, who being 17 years older than she, married her while playing a most dangerous role as conspirator and revolutionary, eager to change the Russian autocracy into a constitutional monarchy or republic by force. Thus, Pushkin's conclusion is highly appropriate in Prince Sergey's situation:

*V odnu telegu vpryach' nemozhno  
Konya i trepetnuyu lan' .  
Zabylysa ya neostorozhno:  
Teper' plachu bezumstva dan' . . . (IV,282)*

Princess Mariya, after finally learning the truth about her husband and still ill after her recent confinement and troubled by a severe inflammation of her leg, left her infant, Nikolenka, with her paternal aunt, Countess Branicka, in Byela Tserkov and took a long journey to St. Petersburg in order to see, save, or if necessary, follow her unfortunate husband to wherever he might be sent. Her father, family and all her friends tried to dissuade her from that decision. They even used the influence of the Emperor. The Empress cried after she learned of her determination to leave her child and parents, her comfortable life in European Russia, and to share all hardships with her husband in "the sad desert" or "the cold desert of Siberia," as Pushkin expressed it in the dedication of *Poltava*. Emperor Nikolay I, being unable to stop her, tried to persuade her, to

threaten her, but Mariya was adamant in her decision, and said, "I was married to him and I want to share his suffering with him."<sup>27</sup> Were not her words perhaps immortalized by Pushkin in Tatyana's answer to Yevgeniy Onegin?

*No ya drugomu otdana;  
I budu vek yemu verna.* (V,189)

Her child died soon afterward, her family lived in grief and lost favor with the Emperor, but her father accepted the heroism of his brave daughter and while dying looked at Mariya's portrait and said proudly, "Here is the most wonderful woman I ever knew . . ."<sup>27</sup> Thus, Pushkin's words in *Poltava*:

*Vsyo, chto tseny sebe ne znayet,  
Vsyo, vsyo, chem zhizn' mila byvayet,  
Bednyazhka prinesla mne v dar,* (IV,282)

could hardly be the thoughts of his Mazeppa, who never in reality lived with Matrena, but are most probably those of Prince Sergey Volkonsky.

Although some contemporary critics spoke negatively of Pushkin's Mariya, Pushkin himself only twice referred to her as "the young transgressor," and once as a "sinful maiden;" otherwise he always spoke with great sympathy, calling her "unfortunate maiden, poor Mariya, shy maid, peaceful angel," and he finished his first canto with a lyrical digression of forty-eight lines, full of tender compassion for her.

*Mariya, bednaya Mariya,  
Krasa cherkasskikh docherey.*

.....  
*Komu ty v zhertvu otdana ?* (IV,269)

Was Pushkin so deeply concerned for his heroine's misfortune purely out of poetical involvement or merely because he loved her "sweet name," or perhaps because once he had loved her prototype so deeply? This, of course, can never be answered with complete certainty.

In addition, I would like to give the viewpoint of V. G. Belinsky, one of Russia's most articulate literary critics. He admired Pushkin's Mariya for her "proud, firm and decisive character," her ability to love a true hero against all odds, but—according to Belinsky—she did not find that hero in Mazeppa. This mistake was her misfortune, but not her guilt. "Mariya, as a woman, is great in this mistake." And Belinsky's conclusion was: "The creative brush of Pushkin painted many women's portraits for us, but nothing better was created than the character of Mariya. What is that Tatyana, glorified and highly overrated by many in the past and at present, that mixture of rustic dreaminess with urban reasonableness, in comparison with Mariya."<sup>28</sup> Belinsky, of course, was not alone in passing severe judgment on Tatyana, but for the majority of Russians, she was and still is Pushkin's most glorious creation. Nevertheless, Belinsky very accurately underlined Mariya's character, which had so many parallels with Mariya Volkonskaya's, although there were some differences. Princess Volkonskaya, after encountering many difficulties, joined her husband in Siberia in 1827 and stayed with him there until his amnesty in 1856, when they returned to Moscow and then went to Voronki near Chernigov, where their daughter, Yelena S. Kochubey, was living.

Pushkin's interest in Mariya did not end with her departure to Siberia. In Petersburg, in February, 1828, Mariya's two-year-old son died, and Pushkin wrote an epitaph for him, which was engraved on his gravestone:

*V siyan'ye, v radostnom pokoye  
U trona vechnogo Tvortsa,  
S ulybkoy on glyadit v izgnanie zemnoye,  
Blagoslovlyaet mat' i molit za otsa. (III,91,493).*

Mariya learned of this tragedy one year later, from her father who sent her Pushkin's epitaph. In a letter to her father of May 11, 1829, she answered: "I read and reread the epitaph

for my dear angel, sent to me. It is beautiful and concise, and abundant in meaningful thoughts. How thankful I should be to the author. But in my situation, one never knows if remembrances to old friends afford pleasure. Nevertheless, please remember me to Aleksandr Sergeevich and express my gratitude for the epitaph for Nikolenka. Ability to console a mother in her sorrow is real proof of his gift of sensitivity."<sup>29</sup>

Mariya's grief-stricken father died in 1829, and the family of the national hero was left in poverty. Pushkin, who himself was hunted by the police, with difficulties helped Mariya's mother to get a small pension (X, 267, 803).

How Pushkin treasured the memory of Mariya Volkonskaya is apparent from the few lines of his short poem about her portrait with her infant son, painted by Sokolov (1826). Referring to Raphael's Madonna with Child, the Russian poet implores the painter to forget the young Hebrew maiden with the Infant Jesus, and to paint for us "the other Mariya, with another infant in her arms":

*I ty Kharitoyu venchannyi,  
Ty, vdokhnovennyi Rafael' ,  
Zabud' yevreyku moloduyu,  
Mladentsa—Boga kolybel' .  
Postigni prelest' nezemnuyu,  
Postigni radost' v nebesakh.  
Pishi Mariyu nam druguyu  
S drugim mladentsem na rukakh.*<sup>30</sup>

Just before Mariya left Moscow for Siberia (December 27, 1826), Zinaida Volkonskaya gave a farewell party for her and there Pushkin saw his "secret love" for the last time. It was a touching moment and they spoke warmly to each other. Mariya kissed the poet for the last time and departed suddenly. For Simmons "it seems strange" that this meeting "did not find some echo in his poetry at this time."<sup>31</sup> There could be several reasons

for this omission. First, Pushkin was almost obsessed by the idea of keeping Mariya's name secret. To write more openly at that time would have meant betraying his treasured secret to the curious public, and this would have been contrary to Pushkin's nature. Secondly, the Decembrist women were admired and almost worshipped at that time in Russia. We read this in the letter of Prince P. A. Vyazemsky to A. I. Turgenev, on January 26, 1827: "Recently we saw passing through Moscow, Muravyeva-Chernysheva and Volkonskaya-Rayevskaya. What an exciting and noble sacrifice. Thanks to the women, we have a few beautiful pages in our history. One saw in them, not an exalted fanaticism, but the pure, quiet humility of martyrdom, which does not seek glory, but acts in accordance with all-embracing sympathy. There was nothing for the gallery. Besides, where do we have a gallery? Where is public opinion?"<sup>32</sup>

Thus, Pushkin's silence perhaps expressed the highest reverence to Mariya, the more noble way to respect the great tragedy of the beloved woman. Thirdly, such a great artist as Pushkin was able to put his personal tragedy skillfully and unnoticeably into his art, as we can see in the dedication to *Poltava* where the subtle hint of her "sad desert" and "the last sound" of her voice has that tender echo of the last meeting. Furthermore, "some echo" of that meeting can be read between the lines in *Yevgeny Onegin*, in Chapter VIII, where Onegin's impression of the second meeting with Tatyana could easily have been the poet's own experience:

*"Uzhe! ona? No tochno . . . Net . . .  
 Kak! iz glushi stepnykh seleniy . . ."* (V,173)  
*Chto s nim? v kakom on strannom sne!  
 Chto shevel'nulos' v glubine  
 Dushi kholodnoy i lenivoy ?  
 Dosada? suyetnost' ? il' vnov'  
 Zabota yunosti—lyubov' ?* (V,175)



Thus, we can see how much this remarkable woman meant to Pushkin and how greatly she influenced his poetry. Not only Mariya in *Poltava*, but Tatyana in *Onegin* and also Marya in *The Captain's Daughter* are subtle reflections of that deep but tragic love. Pushkin was the first to exalt the Russian woman in literature and he had good reason to do so, because he had a real and living example in the person of heroic Mariya Volkonskaya, the object of his secret and unacknowledged love. By transforming his personal unhappiness into poetry, he created several outstanding examples of Russian womanhood in his works. The pattern of Pushkin's heroines can be seen in Lermontov's Princess Mary, Turgenev's Liza and Nataliya, and Goncharov's Olga and Vera, and in heroines of many lesser writers as well.

As Waclaw Lednicki so aptly expressed it: "The whole gallery, this exquisite row of feminine portraits impressing with their physical charm as well as with their spiritual depth, is a psychological puzzle until we put them in the light of Pushkin's love to Princess Volkonskaya. This love explains all and seems to build an admirable line of character and adds a heroic touch to Pushkin's Russian women. This heroic touch, this element of heroism which slumbers in the depths of these female characters doubtlessly derives its beginning from Princess Volkonskaya."<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps an adamant skeptic would be convinced only by the signed statement of Pushkin himself. However, in light of the evidence presented above, it would seem that *Poltava* could be dedicated only to Mariya N. Volkonskaya, and that her character and her deeds influenced all of Pushkin's remarkable heroines.

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<sup>1</sup>Wellek, René and Warren, Austin, *Theory of Literature*, New York, 1956, pp. 63-68.

<sup>2</sup>Brückner, Aleksander, "Oniegin Puszkina po polsku," *Przegląd Współczesny*, Warsaw, May, 1925, p. 301.

<sup>3</sup>Lednicki, Waclaw, *Aleksander Puszkina*, Cracow, 1926, p. 7. I obtained some valuable information and bibliographical data from this inspiring study, which I respectfully acknowledge here.

<sup>4</sup>Zelinsky, V. A. (ed.), *Russkaya kriticheskaya literatura o proizvedeniyakh A. S. Pushkina*, 7 parts, Moscow, 1887, Pt. 7, p. 100.

<sup>5</sup>Matrena (in Ukrainian, Motrya) was the youngest daughter of the Cossack General Judge, Vasył' Kochubey (? -1708), a Ukrainian nobleman of Tartar ancestry. Her godfather, the Ukrainian Hetman Ivan Mazeppa (1687?-1709), who was about forty-five years her senior, and Matrena were in love and he wanted to marry her. His proposal, however, was rejected by her parents, not only because of the age difference but for religious reasons as well. The Orthodox Church strictly forbids a marriage between a godchild and godparent. Annoyed by the persistent scoldings of her parents because of this unusual love, Matrena once ran away to the hetman's palace, and he immediately sent her home to her parents. In his letter to the offended Matrena, Mazeppa explained that he did not keep her, but sent her back home, because "your parents would have spread the story through the whole world that I had kidnapped their daughter by force during the night and that I am keeping you as a mistress." (See Bantysh-Kamensky, D. N., *Istoriya Maloy Rossii*, 3 vols, (3rd ed.), Kiev, 1903, Vol. III, p. 575.) Pushkin utilized this strange love, especially its final episode in the untrue version (just as Mazeppa had feared Matrena's parents would misinterpret); applying poetic license to obtain a more dramatic effect. In reality the whole love episode was over by 1704, but in *Poltava*, Pushkin places it in the year 1708.

<sup>6</sup>Pushkin, A. S., *Polnoye sobranie sochineniy*, 10 vols, (ed. by the USSR Academy), Moscow, 1956-1958, Vol. IV, pp. 563-564. Hereafter, I will refer only to the volume and page of this edition in the text, following quotations.

<sup>7</sup>Shchegolev, P. E., "Iz razyskaniy v oblasti biografii i teksta Pushkina," *Pushkin i yego sovremenniki*, Petersburg, 1911, Issue XIV, pp. 53-193, and Shchegolev, P. E., "Utaënnaya lyubov' Puskina," *Pushkin*, Petersburg, 1911, 2nd. ed., pp. 35-195.

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- <sup>8</sup>Simmons, Ernest J., *Pushkin*, Cambridge, 1937, pp. 111, 264.
- <sup>9</sup>Troyat, H., *Pushkin*, (trans. by R. T. Weaver), London, 1951, pp. 137, 274.
- <sup>10</sup>Nekrasov, N. A., *Izbrannye sochineniya*, Moscow, 1945, p. 187.
- <sup>11</sup>Lednicki, *op. cit.*, p. 238, suggests that there were at least 113 women, because at one time Pushkin told his wife, she was his 113th love.
- <sup>12</sup>Lednicki, *op. cit.*, p. 227.
- <sup>13</sup>Bulashev, G. O. "A. S. Pushkin na yuge Rossii," *Sbornik Pushkina*, vol. II, (ed. by Kievskoye Pedagogicheskoye Obshchestvo), Kiev, 1899 and Sipovsky, V., *Pushkinskaya yubileynaya literatura 1899-1900*, Petersburg, 1902, pp. 100-104.
- <sup>14</sup>Sokolov, B., *Kn. Mariya Volkonskaya i Pushkin*, Moscow, 1922.
- <sup>15</sup>Brückner, A., *Historja literatury rosyjskiej*, Vol. I, Lvov, 1922, pp. 523-524.
- <sup>16</sup>Lednicki, *op. cit.*, pp. 226-263. Cf. also *A. Puszkín, Eugenjusz Oniegin*, (trans. by L. Belmont), ed. by W. Lednicki, "Biblioteka Narodowa" Vol. 35, Cracow, 1925.
- <sup>17</sup>*A. S. Pushkin i yego epokha*, ed. by "Illyustrirovannaya Rossiya", Paris, 1937, pp. 44-45.
- <sup>18</sup>After a Russian heroine of the Middle Ages, who had been a magistrate of Novgorod and fought for the city's independence. Cf. K. F. Rylejev's ballad, *Marfa Posadnitsa*, and M. P. Pogodin's drama by the same name. See Bogoslovsky, N. V., (ed.), *Pushkin-Kritik*, Moscow, 1934, p. 230.
- <sup>19</sup>In the same chapter, stanza XXXI, Pushkin wrote also a digression about two shapely legs, apparently those of Mariya Rayevskaya, saying, "On the northern sad snow, you did not leave your footprints." (V, 23) This could be an additional indication of his "southern" love.
- <sup>20</sup>Volkonskaya, Kn. M. N., *Zapiski*, (2nd ed), Petersburg, 1906, pp. 22-24, and Grossman, L. (ed.), *Pis'ma zhenshchin k Pushkinu*, Moscow, 1928, pp. 148f.
- <sup>21</sup>Sokolov, *op. cit.*, p. 155, *Volkonskaya, op. cit.*, p. xxix.
- <sup>22</sup>During Mariya's last visit to Petersburg, she happened to stay at the house on the Moyka River, near the Pevcheskiy bridge, where Pushkin died 11 years later.
- <sup>23</sup>*Oeuvres choisies de la princesse Zeneide Volkonsky, nee princesse Belosselsky*, Paris, 1865, pp. 253-4.

<sup>24</sup>Pushkin wrote a poem *To Count Olizar* (1824) :

*I nasha deva molodaya,  
Privlekshi serdtse polyaka,  
Otvergnut, gordost'yu pylaya,  
Lyubov' narodnogo vraga.* (II, 226)

Is this not an expression of his jealousy?

<sup>25</sup>Olizar, G., *Pamietniki*, Lvov, 1892, p. 155.

<sup>26</sup>Zelinsky, *op. cit.*, Pt. 2, p. 157.

<sup>27</sup>*Pushkin i yego epokha*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>28</sup>Belinsky, V. G., *Sochineniya*, 4 vols., Kiev, 1913, Vol. III, p. 574.

<sup>29</sup>Shlyapkin, I., *Iz neizdanykh bumag A. S. Pushkina*, Petersburg, 1903, p. 49.

<sup>30</sup>*Pushkin i yego epokha*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>31</sup>Simmons, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

<sup>32</sup>*Ostaf'yevskiy Arkhiv*, letter of January 26, 1827.

<sup>33</sup>Lednicki, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

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