CHAPTER X

PUSHKIN'S JOURNEY TO ERZURUM

Some months after a trip to the Caucasus during which he participated in Paskevich’s summer campaign against Turkey (1829), Pushkin wrote a letter, excusing his abrupt departure from Moscow the previous year, to his future mother-in-law. He writes on April 5, 1830: “Lorsque je la1 vis pour la première fois, sa beauté venait d’être à peine aperçue dans le monde; je l’aimai, la tête me tourna, et je la demandai, votre réponse toute vague qu’elle était, me donna un moment de délire; je partis la même nuit pour l’armée; demandez-moi ce que j’allais y faire, je vous jure que je n’en sais rien, mais une angoisse involontaire me chassait de Moscou; je n’aurais pu soutenir ni votre présence ni la sienne.”2

Despite this passionate avowal, as early as April, 1828, when Russia declared war on Turkey, Pushkin had asked to be allowed to join the army. His request was denied by Nicholas I. Another plea, that he be allowed to visit Paris, was also denied.3 Finally in mid-March, 1829, Pushkin received oral permission from Benkendorf, the head of the secret police, to go to Tiflis to visit his brother who was then serving in the army.4 Later, in attempting to justify having attached himself to the army without any official sanction, he writes

1 He is referring to Natalie Goncharova, then a girl of sixteen.
2 A. S. Pushkin, Sobranie Sočinenij (Moscow: Gosudarstvenoe Izdatel’stvo Xudožestvennoj Literatury, 1959), IX, 316. All subsequent references will be to this edition.
3 David Magarshack, Pushkin: A Biography (London: Chapman & Hall, 1967), p. 219. According to the testimony of one contemporary, A. Ivanovsky (who worked in the Third Section), it was he who suggested to the poet the possibility of going to Paskevich’s Caucasian army. Another contemporary, N. Putyata, relates that, after the tsar’s first refusal, Benkendorf proposed to the poet that he participate in the campaign as a member of his (Benkendorf’s) Third Section! See V. Veresaev, Pushkin v žizni (6th ed., Moscow: Sovetskij Pisatel', 1936), pp. 391–393.
4 Magarshack, p. 222.
Benkendorf that since his brother and the army had already left Tiflis when he arrived, he felt impelled to follow them.\(^5\)

One can only speculate as to whether the poet’s departure was, as he claims in the letter to Mme Goncharova, occasioned by her daughter’s hedging answer to his marriage proposal, or whether, as he states to Benkendorf, he wanted to visit his brother Lev, or whether he might not have been contemplating fleeing the country altogether, via Turkey.\(^6\) Grossman simply interprets Pushkin’s \textit{pobeg} as a last fling of the poet’s romantic youth,\(^7\) which is certainly true in the sense that not long after his return to Petersburg he married; thereby accepting all the obligations, both social and domestic, that union with such an empty-headed but ambitious girl entailed. After his marriage, furthermore, Pushkin increasingly devoted himself to prose writing; and it is during this last period that he worked on the final version of \textit{Journey to Erzurum} (first published in 1836).\(^8\)

Incessantly harassed, censored and, perhaps even worse, patronized by the authorities, Pushkin was obviously desperate for the relief and freedom which such an excursion to the south involved. The moment was particularly opportune, for the police were occupied with making preparations for Nicholas’ impending trip to Warsaw where he was going to have himself crowned King of Poland.\(^9\) Benkendorf had, nevertheless, taken steps to insure that Pushkin would be under the surveillance of local authorities during his projected trip to Tiflis.

Pushkin’s journey was fraught with ironies, some of which he notes in \textit{Arzrum}, others of which he seems to have intuited (since they are fully apparent only in the light of later events of his life). First of all, Pushkin wryly remarks that, upon crossing Russia’s frontier with Turkey, he still finds himself under Russian jurisdiction: it is all occupied territory. Pushkin never did manage to leave Russia. Despite all his efforts to escape a tyrannical order that was restricting and humiliating him, he seemed to be driven towards a tragic end which seemed inevitable only after it had been accomplished.

Another irony, to some extent contingent on later events, hinges on

\(^5\) Pushkin, IX, 296–297.
\(^6\) This last somewhat dubious thesis is advanced by one Soviet scholar on the basis of several ambiguous passages in the correspondences of the poet’s friends. I. N. Enikolopov, \textit{Puskin na Kavkaze} (Tiflis: Zarja Vostoka, 1938), p. 71.
\(^8\) This work, \textit{Puteshestvie v Arzrum}, will henceforth be referred to as \textit{Arzrum}.
\(^9\) Enikolopov, p. 34.