Introduction

When, in his poem ‘An Evening of Russian Poetry’, Vladimir Nabokov sought to convey a quintessential image of Russia’s most celebrated poet, he conjured up a vision of that poet on the road:

Let me allude, before the spell is broken,
to Pushkin, rocking in his coach on long
and lonely roads; he dozed, then he awoke,
undid the collar of his traveling cloak,
and yawned, and listened to the driver’s song.¹

Nabokov’s description recalls the many instances of travel familiar to Pushkin’s readers, as well as the larger fascination with journeying that pervades Romantic literature.² That fascination was at least as strong in Russia as it was in the West. Under the watchful eyes of a repressive regime, the rare opportunity to travel freely imbued journeying with an intensity reflected in the work of many Russian Romantic authors. Indeed, Pushkin’s great contemporary, the poet Fyodor Tyutchev, expressed the widespread urge for wandering when he wrote, in a memorable bilingual play on words, ‘Je n’ai pas le heimweh, mais le herausweh’ (‘I don’t have homesickness, but going-away sickness’).³

For Pushkin, going-away sickness took many forms – travel to specific settings, such as the Crimea or the Caucasus; imagined travel to places that Pushkin never visited in person; travel in various vehicles or modes (e.g. by ship or coach, on foot or horseback); travel as a source of satire or of sentiment; travel as metaphor. A persistent motif from his early work on, travel in Pushkin encompasses a strikingly broad expressive

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¹ From Transport to Transgression: Alexander Pushkin’s Literary Journeys
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range – the elegiac, otherworldly tone of poems like ‘Demons’ and ‘Winter Road’, where the exterior journey of the lyric frames an exploration of the poet-speaker’s interior, emotional journey; the troping of life itself as a coach-ride that all too soon reaches the end of the line, as in ‘The Wagon of Life’ (a poem with intriguing points of comparison with other coach-ride texts on life and mortality, such as De Quincey’s *English Mail-Coach*, Dickinson’s ‘Because I could not stop for Death’, and De Vigny’s ‘Maison du Berger’); the humorously irreverent verse catalogue of travel annoyances entitled ‘Lamentations of the Road’; the ironic social commentary of the prose narratives *Journey from Moscow to St. Petersburg* and *Journey to Arzrum*; and exaltation of travelling as an image of imaginative freedom and poetic productivity. This last mode finds its expression in, among other places, two famous lyric poems from the 1830s, ‘To the Poet’ and ‘Autumn’; in the first poem, Pushkin ostensibly apostrophises poets in general but actually seems to be addressing himself, when he urges ‘the poet’ to follow ‘the free road / Along which your free mind leads you’. In ‘Autumn’, Pushkin specifically links poetic creation to two successive tropes of travel-related motion: the image of a horse bounding across the ice, and that of a stately ship setting out to sea. Yet further instances of travel abound in Pushkin’s letters, short stories, the novella *The Captain’s Daughter*, as well as his masterpiece, the novel in verse *Eugene Onegin.*

Rather than attempt to cover so vast and varied a theme in its entirety, this chapter deals with the process of journeying in Pushkin, apart from considerations of purpose or destination. My discussion focuses primarily on three Pushkinian texts representing different genres and styles: the ‘southern’ narrative poem, *The Gypsies*, begun in 1824, published in 1827, and reflecting Pushkin’s exile in the south of Russia during the 1820s; the prose travel memoir, *Journey to Arzrum*, based on notes Pushkin made during a journey in 1829, but revised into final form in 1835; and the great short lyric poem, ‘From Pindemonte’ (written in 1836 but published posthumously). Himself deprived of the right to travel freely for much of his short life (1799–1837), Pushkin often invested taking a journey with the emotional transport of individual self-determination, artistic creativity and a euphoric union with nature; above all else, his work links travel with freedom. But such positive, ‘transporting’ aspects of the journey often co-exist or, at times, ambiguously overlap with darker themes: the journey itself as a transgressive act of rebellion or defiance, as a form of punishment or suffering (e.g. the isolation of exile), and as the occasion for a sinister, even violent crossing of moral and cultural boundaries.