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**James Robinson Johnston Chair in Black Canadian Studies
Eminent Speakers' Series
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*“...And Every nation shall know my name”:
The Impact of Alexander Pushkin on World Culture
by
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EXCERPTS

PUSHKIN'S IMPACT WORLDWIDE*

[...] *“...If Pushkin had not arrived when he did as a writer and historian Russia would have had to create both a literary giant of his proportion and a chronicler of its history who could create and interpret the myths of the ordinary people with the detail of a scientist and the sensitivity of a poet. Since the royal house had been so completely Europeanized from the time of Peter the Great, Russia was in danger of losing its own soul, that is, its own voice which is the same thing. And with Peter's mad rush to bring Russia into the Western sphere, he had gathered to himself the accoutrements of power and prestige much like his contemporary colleagues. He had brought his own African to court. A token was needed to say that he had really arrived at high status. This was a move that would catapult Russia into the major leagues far quicker than the*

new-fangled navies Peter was fond of building. The great grandson of Hannibal would claim Russia's heart as his own, and the blood he would shed in his final duel would fertilize and immortalize his name forever.

"Few heroes have had so much thrust upon their shoulders in such a short period of time as the young writer. The major accomplishment of the young poet, Pushkin, was that he helped Russia to find and then to save its soul during a period of tremendous hardship, suffering, and spiritual indirection. Out of the frayed emotions of the Russian people and the confused philosophies of the Russian court, Pushkin almost singlehandedly lifted the nation into the modern world of great literature. He was its inspiration, its ambition, its flamboyance, its swagger.

"What troubled and invigorated Pushkin was the state of literature and language in Russian society and he felt that the unlimited and unspeakable terror of ignorance had to be overcome in order for the ordinary people to rise to a higher level of consciousness. In this we see his first great impact on world cultures, that is, the elevation of the artistic and intellectual sights of ordinary humans.

"In my own interpretation of human experiences I am most concerned with human agency and centering. Agency suggests the ability of someone to be self-generating and not simply an object in the worldview of others. Centering means seeing a person as a responsible and accountable force within the context of all human activities. Thus, it is possible to be located in a centered position or dislocated. Dislocation carries with it confusion, anomie, and subordination to the will of others. In relationship to Africa I seek in every case and on all occasions the centered place of Africans within phenomena. I want to know what role or action occurs because of the participating, motivating, or activating influence of African people. I am not interested in African people as peripherals to Europe or on the fringes of some one else's agenda; I am preeminently concerned about centering of African people within their own cultural, historical, and economic context.

Nevertheless, centering as a concept is applicable to all cultures and every situation, not just to Africa and Africans. Although I initially approached the theoretical work with an eye toward the African condition, I am deeply aware of the fact that location and dislocation, agency and the lack of agency, can be found in all circumstances.

*“It is for this reason that I am able to examine the life and work of Alexander Pushkin within the context of agency and centeredness. I am interested in him as a Russian of mixed heritage, African and European, who activated an entire nation with the eloquence of his poetry as in *Eugene Onegin* and other lyrical works. This is not merely a biological interest, but a cultural one as well inasmuch as Pushkin was evidently visibly of African descent. Nevertheless, he captured Russian sentiments and myths and created the most fundamental literature of his age impacting on the way the Russian people interpreted their own condition. What is **Eugene Onegin** but one of the great studies in human nature? Here we see the full power of a novel in verse. Pushkin showed his versatility in **Eugene Onegin** by introducing new forms of language, new figures, and new myths. His poetry was triumphant, richly endowed with metaphors and tropes, endless permutations and brilliant improvisation. The incongruity that we find in life is found in *Eugene Onegin*’s preaching to Tatyana. We can survey the follies of humans and comment on them as the protagonist does in **Eugene Onegin** and never once call something good or bad. Life dictates so much incongruity, so much absurdity, so much that we cannot explain, even when we are as skilled as Pushkin in the use of antenantiosis, the positive statement made in negative form, e. g., “she was unhurried, neither received, nor talkative.” Antenantiosis is not to be confused with antithesis which is to deny one in order to settle on another., e. g., “not him, but her.”*

“Pushkin was the master of an array of literary forms and was the single most important influence on the nature of the Russian literary genre. As such, his cultural location, indeed, his psychological location at the time of his most powerful writings, indicate a sense of agency and

centeredness within Russian culture that embodied the attitudes and sentiments of Russian people despite his biological inheritance. The sociobiologist may say that biology is destiny but Pushkin demonstrated, even within the limited technological environment of early 19 century Russia, the significance of culture in orienting the masses toward a collective consciousness. His natural reactions in the presence of the sad prospects of the ordinary people's lives were to view the continuing cultural dislocations of the Russian people as an act of sacrilege..."

PUSHKIN'S LEGACY TO THE WORLD *

"... How could the Russian people exhibit only the cultural styles and abilities of a conquered people? What tragic situation had befallen the Russian people that caused them to reject the use of their own language as literature?"

"Pushkin was Russia's first great writer of international scope and class. He was the first Russian writer to use the full powers of the people's language, Russian, in literature. This is the beginning of his genius. He recognized that the masses of people did not speak or understand French. In fact, being of noble ancestry himself, and having an African great-grandfather, who may also have been a noble in Ethiopia, Pushkin was keenly aware of the role culture plays in uniting a people. He pursued the freedom to listen to the serfs who served his family and to learn from them the governing myths of their extraordinary lives. His ability to absorb gave him the freedom to form his own opinions, to establish his own traditions, to explore the metaphors of the people, and to measure the emotions of common people in his writings.

"Yet with all of Pushkin's concern and interest in the realism of Russian masses, it is correct to say that he belonged to the Romantic Age as well. Now, two hundred years after his birth, we are still exploring the moral realism in his poetry as a structural problem or assessing his impact on the semantics and linguistics of a major modern language while at the

same time we recognized the ideals of the Romantic Age in his narrative poetry and drama.

“Pushkin wrote the best prose, poetry, and fiction at a time when it was necessary to establish new standards in every genre. So great was Pushkin’s emotional and intellectual reach into the Russian people that he was without comparison. One could read Pushkin and know that he knew so intimately the language of the masses. His poetry demonstrated influences from European sources but his prose is rich with the elements of the people. And it is possible to say that because he lived so briefly in a Russia fraught with social and material problems, most of what he contributed to the literary scene came, not from without but from within the historical and psychological life of the people. When he died, even at such a young age, he had achieved everything that was necessary to achieve to lay the basis of the literature of Russia.

“There was an element of inspiration so deeply ingrained in his work that “brilliant” becomes the only adjective to describe Pushkin. He mastered at an early age all the best qualities of European literature, not through study necessarily, but through the living experiences of the people, and he became for Russia more than Shakespeare was for England, or Goethe for Germany, the embodiment of the soul of the people. In one very profound sense, the descendant of the blackamoor of Peter the Great, created a people who were on the verge of becoming a nation.

*“Pushkin was Russia’s greatest thinker and its most celebrated poet because he established a full range of fictional and nonfictional writings that have continued to influence Russians’ views of their own history. In the narrative poems, **Poltava, The Bronze Horseman, and Count Nulin**, as well as the prose fiction such as **The Blackamoor of Peter the Great and The Captain’s Daughter**, we are introduced to Pushkin’s enormous reach into the historical and political thought of the Russian people. So thoroughly Russian was he that his African blood, although*

present even in his physical appearance, did not prevent him, and perhaps assisted him, in absorbing the manifold experiences of the Russian people. He became the personification of Russia with all of the tensions of the society expressed in his histories and fictions or in the relative weight of chance and necessity in historical processes.

“Thus, as we celebrate the birth of Pushkin let us celebrate also the liberating spirit to which his life attested and see in him the great possibility of human freedom. If there is one lesson to be learned from the centeredness and agency of Pushkin it must be that regardless of the environmental and social conditions of our lives we can always rise to the challenge of transforming ourselves and the world in which we live. Even in this lesson we see the energizing and flourishing of the most African of all attributes, the creative science of effective human relationships. And with the Russian people, we African people celebrate our common genius. ...”

* Excerpted from the James Robinson Johnston Chair in Black Canadian Studies' 1999 March 21st Public Lecture delivered by Dr. Molefi Kete Asante, “ *...And Every Nation Shall Know My Name*”: *The Impact of Alexander Pushkin on World Culture*, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, March 19, 1999.