

DOMIK V KOLOMNYE
THE LITTLE HOUSE AT KOLOMNA
 by **ALEXANDER PUSHKIN**
Peter Cochran

Introduction:

Pushkin published too late for his reputation to reach Byron. He appears in neither of John Bowring's anthologies of Russian poetry, at least one of which Byron knew: ¹ if Byron had read a Bowring-ised version of *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai*, for example, he would have felt strangely flattered to see his earlier self being used as model. On the other hand, the influence Byron had on Pushkin was (via French paraphrases ²) considerable, although it is not well documented in English. Here I consider one aspect of it only.

A possible sub-title for *Onegin* would be, "Reading Byron will ruin your life". From early in the portrayal of his heroine, Tatyana, Pushkin tells us how corrupted her sensibility has become by reading even Richardson and Rousseau – whose heroes are at least pure in intention. But, as Charles Johnston's translation has it:

... Now that the British Muse is able
 to wreck a maiden's sleep with fable,
 the idol that she'll most admire
 is either the *distrain* Vampire,
 Melmoth, whose roaming never ceases,
 Sbogar, mysterious through and through,
 the Corsair, or the Wandering Jew,
 Lord Byron, with his shrewd caprices,
 dressed up a desperate egotism
 to look like sad romanticism. ³

The Byronic hero constituted a cult in which Pushkin found a subject for satire, in part as a result of the borrowing he had made from Byron in his own early work. Familiar use had bred objectification.

Tatyana's bookish fantasies combine for her in his new "hero", Onegin, who has already (I, 38) been described as modelling himself on Childe Harold, and the consequence is humiliation, when he rejects the love she offers – very correctly, but without grasping what it is in him that she has fallen in love with. In Chapter Seven, she confronts the reality behind the dream, on entering his deserted house and looking over his library. Her intuition tells her that she will find something out there about this man, who ought in theory not to be, but in reality is, indifferent to her. Sure enough, many of Onegin's books are by Byron, and a portrait of the poet hangs on the wall, over a statuette of Napoleon. Here is what then happens:

1: See the reference to Zhukovsky (rendered "Kutoffski") in the letter to Moore of December 27th 1823 (*Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed Marchand, IX 84-5).

2: See Vladimir Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin* (Routledge 1964) II 158-63.

3: Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, tr. Charles Johnston (London 1977) Chapter III Stanza XII.

And so, at last, feature by feature,
 Tanya begins to understand
 more thoroughly, thank God, the creature
 for whom her passion has been planned
 by fate's decree: this freakish stranger,
 who walks with sorrow, and with danger,
 whether from heaven or from hell,
 this angel, this proud devil, tell,
 what is he? Just an apparition,
 a shadow, null and meaningless,
 a Muscovite in Harold's dress,
 a modish second-hand edition,
 a glossary of smart *argot* ...
 a parodistic raree-show? ⁴

Thus Tatyana's judgement of men, in both literature and life, starts to approximate that of her creator.

The seventh chapter was written during the autumn of 1827 and the winter of 1828. Two years later, quarantined at Boldino in the autumn of 1830, Pushkin wrote the eighth and final chapter – but also, in a great burst of creativity, his Don Juan tragedy *The Stone Guest*, the two further tragedies *Mozart and Salieri* and *The Covetous Knight*, the five prose stories which make up *The Tales of Belkin* – and the work, a version of which will be found below: *The Little House at Kolomna*.

On or about March 7th 1826, he had written to his friend and agent Peter Alexandrovich Pletnev (to whom *Onegin* is dedicated):

In the collection of my poems, for a novelty, let's place another tale, of the type of *Beppo*, which I have in stock. ⁵

The poem to which he refers is here *Count Nulin*, written – like *Beppo*, in two days – in mid-1825. It is indeed a variation on the *Beppo*-theme. Its heroine, Natalya Pavolvna, appears to entice the eponymous protagonist, only to box his ear when he visits her at night (Tarquin and Lucrece travestied) and to inform her husband of the insult next morning. She thereby confirms her husband's faith in her, which is her plan, for – as the poem's final lines reveal – she is all the while carrying on a liaison with their twenty-three-year old neighbour. Nulin himself is a version of the Count in *Beppo*, except that where Byron's Count seems a critic of authority (to judge, for instance, from the way orchestras react when they know he's in the audience ⁶) Nulin is just a bankrupt dilettante, toting Frenchified cultural baggage around the Russian countryside from estate to estate. If he is a trivialisation of his Byronic original, the poem's heroine, Natalya Pavlovna, seems, in serious adulterous intention, closer to Donna Julia in *Don Juan* than to Laura in *Beppo*. No-one could accuse Laura of long-term scheming: the spontaneity of her reaction when *her* husband comes unexpectedly

4: Ibid, Chapter VII Stanza XXIV (p. 175). Johnston's last line substitutes something weird and climactic for the anticlimax of Pushkin's *Uzh nye parodiya li on?* (rendered "Might he not be, in fact, a parody?" at Nabokov, op. cit., I 273).

5: *The Letters of Alexander Pushkin*, tr J. Thomas Shaw (Indiana and Pennsylvania 1963) I 307.

6: *Beppo*, 32 2-3.

home (Penelope and Odysseus travestied) is so guileless and unanswerable that he is silenced – which Natalya Pavolvna’s husband would never be.

Upon finishing *The Little House at Kolomna* (the manuscript date is October 9th 1830) Pushkin was, in his letter to Pletnev of December 9th, even more coy than he had been about *Nulin*:

... in Boldino I wrote as I have not written for a long time. Here is what I have brought along: the two *last* chapters of *Onegin*, the eighth and ninth, completely ready for the press. A tale, written in ottava rima (of about 400 verses) which let’s bring out *Anonyme*.⁷

Count Nulin is in the four-stress line of which Pushkin was master, and in which *Onegin* is written, as are such works by Byron as *The Giaour*, *Parisina*, and *The Siege of Corinth*. These (albeit in French prose versions⁸) had influenced Pushkin in his earlier years, just as Tatyana had, and Tatyana’s disillusioning tour of Onegin’s library may signal his objectification of them. Pushkin had never written in ottava rima; his decision to do so now (if “decision” is the word) signals a further break with the Byronism of works like *A Prisoner in the Caucasus*, and an assertion, at the same time, of admiration for the older Byron – the result of further thought on his part, and further study of, especially, *Don Juan*. He had at first written that *Onegin* was modelled on *Don Juan*; though subsequently he modified the statement.⁹ The *Domik* experiment did not prevent his returning to octosyllabics for his 1833 masterpiece, *The Bronze Horseman*.

Pushkin’s attitude to Byron’s later work is summed up in this passage from a letter to Vyazemsky of June 1824, often quoted, but never, it seems, understood:

His poetry noticeably changed. He was completely topsy-turvy; there was no gradualness in him, he suddenly matured and attained manhood; sang his song, and fell silent; and his first sounds did not return to him again – after the fourth canto of *Childe Harold* we did not hear Byron, but rather some other poet wrote with a high, human talent.¹⁰

“We did not hear ‘Byron’” is what he means – that is, between *Childe Harold IV* and *Beppo* we lose the gloomy, histrionic misanthrope who impressed us in our adolescence, and hear instead the “high, human talent” of a much greater writer.

The Little House at Kolomna shows, even more clearly than does *Count Nulin*, how well Pushkin had studied this, Byron’s “high, human” talent, and made it his own. The poem is, like *Don Juan* or *Beppo*, a meta-literary work, in part about its own writing, as will be seen; like them, it digresses without scruple, so that the digressions become as important as the narrative; like them, it advances so far into the depths of facetiousness as to form a sublime quintessentialisation of that quality. As *Beppo* does, it anchors itself with great precision in one city, using St Petersburg as Byron uses Venice, to the extent that the location becomes a kind of character in the story.

7: Shaw, op.cit., II 446. The original eighth chapter – describing Onegin’s journey across Russia – was not published. See Nabokov, op.cit., I 333-45.

8: For Pushkin’s struggles with English, see Nabokov, op. cit., II 161-3.

9: Shaw, op.cit., I 141; I 209-10.

10: Shaw I 161. Pushkin admired the first two cantos more than the rest (I 161); his dislike of the middle cantos probably has to do with their Russophobia.

Pushkin was to do this again – St Petersburg, and the Neva river, are much more active as protagonists in *The Bronze Horseman* than is the poem's sad central character, his other Yevgeny. Last but by no means least, *The Little House at Kolomna* is, like *Don Juan*, a comic hymn to the female sexual impulse. Pushkin is again using himself as model as surely as he is using Byron, for in his blasphemous 1821 tour-de-force, *The Gavriliad*, he takes western civilisation's greatest icon of female sexual continence, the Virgin Mary, and creates adventures for her by which I'm sure Byron would have been shocked. It was not just amusement at the gap between women's words and their deeds which made Byron write in the way he did: somewhere in him was a feeling that women shouldn't have appetites at all – he thought they should “feed on the dew from heaven, the emanations of the spheres, or the rays of the sun”.¹¹ Pushkin had no such prejudice.

A further parallel *would* have lain in several stanzas devoted to attacking literary periodicals of the day: but as one of these, at least, had folded by the time publication arrived, Pushkin edited the stanzas out.

The name of the poem's heroine, Parasha, had been used already by Pushkin: it belongs to Natalya Pavlovna's Zoe-like maidservant in *Count Nulin*, whose role in that tale is peripheral. The only other named character in *Kolomna* is again the maidservant, the second mention of whom occurs when she dies (the third name used in the story is no name, as will, again, be seen). Parasha's need for a man is presented by Pushkin with farcical tenderness, contrasting with Byron's crueller satire in *Don Juan*. The contrast lies partly in the fact that she lacks the power possessed by most of the heroines in the English poem (who include Catherine the Great, grandmother of Pushkin's own Tsar-censor). We never even know to what extent Parasha enjoys the company of her man, after she has got him. We may guess, however, that she obtains a temporary relief from loneliness and frustration, to which Tatyana from *Onegin* – a vision of whom appears, to our amazement, in mid-narrative – seems doomed in perpetuity. “Parasha” then becomes name of the fiancée of the wretched Yevgeny in *The Bronze Horseman*, swept away with *her* widowed mother in the great flood of 1824; and the self-references end dizzyingly, back in the tenth stanza of the present poem, in which Pushkin tells of how *he* looked for the Little House – as Yevgeny looks after the flood in *The Bronze Horseman* – only to find that it had been destroyed.

The Little House at Kolomna was first published in the first number of the periodical *Novosel'e* in 1833.

What follows is not a word-for-word translation of *Domik v Kolomne*: my Russian is not good enough, and it would be impossible to do justice both to the matter and to the ottava rima – so I have paraphrased, with one rule, namely, never write more than one sentence to a stanza unless dialogue is involved, or unless a major dramatic point has been arrived at. I have changed several of Pushkin's references to make them Byronic, so that the thing may appear a Byronic version of a Pushkin version of a Byron poem.

11: Teresa Guiccioli, *La Vie de Lord Byron en Italie*, 3,241. I am grateful to Michael Rees for permission to quote from his unpublished translation of this work.

THE LITTLE HOUSE AT KOLOMNA

1.

These foolish four-stress Lines have had their Day;
 They're puny Rubbish, fit for Boys and Girls;
 Ottava rima's best for a fresh Fray –
 I've always liked its fast, facetious Swirls;
 Chimes One and Two should come as fresh as May,
 Though Number Three more cautiously uncurls;
 Rhymes always were my favourite Relations –
 So, off to War! *En avant!* Battle Stations!

2.

To make my new Verse true and empathetic,
 I'll take for Rhymes whate'er my Soul suggests –
 Despite the Cavils, arrogant, emetic,
 Which carping Critics, feathering their Nests,
 Give old John Hookham Frere, that proud Heretic,¹
 And, doubtless, soon will level at my Jest;
 When Fate decrees, there's no Alternative –
 The Rhymes must bounce, so that the Verse may live.

3.

No Word shall be thrown out here, All shall pass;
 No Draft-dodgers shall here have cold rejection,
 Nor any spavined Mule, nor jade, nor Ass;
 Conjunction, preposition, interjection,
 I'll take them all on, huddling in a Mass –
 Untouchability is no Infection –
 The Dictionary don't disdain, so why should you?
 This is War, not a military Tattoo.

4.

So, let's be having you! You make me ill,
 You 'orrible lot of endings, male or female!
 Fall in, chests out, eyes to the front! Keep still!
 In octave stanzas, 'ten ... shun! Without fail!
 At ease, at ease; stand easy ... By God's will,
 If you keep proper chime, all whole and hale,
 We'll very soon get used to one another,
 And you'll look on me as your loving Brother.

5.

It's quite a thrill to drill such tuneful Numbers,
 To see them all march past, their Heads held high –
 Not straggling out of line, with jolts and lumbers,
 Advancing against odds, all doomed to Die;
 Each syllable, each Foot, each line encumbers
 Its Neighbour not a jot; I tell no lie –
 The poet feels himself the Sword of Fate,
 Like Bonaparte, or Tamburlaine the Great.

6.

Perhaps I'll stop; what next, now – go for Broke,
 All on one Throw? Or time for a Retreat?
 Implanting the Caesura's no big joke,
 To give a Pause between the line's quick Feet;
 My talking Flow may stutter, gape, or croak –
 However I may lie awake and beat,
 The Verses jolt and jump in horrid haste,
 Like kibitkas across Kamchatka's Waste.

7.

Things could be worse; the mighty Neva's granite
 Embankments – or the polished marble Floors
 In ballrooms – or the Steppes of Kirghiz – can it
 Have been so poor a Life, that was the Cause
 Of such Peregrinations? Let me scan it,
 Like that Eccentric who, without a pause,
 Rode dauntless, non-stop – killing his poor Hack –
 From Moscow to St. Petersburg and back.²

8.

The Beast did well, though – Pegasus, in sport,
 Could not have kept up; he, too, has grown old,
 His teeth all rotten, his rank breathing short,
 And his Parnassian Stable damp and cold;
 Dan Phoebus, out to Grass, is all amort,
 And can no more enchant with Songs of Gold;
 The Classic Virtues shrink down in debility –
 We have to strain for new Street-credibility.

9.

Hell, Muse, stop rabbiting! where's your ancient Pride?
 Belt up, and Blow your Nose! Let's start, somehow!
 Eight years ago there lived, by Neva's side,
 A Widow, old and poor, with humble brow
 And one young Daughter – safe they did abide
 In a small Cottage (I can see it now)
 With Windows three, a door, Porch clean and airy,
 Down by the Church of the Protectress Mary.

10.

Out with a Friend, a night or two ago,
 Passing the Place again, I stopped in Wonder;
 The Cottage was no more, and where its low
 Façade sat snug, some gross three-storeyed blunder
 Now lowered o'er us poor Folk; the little widow –
 And her Girl – what roofs were they now under?
 Where are the Snows of youth, the Hails of yesteryear?
 One certainty's for sure – they don't fall here.

11.

It did upset me – I looked up and down
 At those three floors, for Profit ill created;
 And if they had burned down then, not a Frown
 Had crossed my Face; I should have been elated;
 I should have wielded Bellows there, and blown,
 To speed their blazing End; how strangely fated
 Our Memory is! It casts the saddest spell –
 Alone – in company – like a Passing-Bell.

12.

Nostalgia doesn't pay; that man's a Winner
 Who keeps it all at bay, or under hatches;
 Who silences the Impulse, after dinner,
 To let it all come out, while the Room watches;
 He'll soon be called a poor, loose-tongued old Sinner,
 Who flashes all his Dreams, his shreds, and patches –
 As the Doc says, "It's bad for thee, beneath thee!"
 So, restart – but – just one more Glass of Lethe.

13.

The Widow wore a cap, and thickish glasses,
 Stepped from a Rembrandt, grey hair in a bun;
 The Girl was one of those pale, pretty Lasses
 Whose Brow flashed sunlight, and whose dark Eyes shone;
 Just as a female dove cooes when it passes,
 So She seemed to, whenever She stared through one;
 Moore's *Irish Melodies* (in translation chaste)³
 Conspired to educate her tender Taste.

14.

The Harp that once did Tara's Halls She'd sing,
 Another favourite was *Oh! doubt me not*;
 Nor did She sneer at folk songs (the real thing)
 Which, when the ancient Samovar is hot,
 To the warm autumn Stove we sadly bring,
 Or which, while wandering in some wintry Grot,
 Near Homes too poor to buy fresh eggs of Sturgeons,
 The Muse gives *gratis* to poor Russian Virgins.

15.

Our Music is both literal and figurative,
 And, whether by Ivan or by Derzhavin,
 Is always soulful, never merely decorative;
 What happens at a Party, when you're having
 The twentieth merry Toast, and you get speculative?
 All turns to Gloom; whether in court or tavern,
 We take our tunes from Tragedy and Sadness;
 From Misery (here's a paradox) comes Gladness.

16.

Parasha ('twas her name) did all the Chores –
 She washed, and ironed, and sewed, and scrubbed, and scoured;
 She kept the household Books (those needful bores)
 To stop the Family's Mite from being devoured
 By too great an Indulgence within-doors;
 And as the *kasha* soup was being poured,
 Watched carefully o'er the deaf cook, Granny Fekla,
 Lest it should freeze, as if on Parry's Hecla.⁴

17.

Her elderly Mama, meanwhile, just knitted in
 Their Window-seat in day-time (the one Stocking)
 And at nights – Cats rattling the litter-bin –
 Foresaw, in Cards or Tea-leaves, Fate’s keen mocking,
 Or Fortune’s warm Caresses; flitted in
 And out Parasha, her Pulse fiercely knocking;
 No Captain off to Ball, Duke to Bordello,
 Escaped her Eye’s gaze, or that of its fellow.

18.

In Winter, naturally, they closed the Shutters,
 But in Kolomna,⁵ Summer Nights are hot,
 And so they left them open; the Muse stutters
 With Shame to mention “Pale Diana” (not,
 I’m sure, that She is swarthy – my heart flutters
 As fast as Any one’s, at her cold, fruitless Lot)
 But while her Mama snored, our chaste Parasha
 Prayed to the night⁶ to make her Life no harsher

19.

Than it need be; and, while the Cats were howling,
 The clocks tolling, the Nightwatchmen shouting,
 And coaches, late at night, o’er cobbles bowling,
 Intruders burgling, pimps and Harlots touting
 (Discreetly, at a distance) guard-dogs growling,
 And Incubi of all sorts in- and out-ing –
 Parasha felt her tender Heart all modest
 Nudge stealthily the tissues of her Boddice.

20.

On Saints-days scarce, or Sundays more mundane,
 She and her aged Ma would go quite early
 To the Protectress’ Church, humbly to gain
 A Pew well-placed, to hear the Service clearly;
 I’ve not been there for years, but would go fain
 (To satisfy this Fool’s obsession, merely)
 And see if Memory, deceitful Summoner,
 Has lied about the singing at Kolomna.

21.

To the Protectress' too (*Narrative Hitch*)
 A Lady came; her name I can't belay,⁷
 But young She was, and well-dressed, proud, and rich,
 And noble, too (by Marriage, anyway)
 And beautiful; but, like a white Witch,
 She came to pray, and prey She did, I say,
 For one young Bard's thoughts of her still abide;
 Parasha looked less pretty by her Side.

22.

The Rich girl at the poor Girl oft would glance;
 The Poor girl marked her not, but went on praying,
 Which caused the rich Girl's eyes to swim and dance –
 Though not with Joy – with Tears – there's no gainsaying,
 Oblivion did her Innocence so enhance;
 Mean People whispered – Wolves genteelly baying
 Behind their hands – “She's not devout, you know –
 She only comes to Church to make a show;”

23.

And some agreed, her Act was so convincing,
 So proud, so cool, so high, so condescending;
 But I could read her hauteur as evincing
 A Heart destroyed, but Spirit still unbending;
 No matter what misguided Tongues were mincing,
 My Eyes saw in her, Sufferings unending;
 This made me weep, as She did – which She saw,
 And put me down, I guess, as one Bore more.

24.

Although men courted her, She'd never yield;
 Snowed under with luxurious, useless Goods,
 Home was to her a Tomb, lovingly sealed;
 Though Serfs and husband tended her, her moods
 Would show an Arctic sameness, if revealed;
 She starved to Death from most nutritious Foods:
 Though few could see it, Fate had been much kinder
 To poor Parasha, praying close behind her.

25.

And yet Parasha pleased: red ringlets fair
 (I'm very fond of Redheads) just peeped out
 From under her light Headscarf; in her hair
 A little horn-comb nestled; and about
 Her neck, wax beads gave her a nunnish Air,
 Which was quite devastating to the Rout
 Of Guardsmen and of Bureaucrats, whose ogles
 Fell on her from all sides, like hungry Moghuls'.

26.

But did her ogle, sigh, head-inclination,
 Give note of Preference? I'll not report,
 For fear of spoiling this my plain Narration;
 She lived in outward Calm; gave, as I thought,
 No clear Signs of her lonely, shy frustration;
 She may have dreamed of Paris, or of Court,
 But richer cousin Ivanovna (Vera)
 The Sutler's wife, lived, enviably, nearer.

27.

Fate intervened, when Fekla the senescent
 (Their dear, deaf, hopeless Cook from West Estonia –
 Her sense of Smell was no less deliquescent)
 Returned Home from the Baths and caught Pneumonia –
 Infusions hot of minty Tea so pleasant
 Had no effect; The Man Than Whom None's Bonier
 Hauled her away – one Christmas Day he knocked her –
 And took her to the cemetery at Okhta.

28.

Parasha's ma grieved for her more than I did
 (But Vaska, their old Mog, was really pissed)
 Three days she mourned on, Cookless, unprovided,
 Until impatience at the Meals She missed
 Caused her to cry, "That's done! I can't abide it!
 "We've got to hire a new One! Daughter! List –
 "Parasha? Are you there?" – "Yes." – "Run and see
 "If anyone knows a Cook who's going free."

29.

“Yes, Mummy dearest. Shan’t be long. Bye-bye.”
 She went, cloaked, in the Snow; beneath her boots
 It crunched, while overhead, the cloudless sky
 Glittered and twinkled o’er the Owls’ quiet hoots;
 The old dear dozed, and she could not think why
 Parasha took so long; the Problem’s Roots
 Revealed themselves at last, when in she flew,
 And whispered, “Here’s a Cook – I think She’ll do.”

30.

Behind her, quietly clinging like a Shadow, came
 A tall young Woman, skirted bare and humbly,
 Who curtsied low before the ancient dame,
 And then retired into the corner, dumbly;
 “How much d’you want a Week? I’m not to blame
 “If Money’s scarce.” “Little,” lisped the girl so comely;
 “Whate’er you can afford – just a few bob,
 “I’m such a lucky Thing to have a Job.”

31.

The words Parasha’s mother had desired;
 She peered out at the maid. “What do they call you?”
 “They call me Mavra.” – “Well, Mavra, you’re hired;⁸
 “You sleep in there; it won’t too much appal you;
 “Steer clear of men; our Fekla ne’er required
 “Attention from suchlike; it may befall you
 “To tempted be to cheat on Shopping listed –
 “I give you warning – if it does – resist it.”

32.

Some Time went by, but to their great dismay
 The girl seemed daft; her work was up the spout;
 She dropped the plates, the cups, the spoons, the tray,
 She overdid the roast; when she tried out
 A ragout, it ran lumpily away;
 She couldn’t sew, not even a dishclout;
 No matter how or when Parasha tutored,
 Her wisest Efforts were frustrate and neutered.

33.

One Sunday morn she said she'd stay and bake,
 While t'other two answered St. Mary's bell;
 She was quite ill; a cruel, night-long toothache
 Had spoiled her sleep, and made her dreams like Hell;
 But this time they should have a first-class Cake!
 St Mary's music wove its usual spell,
 When suddenly the widow's heart beat harder,
 Imagining Depredations in the Larder.

34.

"A cake?" she thought aloud; "Now, why today?
 "Why should that bad girl Mavrushenka think
 "That she could bake? She couldn't yesterday!
 "We're being robbed! I know she's going to drink
 "Us dry! the Savings! and the Silver! We've been prey
 To Criminals! We'll spend Christmas on the Brink!"
 With all these quaking qualms, and fiendish fears,
 Her eyes went from God's business – and her ears.

35.

"Parasha, dear, stay here – I'm going home,
 "To check on what's afoot – it's just too frightening!"
 Thus, while Parasha stared, and Mary's dome
 Echoed fine Music still, like oiled greased lightning,
 Half-falling down the steps, like a scared Gnome,
 She homeward rushed, with, all around her, brightening
 Apocalyptic Visions; here's the hearth –
 Mavra's room's empty – heavens – what on earth?

36.

Before Parasha's mirror – not her own –
 The Cook was shaving. When the mother saw it,
 "Ah, ah!" she screamed, and fainted. Found alone
 With her unique Ablution, Mavra bore it
 Not a moment, but, vaulting the prone Crone,
 Made off across the Town at some brisk pace,
 A big white Towel across her soapy face.⁹

37.

Eleven struck, and Parasha came back;
 “What is the matter, Mother?” – “Ah, my dear,
 “Mavrushka ...” – “Well, well, what?” – “Had an attack ...
 “I’ll not recover ... Fetch a glass of beer ...
 “She sat there, by your mirror ...” – “Ma, alack!
 “What are you saying? I have no idea –
 “Where *is* Mavrushka?” – “She’s all smeared with Lather!
 “She was a-shaving! Like your late dear Father!”

38.

Whether a blush o’erspread Parasha’s Face
 I cannot tell, at this news misbegotten;
 Mavrushka ne’er returned to that small Place,
 And ne’er was paid; there spread no Rumours rotten
 Of her misdeeds (whate’er they’d been) and Grace
 Ensured that she was soon forgotten;
 Who next took over cooking for the Mother
 And Daughter, God knows. There, the Story’s over.

39.¹⁰

“What, is that all? You’re joking!” – “No, that’s it.”
 “But is this where your Octave Verse bathetic
 “Has led us readers? What a load of Squit!
 “What happened to your Muse so sympathetic,
 “Your Soldiers marching, for a Battle fit?
 “Could you do Nothing else? Oh, how pathetic!
 “Tell us some Moral Thing, to ease our Torment!”
 “I haven’t got one ... have I? ... Wait a moment ...

40.

“Here’re your Morals ... Always check your cook’s
 Culinary and technical Credentials;
 Don’t trust a girl whose Manner and whose Looks
 Lead you to think she’s got more than Essentials;
 Chaps always ought to shave in private Nooks;
 To shave’s not in a Lady’s first Potentials.
 O.K.? If you want Ethics, wrought of Iron,
 Go read some Stuff by that Impostor, Byron.”

The idea of smuggling a man disguised as a woman into a woman-dominated establishment, to satisfy a woman’s desire, will not be new to readers of *Don Juan* Cantos V and VI.

Notes to the poem:

1 (2,5): In the original, Prince Sergei Alexandrovich Shirinsky-Shikhmatov (1783-1837) author of a *Lyric Hymn* in eight cantos (1810) to Peter the Great. Not at all to Pushkin what Hookham Frere was to Byron. At Shaw I 266 Pushkin describes him as a “soulless, cold, inflated, boring windbag”. He was also a Tsarist censor.

2 (7,8): “Monarchs are less imperative than rhymes”: the journey is, in the original, only half this length.

3 (13,7): In the original, the novels of Fyodor Alexandrovich Emin, whose *Miramond* (1766) is strangely *Don Juan*-ish in narrative outline.

4 (16,8): HMS *Hecla*, together with HMS *Griper*, took the Admiral to seek the North-west Passage in 1820.

5 (18,2): Kolomna is a suburb of St Petersburg, on the bank of the Fontanka. Pushkin lived there, near Kalinkin Bridge, until he was exiled in 1820.

6 (18,8): Compare Tatyana contemplating the moon at *Onegin*, II 28, III 16, or VI 2.

7 (21,2): Based on the beautiful but unhappily married Countess Stroynovsky, whom Pushkin had often noticed at Kolomna, this figure also gives a sad possible perspective on Tatyana after the plot of *Onegin* is over.

8 (31,3): *Mavra* is the name of the opera Stravinsky based upon this poem.

9 (36,8): Stanza 36 line 6 is missing in the original.

10 (St.39): The dialogue here can be compared with that at *Onegin*, IV 32-3.