Pushkinist or P.R. Man? Sergei Lifar in 1930s Europe*

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In a 1997 essay for a pre-bicentennial exhibition of Pushkiniana in Paris, Hélène Henry noted the irony of Aleksandr Pushkin’s situation: nick-named “le Français” when he was at school, Pushkin never set foot on French soil. What’s more, his debt to French philosophy and poetry did little to enhance his reputation in the country of Voltaire and André Chénier. “In current opinion,” writes Henry, “nothing could come from Russia but ‘exotic’ objects, marked by local color and folklore: tales and legends, popular refrains, ‘Muscovite songs of old times’, and other ‘verses of moujiks’, as Mérimée expressed it.”1 When the French read Pushkin, it was the fantastic elements of “Ruslan and Liudmila” and the exotic locale of “The Fountain of Bakhchisarai” which drew their attention.

The French have traditionally seen Russia as a country of the Orient, an exotic place located somewhere not in the West, if also not quite in the East. Along with the sense of Russia as a faraway place comes its chronological distance—Russian events seemed to happen in either folkloric time or the non-specific ancient time of fairy tales. From 1909 to 1929, Sergei Diaghilev and his Ballets Russes contributed to this image of Russia, staging ballets with folkloric and fairy tale elements such as Sadko, The Firebird, Petrushka, The Rite of Spring, The Golden Cockerel, Midnight Sun, Russian Tales (Contes russes), The Tale of the Buffoon (Chout) and The Wedding (Les Noces). Each of these ballets emphasized life in Old Russia, in historical or fantastic mode. Along with other of Diaghilev’s presentations, such as Cleopatra, Prince Igor and The Orientals which showed fantastic versions of life in Egypt, the Polovtsian lands, and the Orient (India, Persia, China and Arabia), these spectacular shows gave French audiences what they wanted. “The taste for Oriental art came to Paris as a Russian import, through ballet, music, and decoration,” com-

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mented *Le Figaro* in 1913. “Russian artists have acted as intermediaries between the East and us.” “The French wanted exoticism,” explains Lynn Garafola, historian of the *Ballets Russes*, “and Diaghilev, with an eye to the box office, obliged. Each year [after the success of *Cleopatra* in 1909] exotic ballets—either Eastern or Russian in theme—filled one, or more often, two repertory slots.”

In the Paris of the first decades of the twentieth century, the predominant showplace for things Russian was on stage. But during this same time period Paris became the refuge for Russians fleeing the Revolution and its aftermath, and by the 1930s Paris was considered the capital of “Russia Abroad.” At the intersection of the worlds of theatrical presentation and ballet, of Russian émigrés and Russophilic fans, and of Pushkin and commemorations of the centennial of his death in 1937, one figure stands out in the history of Russian France. The unofficial heir to Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes* as well as his collection of Pushkin memorabilia was the dancer and choreographer Sergei Lifar, and it was Lifar who was at the center of Parisian Pushkin events in 1937.

**Lifar the Dancer**

Born in Kiev in 1905, Sergei Mikhailovich Lifar became captivated by the dance, and in 1922 when the chance came, the young man fled revolutionary Russia for the capitals of Europe and the life of a dancer and choreographer with the *Ballets Russes*. Historians of Diaghilev and his troupe comment that of all the dancers who worked with Diaghilev, Lifar was the only one who continually acknowledged his gratitude for the opportunities and training he received from his mentor. But being a creation of Diaghilev, Lifar was always conscious of the potential for publicity in every word, every action. Having risen to fame by the late 1920s, Lifar continued throughout his life to prime his own publicity pump, reminding his contemporaries of his connection with Diaghilev, with Russia, and with Russia’s poet, Pushkin.

In his books and articles in French and Russian, Lifar had a presence beyond the stage. Over the course of his lifetime, often publishing virtu...
ally simultaneously in French and Russian, Lifar wrote two autobiographies chronicling his path to and with the Ballets Russes, a biography of Sergei Diaghilev, several volumes connected with Pushkin, and a summary of his involvement in Pushkin events of the 1930s. As a character in the story of Pushkinistika abroad, Lifar continued to be of interest to Pushkinists in Russia and in emigration until his death in late 1986. In a 1989 collection devoted to Pushkin, Il’ia Zil’bershtein described his efforts to convince Lifar to donate his collection of Pushkiniana to Russia, while Efim Etkind discussed Lifar’s 1937 centennial exhibit “Pushkin and his Epoch” with the dancer in the last months of Lifar’s life and published their conversation in the issue of Revue des Études Slaves devoted to the sesquicentennial of Pushkin’s death.4

The fact that Lifar deliberately emphasized his ties with Diaghilev, both through his biography of the master and in his own ballet work, makes more than just public relations sense, since Diaghilev really was his dance mentor, training and launching him as a star of the Ballets Russes. Indeed, from his years in Kiev Lifar seemed fated to work with the Ballets Russes. His first dance instructor was Bronislawa Nijinska, sister of Ballets Russes star and choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky, who herself had danced with the first Russian seasons in Paris. Soon after Lifar began his studies, though, Nijinska suddenly disappeared from Kiev. She had received news that her brother had entered a medical institution in Vienna and, along with her mother and two daughters, she rushed to emigrate to be with him. Within a few months, Bronislawa was back working with Diaghilev,5 and several years later she was to be an unwitting conduit for Lifar to join the troupe.

When Nijinska herself began to choreograph ballets for Diaghilev’s troupe, she sent for four of her best pupils from Kiev. Seeing his chance, Lifar tagged along and was able to try out for Diaghilev in early 1923. By all accounts, Lifar did not have the skills of a great dancer, but as Garafola reminds us, “Boys, whether beautiful or not, cost far less than their elders,”6 and Lifar was a beautiful young man.

“Siiaiushchii svet poezii,” Dlia Vas, No. 6 (164), 7 February 1937, 13. While it might seem odd that Moia zarubezhnaia Pushkiniana came out only in 1966, I believe Lifar’s impulse for writing the history of his involvement with Pushkin can be found in his 1961 trip to the Soviet Union, where he discovered an appalling ignorance, in his eyes, of his place in Pushkinistika. By writing the book in Russian, Lifar could be sure his words would reach his former homeland.


5 Garafola, Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes 124.

6 Garafola, Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes 255.
Thus [in the 1920s], for reasons of economy as much as art, Diaghilev turned to youth for his newest stars ... Anton Dolin, Nikitina, Serge Lifar, and Constantin Tcherkas lacked the technique of accomplished dancers. They came to Diaghilev almost straight from the classroom. He gave them lessons, roles that displayed their strengths and masked their weaknesses, and publicity builds that made them instant stars.7

Lifar danced with the Ballets Russes until 1929, when upon the death of Sergei Diaghilev the troupe folded.

But Lifar was to remain in France, his adopted homeland, and he continued to be a visible part of the Paris dance and social scene. Soon after Diaghilev’s death Lifar was offered the directorship of the ballet troupe at the Paris Opéra,8 the hall where the Ballets Russes had performed most often when in Paris. Jacques Rouché, the director of the theater, was delighted with Lifar as a collaborator, especially since Lifar transplanted many of the works from Diaghilev’s repertoire to the Opéra. Lifar staged these works throughout his tenure at the Paris Opéra Ballet, almost thirty years, although not, remarks a French historian of the ballet cattily, “without some perversion of their original choreography.”9

Only 17 when he left home, Sergei Lifar was formed as an adult during his time with Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes. It is not surprising that much of his personality emerged from these experiences. His “artistic persona,” according to Garafola, was that of a “glamorous deco god,” as can be seen in a publicity photo from the 1927 ballet La Chatte.10 In the photo, Lifar is carried onto the stage on the shoulders of his fellow dancers. As a contemporary recalled the ballet:

There was one memorable moment when Lifar made his entrance carried in a triumphal car formed from his companions. [...] Lifar, borne on high in this fantastic car, and seen in the flower of his beauty, seemed to symbolize the Triumph of Youth.11

It was as a beautiful physical specimen that Lifar made his debut in Europe, and he continued to play this role as long as he could. However, his creation as a star dancer was not the only thing Diaghilev gave him.

7 Garafola, Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes 266.
8 It seems that George Balanchine, another of Diaghilev’s protegés, was offered this position first, but was unable to accept. See Martine Kahane and Nicole Wild, Les Ballets Russes à L’Opéra (Paris: Éditions Hazan/ Bibliothèque Nationale, 1992), 17.
9 Kahane, Les Ballets Russes à L’Opéra 181.
10 Garafola, Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes 139.

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Like his mentor, Lifar became an amateur Pushkinist in the 1920s. And as the centennial anniversary of Pushkin’s death neared, Lifar took on a central role in Paris Pushkin celebrations. In addition, working with Diaghilev, Lifar learned the art of advertising, the art of public relations—an art which he was to apply to his own career and to Pushkin.

Lifar the Public Relations Man

In order to achieve a place in the Parisian spotlight, first and foremost Lifar had to advertise himself. Diaghilev gave him the start he needed, with starring roles in La Chatte, Zéphire et Flore, Romeo and Juliet, Apollon Musagète, Le Fils Prodigue and other ballets of the late 1920s. With his writing, Lifar brought his story to a larger public. His first autobiography came out in both French and Russian: Du temps que j’avais faim and Stradnye gody: moia iunost’ v Rossii were both published in Paris in 1935. About the same time, Lifar began to participate in amateur Pushkin studies, publishing some of the Pushkin manuscripts he had obtained from Diaghilev’s estate with his own prefaces. But in scripting his life and his Pushkinism, Lifar had help from a publicity staff of his own.

A paradigmatically iconographic version of Lifar’s life became available in 1937 in Georges Augsbourg’s pictorial biography of Sergei Lifar. La Vie en Images de Serge Lifar could act as a romanticized companion to Lifar’s Du temps que j’avais faim. Augsbourg’s book, with the large format of a coffee table book and the rough pages of a child’s coloring book, was filled with line drawings of imagined scenes from Lifar’s first thirty-some years. The Russian countryside becomes a stage set for the young Lifar, whom the viewer sees playing a fiddle in a “Ukrainian cornfield,” “dancing with the peasants in the forest,” as a student, and as a Red Army man. Scenes of emigration include Lifar leaving Ukraine in a troika, living as a poor émigré in Warsaw, and heading to Paris on foot. Lifar’s life in France includes scenes as a dancer with Diaghilev, as an Opéra star, and finally as a member of French society. Augsbourg labeled one section of the book “Intimité,” and included two drawings pertinent to the discussion below: one “sur les quais” visiting antiquarian booksellers to show his interest in books, manuscripts, and collecting, and another “avec Pouchkine.”

In Augsbourg’s drawing of Lifar and Pushkin, Lifar has a faraway look in his eyes as he thinks, quill pen in hand, about the poet of his homeland. Shown in left profile on the bottom right of the page, Lifar is portrayed as a dancer in his open-necked sleeveless tunic, but he is also a mirror image

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12 For the story of how Lifar acquired Diaghilev’s Pushkiniana, see Lifar, Moia zarubezhnaia Pushkiniana, 26 31.

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of the poet he evokes, drawn in right profile in the upper left section of the page. Both Lifar and Pushkin stare into the air, seeing something not visible to the ordinary man; both hold writing implement to paper, prepared to capture their thoughts on the manuscript page unfurled between them; both seem inspired to write—Pushkin, we assume, will pen immortal lines of poetry, while Lifar, having dreamt himself into Pushkin's study, will fix the image of Pushkin on the page for one of his essays or articles about the poet. Thanks to Augsbourg, balletomanes who were also bibliophiles and collectors could obtain a numbered copy of this tribute to the Russian émigré turned star.\footnote{Augsbourg's book was published in 535 numbered copies, designed to be a collector's rarity.}

But it was not only book afficionados who met Lifar in print. In the 1930s, Lifar's name graced the pages of the Paris press as well, and in more than just advertisements and announcements of performances at the Opéra. He was a celebrity, truly a star to be watched, as announcements such as “The Cinematographic Projects of Sergei Lifar" show. In February of 1937, \textit{Le Temps} ran the following piece:

\begin{quote}
The celebrated maître de ballet intends to make a film based on his own recollections, the ones he evoked in his book \textit{Du temps que j'avais faim}. But his ambition is both wide-reaching and elevated: “The dance of the music hall,” he says, “has found its cinematographic style and rhythm; in its turn classical dance must find a photogenic style.”\footnote{\textit{Le Temps} 4 February 1937, p. 6. Lifar’s later autobiography, \textit{Ma Vie from Kiev to Kiev}, does not mention the plan for a film of his early life. It is probable that his plans were interrupted by the Second World War and never revived.}
\end{quote}

On the stage, in the windows of bookstores, and in the pages of the newspapers, Lifar was a presence in both French and Russian Paris. In preparation for the centenary of Pushkin's death in 1937, Sergei Lifar decided to turn his publicity talents toward the great poet of his homeland and book Pushkin into as many venues as he could.

\textbf{Lifar the Pushkinist}

Lifar's role as Pushkin's Parisian publicist has not received the attention from scholars that it deserves. It is probably fair to say that no single person did more to present Pushkin on the Paris scene than Lifar. While more serious literary assessments, remembrances and commemorations of Pushkin filled Russian newspapers and journals in Paris in the mid- to late-1930s, penned by critics and scholars like Khodasevich, Kul'man and...
Bitsilli, Lifar had put himself in charge of public relations and Pushkinian presentation, and he made sure that he was a part of most Pushkin events across the city. What French and even parts of Russian Paris saw during the centennial was Pushkin through Lifar's lens.

For Lifar, creating and promoting his own Pushkin also became an act of self-promotion as a literary commentator—if not scholar—in both French and Russian. We might expect Lifar—as a dancer, not a writer—to use the dance as his medium of promotional materials, creating the role of Eugene Onegin or another of Pushkin's heroes, but for his primary Pushkin numbers Lifar leapt into literature to offer written versions of Pushkin to audiences Russian and French. His name was connected to several of the important literary events of the Pushkin Days in Paris: editions of Evgenii Onegin and Pushkin's letters to his fiancée Natal'ia Goncharova, published at Lifar's initiative and with his prefaces, were for sale in all the Russian bookstores of Paris and advertised and reviewed in all the Russian publications.

In addition, Lifar worked to promote Pushkin to a popular French and Russian audience by drawing upon the aura of original objects when he mounted and presided over the major exhibition of the time devoted to Pushkin. Called “Pushkin and His Epoch,” the exhibit ran from March 16 through April 15, 1937 in Paris. The exhibit caused a minor political scandal when the Soviet ambassador insisted to the French Minister of Education that he must be a part of the opening, but Lifar avoided any such Soviet intrusions on 'his Pushkin' by moving the location from the more public Bibliothèque Nationale to the private Salle Pleyel near one of the “Russian corners” of Paris.16

Lifar traced his love and interest in Pushkin to the first months of his intensive work as a dancer back in Kiev, linking his discovery of the dance with his discovery of the poet and drawing the connection between his two callings, as a dancer and as a Pushkin admirer. Deaf to Pushkin's genius as a child, Lifar had matured into a need for his own Pushkin.

16 Pleyel was a Paris piano manufacturer and an early patron of Diaghilev, purchasing blocks of tickets to the 1909 performances of Boris Godunov. See Garafola, Diaghilev's Ballets Russes 283. In the campaign to name a Parisian street after Pushkin, a reader of Poslednie novosti suggested renaming the rue de la Neva, which runs near the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral and the rue Pierre le Grand. In the eyes of a journalist from Le Temps, this was an excellent idea, since “this is one of the most frequented ‘Russian corners’ of Paris” and, in addition, in the French view “the rapprochement of Pushkin and Peter the Great on the map of Paris would be appropriate enough, since the great poet played in Russian literature an analogous role to that of the tsar reformer in national history” (“Où sera la rue Pouchkine? Le Temps February 6, 1937, 4). To my knowledge, despite much discussion in the press and several petitions to the city during early 1937, Paris did not ultimately rename a street after Pushkin.
Now, during this fifteen-month period of my life, I reread all of Pushkin—and suddenly began to perceive him completely differently, in a new way, not like a great writer who had gone into the distant past, but as a living [being], trembling, close, and dear to me.¹⁷

Gradually Lifar's new love of Pushkin was to become for him a “cult of Pushkin.”¹⁸ Lifar himself defined his “Pushkinism” in Europe as stemming from his reverence for Pushkin’s genius, but also from his awareness that the foreigners who flocked to his performances were as yet unenlightened about the Russians’ great poet.

Abroad, the name of Pushkin is not surrounded by that shining aura with which it is surrounded in our homeland and which it deserves. The reason for this is, in the main, foreign society’s insufficient knowledge of the true greatness of Pushkin, brought on in turn by the insurmountable difficulty of translating all the power and charm of Pushkin’s poetry into a foreign language ... This is why I directed my activities as a Pushkinist mainly toward acquainting Western European society with the works of Pushkin.¹⁹

As a Pushkinist, albeit self-appointed, Lifar played an important role in the Pushkin commemorative celebrations of 1937 in Paris. The Parisian Pushkin Committee Abroad, an organization founded in 1934 to prepare for the centennial of Pushkin’s death, was pleased to count him among their number. Lifar’s account of his place in Pushkin events, _My Pushkiniana Abroad_, gives an insider account of the events and intrigues of this portion of Parisian Pushkinian history.

In searching for his own cultural identity as a Russian in France, Lifar understood Pushkin on several levels. On one level, Pushkin fulfilled Lifar’s own “fetishism,” his love of the object.²⁰ Lifar saw Pushkin as one source of things to be collected and owned, and he proceeded to collect as

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¹⁷ Lifar, _Stradnye gody_ 232. As did many, Lifar thought of his relationship to Pushkin in terms of Briusov’s and Tsvetaeva’s “moi Pushkin,” “my own Pushkin.” Telling of this period of intensive study of dance and literature, Lifar writes: “I didn’t have ‘my own’ Pushkin, there was not that intimate love, that intimate relationship...” (_Stradnye gody_ 232).

¹⁸ Lifar, _Stradnye gody_ 235.

¹⁹ Lifar, _Moia zarubezhnaia Pushkiniana_ 23.

²⁰ In what may now seem like a rather unfortunate biological metaphor, Lifar referred to his mentor Diaghilev having caught a “collecting bug” (literally “mikrob kollektionerstva”) in his later years. Diaghilev collected everything from phonograph records to rare books and manuscripts, and it was from him that Lifar ‘caught the bug’ himself. Lifar identified Pushkin’s letters to his fiancée as “that acquisition which was later to be the beginning of my own active ‘pushkinianstvo’.” See Lifar, _Moia zarubezhnaia Pushkiniana_, 26–31, especially 28.
much Pushkiniana as he could get his hands on, ranging from portraits of Pushkin’s wife’s parents, a miniature of Pushkin himself by Tropinin, Pushkin’s seal and his “passport” to Bessarabia, other personal belongings of the poet, to several of Pushkin’s manuscripts. On another level, the special aura of these objects had more than just sensational value. Exhibiting Pushkin’s manuscripts had a deeper meaning for him. Pushkin’s manuscripts were a direct and tangible connection to the cultural past, and touching them gave Lifar a sense of his own ‘Russianness.’ He longed to share that aura with his Russian compatriots and with the rest of Paris. And on a third level, through his love of Pushkin Lifar came to believe that he too could participate in the process of literary creation. Choreography, dancing, even drawing were the arts to which Lifar was born, but he wanted to create in words as well, and like many of his generation, he chose to create a portrait of “his own Pushkin” in literary form.

It was the manuscripts which had led Lifar into his involvement in Pushkin events as well as into his efforts to launch his own career as a literary man. Lifar’s articles in the 1930s celebrating Pushkin and helping to advertise his Pushkin exhibit reached not only the welcoming eyes and ears of the Russian diaspora, but the attention of a larger European audience as well. Prominent articles written in French for a popular audience were placed in Figaro Littéraire (23 January 1937) and Paris-Soir (7 February 1937). The headlines emphasized the significance of the centennial celebration not only in European life but in the making of Pushkin’s international reputation. In Figaro Lifar’s front page article proclaimed that “Pushkin is Becoming a Universal Poet,” while Paris-Soir devoted an entire inner page to two of Lifar’s articles, “The Centennial of a Romantic Genius is Being Celebrated” and “After a Life of Love Pushkin Died in a Duel to Defend the Honor of his Wife.” Lifar was placing Pushkin in an international context for a Francophone audience, thereby grounding the Russian national identity abroad more firmly. More

21 It is curious to note that not only did Pablo Picasso draw Sergei Lifar, but Lifar drew Picasso as well, penning himself into the landscape of a pan European cultural heritage. Jean Cocteau and Lifar exchanged portraits as well, and at Lifar’s request Cocteau sketched the well known poster design for the exhibit “Pushkin and his Epoch,” thus helping build the bridge between Russian culture and French art. Both Cocteau and Picasso were deeply involved with Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes in the 1910s and 1920s.

22 This, too, Lifar learned from Diaghilev, who “planted” commissioned articles in the press to advertise his performances (see Garafola, Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes 293). The difference was that Lifar wrote the pieces himself, thus promoting his own name along with his subject.

23 “Pouchkine devient un poète universel.” See Lifar, Moia zarubezhnaia Pushkiniana for a reproduction of the Figaro front page, 73. The use of the present tense suggested that Pushkin was only now, in 1937, beginning to be acknowledged by the rest of the world.

24 “On fête le centenaire d’un genie romantique” and “Après une vie d’amour mourut en duel pour défendre l’honneur de sa femme.” See reproduction of the page in Lifar, Moia zarubezhnaia Pushkiniana 87.
importantly, considering the French view of Russia as an exotic and time-
less land of the East, Lifar was using literary terms—such as Romanti-
cism—and contemporary sensationalistic language to bring Russia into twentieth century Europe.

However, like authors all over the Russian diaspora as well as those in
Soviet Russia, when Lifar decided to write about Pushkin, he found it to
be truly difficult. It would seem that for Sergei Lifar, no professional
man of letters, the prospect of becoming a Pushkinist would be daunting.
But Lifar later claimed not to remember a time when he was not a
“Pushkinist.” “I was always a Pushkinist, my whole life,” Lifar wrote,
“since the first time I read the divine lines of the poet.” As a boy, he re-
lated, Lifar read Belinskii, Shchegolev, Modzalevskii and Annenkov on
Pushkin, taking the tomes of Pushkin studies down from his father’s
bookshelves. And as a man, he wanted to join their ranks.

Already a star on the stage, Lifar jumped right into literary life with
the publication of *A Journey to Arzrum* in 1934 and jubilee editions of
Pushkin’s letters to Natal’ia Nikolaevna and, in 1937, *Eugene Onegin*.
Wanting to make his own contribution to Pushkin studies, Lifar decided to
write a preface to the edition of Pushkin’s letters. “I wanted to write about
Pushkin,” he recorded:

I wanted to pour into this preface everything that I feel in relation
to this genius, I wanted to convey my admiration of the great
Russian genius and of the only artist in the world who can make
the most sacred strings of the soul vibrate. Everything that I felt
and experienced while reading Pushkin I wanted to express not in
a preface, but in a doxology to Pushkin, I wanted my prefacing
lines to be a hymn to that beauty which Pushkin expressed so
magnificently. I had to write both about Pushkin and about what
Pushkin was for me and for millions of other people.

Having by this time authored one autobiography and a *Manifeste du
Choréographe* (Paris, 1935), Lifar was used to writing about himself. His
preface on Pushkin was no different. In it we find a full-fledged confession
and chronicle of the painful process of writing, offered up to the reader in
truly purple prose, a preface more about himself than about Pushkin. For
Lifar, this was the meaning of “Pushkinistika” and of the phenomenon of
“my Pushkin.”

25 For more on this, see my forthcoming *Writing a Usable Past: Russian Literary Culture,
27 Lifar, *Moia zarubezhnaia Pushkiniana* 43.
As he described in his memoir *My Pushkiniana Abroad*, during the time he hoped to write his preface Lifar found himself on tour in Rio de Janeiro, and there he discovered that he was mute:

Every word that I wrote onto the page next to the name of Pushkin seemed dead, false, insufficient... I fruitlessly sought a beginning... Before me the immortal shades of great people who had in their day uttered fiery words about Pushkin—Lermontov, Dostoevskii—rose up... Thus this month, so horrible for me, continued, and suddenly, after a performance, having returned to my room at dawn and looking through the open window at the rising sun, I felt that I had found a solution. Quickly, not stopping to think, I began to fix onto the page the words which jostled each other in my brain...

The images that Lifar used to describe his experience are telling. First Pushkin himself and his lyricism caused “the most sacred strings of his soul to vibrate,” and yet in trying to turn those vibrations into words, Lifar found himself speechless, silent, mute. In his autobiography, Lifar referred to his inability to write about Pushkin as “impotence ... paralysis,” both conditions to be overcome by the “joy of creation.” Comparing himself to Dostoevskii and Lermontov, Lifar clearly felt that he lacked the equipment, the talent, the knowledge of how to write about Pushkin. Before the idols of Russian culture—Pushkin, Lermontov, Dostoevskii—the dancer remained silent in futile awe.

Certainly these are conventional ways to conceive of and describe writer’s block. What is more interesting is the means Lifar found for overcoming his block—his process of inspiration. Lifar understood a certain model of what it meant to be inspired and wrote himself and his own experience into that model. In order to create his own Pushkin, Lifar felt that he needed to fall into an ecstasy. The budding literary scholar took the idea of “inspiration” almost literally, assuming that just as the spirit of poetry flowed into the poets of old, directing their pens, so he too must open himself to that spirit.

Clearly Lifar saw himself in the tradition of anointed authors and chose to present the episode of writing about Pushkin in that light. By first referring to the “immortal shades” of such commentators on Pushkin as Dostoevskii and Lermontov, and then documenting the “fiery words” which came to him at last, Lifar was reading and presenting his own rela-

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28 Lifar, *Moia zarubeznaia Pushkiniana* 43–44. See also another version of this story in Lifar, *Ma Vie from Kiev to Kiev* 140–41.
29 Lifar, *Ma Vie from Kiev to Kiev* 141.
tionship to Pushkin through the lens of a tradition, through his conception of how poetic inspiration is visited upon a supplicant.

The volume of Pushkin’s letters to his fiancée was a kind of literary first and thereby quite a feather in Lifar’s literary cap. Although in 1878 Ivan Turgenev had been entrusted by Pushkin’s descendants with the task of publishing all of Pushkin’s letters to his fiancée and then wife—a total of 75 letters—in The European Herald, Turgenev had published only the Russian versions of the letters. Ten of the letters, written before the marriage, were composed in French, and it was these manuscripts which had fallen into Lifar’s hands. According to Lifar, Turgenev had considered the invitation to handle the publication of the letters as “one of the most honored facts of [his] literary career.” Lifar, too, took this opportunity seriously.

In preparing the volume for publication, Lifar further shared his own experience by printing photographic reproductions of Pushkin’s letters on paper similar to that of the originals, thus allowing the reader to participate in a fetishism of the object and to sense a similar thrill to the almost religious ecstasy Lifar himself felt in touching the actual letters. The Russian reaction to this volume of Pushkin’s letters suggests that Russian readers did indeed take Lifar into the brotherhood of Pushkinists thanks to these efforts. In a long review in Sovremennye zapiski, N. Kul’man raved about both the fact and quality of the publication.

... the owner of the letters turned out to be ... a famous artist who touchingly and selflessly honors the memory of Pushkin. [The letters] are printed with unusual elegance and maximal exactness: they are reproduced phototypically, with the format and even, as far as it was possible, the character of the paper preserved. The result is a complete illusion, as if before you lie the original letters.

In his excitement over the literary value of Pushkin’s letters to his fiancée, Kul’man did not neglect our P.R. man:

S.M. Lifar’s preface is living proof of his exceptional admiration of Pushkin. ... We must offer up our most ardent gratitude to S.M. Lifar for this present, so dear to all Russians.

30 Qtd. in Lifar, Pis’ma Pushkina k N.N. Goncharovoi, 25.
32 Kul’man, review of Pis’ma Pushkina k N.N. Goncharovoi, 459 60.
The final note of acknowledgment was sweeter for Kul’man and his colleagues because a Soviet publication, *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, had in 1935 lamented the loss of Pushkin’s letters to emigration and had asserted that now they would never be published. Instead, to the gratification and even glee of Pushkinists abroad, Lifar had published the letters in Paris, and in a more attractive and authentic edition than anyone could have hoped.

“The Gleaming Light of Poetry”

I would like to turn to a different autobiographical essay of Lifar’s as yet another, complementary example of how Lifar saw his own relationship to Pushkin and to writing. In his article “The Gleaming Light of Poetry” ("Сияеущий свет поэзии"), Lifar offered a variant model of how one can relate to the poet, a potential everyman’s approach to Pushkin.

Lifar published this article in Russian in the February 1937 issue of the Riga magazine *For You* (*Dlia Vas*).\(^{33}\) Thus this piece, like his others in the Parisian press, appeared on the eve of the one hundredth anniversary of Pushkin’s duel and death. Despite the general—and exaggeratedly poetic—title, this essay, like much of Lifar’s prose, is not as much about poetry or about Pushkin as it is about Lifar and his epiphany through Pushkin’s poetry. The essay begins with his school years, where Lifar remembers being “punished” with Pushkin, “our great national poet.”

Lifar describes in painful detail the reading and memorization of Pushkin’s works, the rote recitals of thirty schoolboys massacring the lines, rhythm, and rhyme of lyric and narrative poems, the “mortal boredom” wrought by the lines of the classical author. Worse than memorization, comments Lifar, were the “literary analyses” required in the upper forms; worst of all were the compositions.

“Pushkin, the Great Russian National Poet.” “Pushkin and Byron.”
“Pushkin, the Creator of Russian Literature of the XIX Century.”
“Pushkin in the Pleiad of the Greatest Poets of the World.”
“Russian Might in the Works of Pushkin.” “Is Pushkin a World-Class Poet?” and so on and so on…

Reading this list of themes, one cringes over the often schematic nature of literary composition for schoolchildren. Such themes, of course, can kill a

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\(^{33}\) Lifar, “Сияеущий свет поэзии,” *Dlia Vas*, No. 6 (164), 7 February 1937, 13. I would like to express my gratitude to the Pushkin Library at the Pushkin House in St. Petersburg, Russia, in whose “Fond zarubezhnoi Pushkiniany” this article first came to my attention.
student’s interest in literature. But Lifar and his schoolmates, back in the 1910s, learned the rote approach to composition well. “It had already become a joke among us,” he recalled, “to begin our compositions with one and the same formula: ‘Our great national poet, A.S. Pushkin, in his work of genius…’ after which we repeated everything that our teacher taught us, or [that was written in] the literary handbook.” The formulas devised by the students read like the rote memorization they were: “... Before him there was nothing. By the strength of his [desire], he created Russian literature, which now occupies a place worthy of her among the literatures of other peoples...” In his article, Lifar suggests that by making Pushkin obligatory, school teachers ruined the poet for generations of Russians. Never did Lifar read Pushkin at home, “for himself,” although he read Dostoevskii with gusto—an author not taught at school. Why read Pushkin? he asked—“I might as well have read my algebra textbook in my spare time...”

But the Revolution changed all that. Suddenly—and Lifar asserted in the article that he did not recall why it happened—Lifar came to love Pushkin. He picked up a book of poems, read an unfamiliar one, and was hooked. “I reread works that I had known before. They took on a new ring, a freshness, a charming beauty.” We might stop to consider why indeed Lifar changed his attitude about Pushkin, or perhaps why he created this epiphanic narrative. From the first volume of Lifar’s autobiography, we know that this rediscovery of Pushkin took place in around 1920, when at the age of 16 Lifar was discovering his love of the dance. This preliminary stage in Lifar’s worship of Pushkin made him even more susceptible to Diaghilev’s “collectioneering microbe” and presaged his own fetish with Pushkin objects. It is possible that the sounds of Pushkin’s poetry and prose—so sweet in his self-induced Kievan solitude—were even sweeter and plucked the strings of his soul even more when Lifar found himself abroad, no longer living in an entirely Russian-language environment. It seems more probable, though, that by addressing Pushkin and claiming to be a long-time Pushkinist, Lifar was also making his cultural case with his fellow émigrés. In describing his sudden change of heart, Lifar widened his potential audience to those who had felt tortured by the official version of Pushkin in school, and by being a part of the Pushkin text of “Russia Abroad,” Lifar could convince Russians to take him seriously.

But the process of rediscovering Pushkin, of finding his own Pushkin to replace the one that school had crammed down his throat, is not really the unusual part of Lifar’s story. What strikes the reader especially in this essay and others of Lifar’s études on Pushkin is his difficulty in writing about Pushkin interestingly. Here, though, in contrast with his confessional style in *My Pushkiniana Abroad* and the preface to Pushkin’s letters to Goncharova, Lifar neither detailed the process of finding his own voice to write about Pushkin, nor did he seem to realize that he was ex-
pressing his newly discovered love of Pushkin in clichés that would have made his teachers at the Kiev lycée proud.

After narrating the scene of his sudden change of heart, Lifar continued the essay, writing with one trite formulaic phrase after another: “Before me the gleaming light of poetry shone.” “I reread him in his entirety, greedily absorbing into myself the music of his poems which forced me to become mute from delight. The more I read, the more he became for me—‘my own.’”

The ‘great and genius’ Pushkin of the lycée student had become my dearest and most wonderful comrade, and I saw how much richer and happier life would be with him. Clearly I could never part with him again. And I will remain true to him for my entire life—to Pushkin, my leader and mentor.

Although Lifar had supposedly undergone a life change in realizing that poetry is more important and lasting than algebra, that literature can touch a deep and precious part of the soul and fill a void in everyday life, he still wrote about Pushkin and poetry in the saccharine-sweet tonality of museum tour guides and grade school teachers.

For Lifar, who as a celebrity was continually thinking of his own fame, being a part of Pushkin events was a way of keeping his name in the press and in people’s minds. But his promotion of Pushkin was more than just self-promotion. As he wrote in 1937,

When you glance at Pushkin’s life, you don’t know what is more amazing: the fact that fate persecuted her chosen one, her favorite, so cruelly, or the fortitude which Pushkin showed in the face of these cruel blows...34

Speaking to the Russian population of Paris and Western Europe, Lifar, perhaps himself in search of a new model after Diaghilev’s death, presented Pushkin as a model for the entire emigration, implying that Russians should face adversity with strength. Additionally, in recreating the image of Russians for their new French neighbors, Lifar placed courageous Russian warriors of old into a modern European setting with modern furnishings.

Lifar the Exhibitionist

At a commemorative concert in memory of Pushkin on February 8, 1937, Lifar united his two loves—Pushkin and ballet—in a performance of the “Dance of the Knight,” originally created for Glinka’s opera *Ruslan and Liudmila*. As a correspondent for *Le Temps* reported, Lifar made his Pushkin tribute as theatrical as possible:

> At the stroke of midnight, M. Serge Lifar, coming out of the theater of the Champs-Élysées where *The Specter of the Rose* and *Icarus* have earned him warm approval, offered his faithful homage to Pushkin by dancing the dance of the Knight (*Vitiaz*) from *Ruslan and Liudmila* with the virtuosity and the brilliant fluidity [souplesse intelligente] that are his.35

In his literary efforts, Lifar had aimed for the same virtuosity and brilliant fluidity, but, as we saw above, his leaps often suffered from trite expressions, excessive sentimentality, and a gushing prose style. In dance, and in his commemorative exhibit, Lifar was right on his mark.

Whether inspired by “the gleaming light of Pushkin’s poetry,” the phantom of Diaghilev and his collectioneering, or the desire to see Russian culture in the sacred halls of the French *Bibliothèque Nationale*, Lifar’s 1937 exhibit “Pushkin and his Epoch” was arguably the most prominent event of the Paris commemorations of Pushkin’s death. The ideal combination of Lifar’s literary efforts, his exhibit, and a dance performance in honor of Pushkin, all taking place near the date of the February anniversary, was not to be, however. When Lifar refused to allow the Soviet ambassador to participate in the opening of the exhibit, the minister of education of France, Jean Zay, withdrew his permission to use the *Bibliothèque Nationale* for the exhibit. “Monsieur Lifar, Potemkin cannot allow any official commemorations of Pushkin, of their national poet, without them,” announced Zay. But without Potemkin, without Zay, without the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, and over a month late, Lifar managed to open his exhibit in a private hall, the same space in which the February 8 concert had taken place.36 Perhaps the delay even helped attendance records; it certainly received considerable coverage in both the French and the Russian press.

Lifar’s presentation of Pushkin in the exhibit had all the glamor of a society event, plus the international attention, political scandal, and last-minute saving grace which marked it as a theatrical moment in its own

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35 *Le Temps* 10 February 1937, p. 4.
36 For Lifar’s conversation with Zay, see *Moia zarubezhnaia Pushkiniana*, 49–50.
genre. In a letter to Sergei Lifar in April of 1937, the Pushkin Committee Abroad addressed the dancer and praised him for his role in Russian émigré culture and in the Pushkin celebrations:

... [F]or a short time you established a real Pushkin House, our Russian Pushkin museum, in the very heart of Paris, and through this effort managed to open to the outside world those brilliant pages of Russian creativity, Russian art, Russian culture authored by the genius of the great Russian poet.

The Pushkin House is mentioned here not coincidentally; members of the Pushkin Committee Abroad deliberately evoked the source of Pushkin studies and exhibits in Soviet Russia—the Pushkin House of the Academy of Sciences in Leningrad. Competition with (now) Soviet institutions was an intrinsic part of the commemorations of Pushkin and of Russian culture that went on in emigration, and to be credited with having created an émigré “Pushkin House” in the center of Paris, itself the center of the emigration and of 1937 émigré Pushkin affairs, was immensely flattering to its organizer.

Visitors to the exhibit “Pushkin and his Epoch” shared in more than the rarity and intrinsic interest of the exhibited items, which included Lifar’s own collection of Pushkiniana (much of which had come from Diaghilev’s collection). In addition to the objects, the visitors were also able to share in the triumph of a successful historical and cultural event mounted by émigrés in emigration, despite the opposition of the relevant organs of political power: the Soviet ambassador to France and Parisian officials.

As an accepted member of French social and cultural circles, Lifar was in some ways uniquely qualified to represent Pushkin and Russia to the world of Western Europe. He was also in a position to negotiate with French owners of Pushkin memorabilia, securing for the exhibit, for example, the famous pair of pistols used in the duel between Pushkin and d’Anthès. Lifar included d’Anthès’s pistols in the exhibit both as legitimate objects which represented the Pushkinian era (after all, what could be more evocative of the time than a set of dueling pistols, especially since they were authentic), and as a kind of publicity stunt. At the opening of

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37 See articles and announcements in the French and Russian press, including Le Temps 7 February 1937, p. 4 and 10 February 1937, p. 4, and Vozrozhdenie, 6 February 1937 (No. 4064, p. 4) and especially 6, 13 and 20 March (No. 4068, p. 6, 4069, p. 6 and 4070, p. 5).
38 Quoted by Lifar, Moia zarubezhnaia Pushkiniana, 25. The Pushkin Committee Abroad included V. Maklakov, I. Bunin, M. Fedorov and others.
the “Pushkin and his Epoch” exhibit, Lifar staged a reconciliation between the Pushkin and d’Anthès clans. Nikolai Aleksandrovich Pushkin, grandson of the poet, traveled from Brussels to the Salle Pleyel, where he met the grandson of Pushkin’s killer, Baron de Heeckeren d’Anthès. Needless to say, this meeting—and the presence of the pair of pistols—received wide press coverage and helped to promote the exhibit.40

For Lifar, the meeting had significance beyond the benefit of free advertising. As Pushkin’s public relations man, celebrating Pushkin and Russian literature in France at a time when the French government was being, to his mind, overly conciliatory to the USSR, Lifar wanted to bridge the gap between French and Russian people, and what better way than to mend the fences broken in that century-old duel?41 He convinced at least one visitor to the exhibit that his efforts were sincere. According to La semaine à Paris, N.A. Pushkin announced in a speech in Brussels that Lifar had “done more than anyone to assure that his grandfather would achieve world-wide fame.”42

His status as a European celebrity made Lifar the ideal candidate to take center stage in promoting commemorations of Pushkin. Lifar had become to the dance world what Chaliapin was to the world of opera, an internationally known figure who could help promote Russian culture. According to Lifar, Miliukov, Fedorov, and Zeeler—the “initiators” of the Pushkin Committee—offered the leadership of the new organization to Lifar precisely because he was “the bearer of a famous Russian name, along with Chaliapin and Rakhmaninov.”43 Known and valued by Europeans of all sorts, ensconced at the Paris Opéra, Lifar by 1937 was a bridge connecting Russian-speaking and French-speaking Paris. In Lifar’s words, as early as 1934 he was “recognized in some measure as the power behind the throne of the international committee and [was] charged with the task of setting up throughout the world branch associations” of the Pushkin Committee Abroad.44 Lifar took that power and used it to become a force in Pushkinian history.

41 In the debate over naming a street after Pushkin, French journalist André Pierre reminded his countrymen that the French owed the Russians a debt: “There is yet one more reason which should incite us to render to Pushkin a more durable homage than oratorical displays and musical evenings at the centennial. Pushkin, let us not forget, was killed by a young French aristocrat. It was the bullet of the Alsatian Georges d’Anthès which stopped, at the age of thirty eight, the greatest poetic genius of Russia.” See “Donnera t on le nom de Pouchkine à une rue de Paris?” Le Temps (19 January 1937), p. 3.
42 La semaine à Paris (1957), No. 771.
43 Lifar, Moia zarubezhnaia Pushkiniana 32.
44 Different sources give different statistics for the final number of branches. In Ma Vie from Kiev to Kiev, 140, Lifar states that there were 166.
The exhibit itself, as its title suggests, celebrated more than just Pushkin and his poetry. In the vestibule and large hall of the Salle Pleyel the entire epoch was on display, from books, almanacs, letters, and manuscripts of Pushkin and his contemporaries, to collections of Russian porcelain, crystal, statuettes, paintings, drawings, and furniture. The large hall included two “rooms” of interiors, with paintings, furniture, and decorations reproducing the salons where Pushkin and his peers gathered to read poetry, discuss current events, and draw and write in each other’s albums. Along the walls of the hall were display cases featuring the collections of fine arts, books, and manuscripts, while the walls themselves held many portraits, paintings, and drawings. In describing the exhibit in detail, Pushkinist Modest Gofman dubbed the event to be “on the scale of Diaghilev”—rich, entrancing, indeed so overwhelming as to require several visits in order to experience, understand, and learn from the materials displayed. Even though the objects displayed at Lifar’s exhibit were crowded—lacking the wall text or explanatory material which would have facilitated their absorption by visitors—and the catalogue was delayed, as an event in Russian and French Paris and as a demonstration of the sophistication of Russian culture of the nineteenth century and of Russian émigré culture, the exhibit was an unqualified success.

At the opening, according to a correspondent of the Russian weekly Vozrozhdenie, ambassadors and diplomats rubbed shoulders with the Russian and Parisian cultural elite. Representatives of Great Britain, Belgium, Germany, Argentina, and Brazil, along with Greek Prince Nicholas, writer Ivan Bunin, and patroness of the Ballets Russes Princess Polignac, among others, heard speeches from Pushkin’s grandson and Modest Gofman. N.A. Pushkin noted with pleasure that Pushkin was finally being recognized not only as a great Russian poet, but as one of the geniuses of world poetry.

During the month that the exhibit was open, over 10,000 visitors, both Russians and “foreigners,” took the opportunity to experience Pushkin’s era and to admire the sophistication of Russia of the 1820s and 1830s. In Gofman’s words:

The impression created by the exhibit was tremendous: the foreigners didn’t know what amazed them more—the unexpected height of artistic culture which was to be found in “barbaric” Russia one hundred years ago, the fact that the Russian diaspora was able to preserve so many cultural treasures, or that artistic

Analyzing the exhibit, Gofman delineated three important conclusions to be drawn from the event. First, he argued that Pushkin’s era, more than any before or since, was defined by its “cult of beauty,” a virtual deification of the beautiful in all aspects of life, and the creativity of this cult was best illustrated and incarnated in Pushkin himself. Secondly, Gofman concluded that the collection of geniuses in Russia in Pushkin’s time was unprecedented in Russian culture—the number of great poets, artists, and musicians working in this era made it the richest in Russian history. The third conclusion which Gofman drew about the Pushkinian era from Lifar’s exhibit was about a kind of “Pushkinian realism,” a “lyrical realism” which he found in the creative works of the time. The “divine lightness, intimacy, and charm” which Gofman saw in everything from poetry to the dancing of the ballerina Istomina, combined technical brilliance with lyrical impact. Admitting that the expression “lyrical realism” is paradoxical and perhaps oxymoronic, Gofman maintained that the relics of Pushkin’s era presented at the Salle Pleyel evoked just this characteristic.

In closing his description of “Pushkin and his Epoch,” Modest Gofman put in his own bid for a “Pushkin House Abroad” to allow scholars to penetrate the depths of meaning evident in the collection of objects put together by Lifar. “The necessity of creating such a museum-laboratory-exhibit-estrada [is obvious,] so that those objects which have miraculously been preserved in Russian hands, hands which value the Russian past, do not disperse and perish in our uncertain life abroad of wandering the earth.”

**Lifar and Pushkin**

In his essay for the Riga glossy magazine For You, in his preface to the volume of Pushkin’s letters, in his tribute in dance to the operatic legacy of the poet, and in his role as organizer of the 1937 Pushkin exhibit in Paris, Lifar created a continuum of images of Pushkin and of models for how to conceive of and relate to Pushkin for his Parisian and European readers. Inserting his own voice into the debates about the ownership of Pushkin, Lifar tried to present Pushkin to a wider audience. With his Riga article, he specifically wrote for a general audience in describing his schoolboy aversion for the “great national poet” and cast himself as a normal young man whose normative experience of detesting school subjects

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should and must be replaced by a mature epiphany. On the eve of the centennial of Pushkin's death, Lifar paid tribute to his idol using his own medium, as he danced the Dance of the Knight from *Ruslan and Liudmila*, appealing to a ballet-loving public. And in persisting with his own presentation of the Pushkinian era, featuring the treasures of his fellow émigrés and exiles, Lifar brought the diplomatic corps, French patrons of the arts, and the Russian diaspora together in one of the “Russian corners” of Paris.

A worthy successor to Diaghilev, Lifar did more than his mentor to bring French attention to the European aspect of Russian letters and culture of the first third of the nineteenth century. With the *Ballets Russes*, patrons and admirers of the arts saw Russian subjects portrayed in achronological folkloric settings in Diaghilev’s exotic opera and ballet presentations of the 1910s and 1920s. In 1937, Sergei Lifar amended the image of “barbaric” exotic Russia to highlight the “romantic genius” of the Russians’ best-loved poet. Like a good ad man, Lifar was squarely in the middle of publicizing Pushkin in 1937 Paris and Europe in all the media to which he had access. And as a publicist who saw his client as being in need of “becoming” a universal poet, Lifar lent his own gleam and glamor as a ballet celebrity to his lesser-known comrade.

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