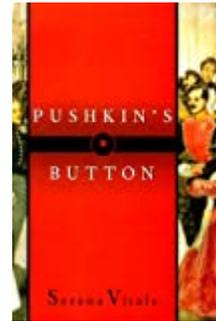




Serena Vitale. *Pushkin's Button*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999. vii + 355 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-23935-0.



Reviewed by Katherine Bliss Eaton (independent scholar)

Published on H-Russia (July, 1999)

Skeletons in the Closet

Pushkin's Button, originally published in Italian (*Il bottone di Puskin*, 1995), is a history, close analysis, and more, of events leading to the dueling death of Aleksandr Pushkin, Russia's most famous and beloved poet.

Pushkin's life ended on January 27, 1837 (Old Style). On the afternoon of that day, he left his St. Petersburg home to fight a duel with his new brother-in-law Baron Georges d'Anthes de Heeckeren (hereafter referred to as d'Anthes), a dashing Frenchman, Dutch citizen, and officer of the Tsar's Horse Guard. The chevalier was slightly wounded. The poet, before he died, suffered horribly from his abdominal wound for about 48 hours. The immediate grounds for the duel were Pushkin's suspicions about the relationship between his famously beautiful wife Natalia and d'Anthes, as well as his rage over a set of anonymous letters (or "certificates"), mailed to Pushkin and several of his best friends, welcoming the poet to a fictitious exclusive club for eminent cuckolds. In retaliation, Pushkin wrote to d'Anthes's adoptive father, Baron Jacob (a.k.a. Louis) van Heeckeren, the Dutch Ambassador to St. Petersburg, accusing him of pimping his son to Natalia. Add to that brew the suspicions, current

then and now, that d'Anthes and his adoptive father were lovers and that d'Anthes's hasty marriage to Natalia's sister Ekaterina was a ploy to avoid the duel, and you have still only plumbed the surface of the maelstrom of scandals, rumors and intrigues that Pushkin swam in during the last year of his life.

In *Pushkin's Button*, Vitale has attempted to write a portmanteau-book: a scholarly history and super-close analysis of Pushkin's last months and days; a detective thriller; an impressionistic personal record of her own research triumphs, travails, and musings, which includes riffs on themes such as missing words and a button too few; and even a research-stimulated dream. In other words, she has written a book which is intended as both scholarly history and belles lettres.

The book is not only a whodunit (who wrote and/or conspired to write the letters?) but also a whydunit: why was Pushkin chosen as the object of humiliation in Petersburg high society? These are only two of the many unsolved mysteries Vitale exposes, endlessly speculating and meditating on such puzzles as the significance of the eponymous missing button on the poet's bekesh (winter

overcoat); the first part of a missing French noun ending in -ite; the type of buttons on d'Anthes's outfit when he fought the duel (the larger and heavier the buttons, the better, when you're dueling); whether the chevalier might have been wearing some unorthodox underwear beneath his cozy imported flannels. Not all of Vitale's exhaustive examinations sustained my interest, but her detailed description of the different types of Pushkin-era full metal jackets, who invented them, and where and how they could be procured is fascinating. Finally, she concludes that d'Anthes surely would not have been wearing a bullet-proof garment because he could not have borne such a stain on his honor, had word of the ruse gotten out.

Vitale has done archival research in Russia, France, Germany, Austria, and Italy, and apparently consulted all the basic published materials as well. But the research centerpiece of her book is her own contribution to what is known as "the duel collection" of epistolary documents. *Pushkin's Button* contains important, heretofore unstudied letters from a de Heeckeren family archive.[1] These letters are significant because they reveal the close emotional attachment between Heeckeren and d'Anthes, and strongly implicate both father and son in a conspiracy to further d'Anthes's seduction of Natalia (as Pushkin had charged). But the letters also suggest that father and son had nothing to do with the anonymous certificates. In addition, Vitale's book includes many of the other epistolary documents written by Pushkin's contemporaries, often either in full or in long excerpts. This is very appropriate, in telling a story which depends so heavily on (indeed, practically originated in) such documents.[2]

As a work of scholarship, by a scholar, for scholars and a general educated audience, *Pushkin's Button* has its disappointments. The quasi-thriller style Vitale often uses (paragraphs which end with portentous, cliff-hanging sentences, insinuating that mysteries will be solved, but not just yet), leads but to disappointment. To her credit, I guess, Vitale occasionally offers an insouciant admission that she's taken the reader on a wild goose chase, as in: "Having led our patient readers into a labyrinth whose exit still eludes us, we haven't the heart simply to leave them there. They are at least owed a guess, a conjecture. So here it is, based on the feeblest of clues ..." (p. 199). And then there are the purple prose and lurid, emotional descriptions of people and places, the splintered, impressionistic, collage style of presenting the story, the user-unfriendly method of citing sources.

These things keep getting in the way of discerning

what the author actually knows and how she knows it. Her presentation (of the results of her research and her speculations about her research) suffers from not enough pruning. Sometimes I had the feeling I was being led on a forced march through the author's index cards and notebooks, but maybe this is appropriate for a study based on epistles. At least Vitale shares my pain: "Weary now, loathe to go on ..." (p. 197).

The history of Pushkin's last year is so complex, so teeming with complicated personalities; comings and goings; mixed motives; letters sent, unsent, destroyed, semi-destroyed and reconstructed; challenges issued, withdrawn, and reissued, that it's best told as straightforward, chronologically ordered history, with the author's interpretation of the data clearly and immediately presented. This lucidite (to add to Vitale's amazingly long list of French ite nouns in "The Deleted Lines" chapter) is too often lacking in Pushkin's Button.

The chapter entitled "The Chouan" introduces readers to d'Anthes, one of the four major players in the history. It also introduces us to Vitale's overheated style: "the name [d'Anthes] was cursed a thousand times, becoming synonymous with iniquity and deicide" (p. 7). Well, maybe, in Russia, but as Vitale reveals in the "Epilogue," killing Pushkin, though it ruined the chevalier's reputation in Russia, seems to have had no ill effects on d'Anthes or his family. Au contraire. Stripped of his rank and forced to leave his adopted country after a trial (dueling was illegal in Russia), d'Anthes returned to France and established a very comfortable niche for himself as family man, successful politician, and prosperous businessman. Not bad for a cursed "deicide."

Vitale wraps up this chapter by proclaiming that d'Anthes bore a "terrible burden of guilt" (p. 20). But guilt for what? In whose eyes? If d'Anthes did have a guilty conscience in his post-Pushkin life, he seems to have borne it lightly. The picture that Vitale gives us of d'Anthes, in "The Chouan" is that of a young man of charm, wit, and good cheer, one of the most popular bachelors in Petersburg high society, who knew how to flatter women of all ages. And he was a great dancer. There is ample documentation for that description. Yet in the following chapter, teasingly entitled "Those Fateful Flannel Undershirts," Vitale suggests that d'Anthes was a "near relative" of Pushkin's plodding Hermann (from "The Queen of Spades"), a man with "the soul of Mephistopheles" (p. 30), and shortly after, she reveals without attribution, that d'Anthes's eyes were "vacant, inexpressive, glassy blue" (p. 34). This is just one instance

of many such sinister descriptions, in which a person's face and body reflect the state of his soul and sex life. Here is a suspect in the anonymous letters case:

Dolgorukov ... More sensitive observers avert their gaze. An acrid smell of sulfur wafts over the stage, purple flashes rend the darkness, a trapdoor swings open with a sinister creak, and lo and behold! Satan, making his appearance in the roles that the Russian popular imagination has assigned him since time immemorial ... Dolgorukov displayed additional marks of Luciferian origin: a squat, ill-shaped body, irregular features, an evasive gaze shielded by thick eyeglasses ... " (p. 137)

These physical defects, combined with an equally rich array of moral ones, combine to make this particular suspect "a regular Antichrist" in Vitale's estimation (p. 137). Heeckeren, a being with "inscrutable pale eyes" (a fitting complement to his son's "glassy blue" ones, I guess), "Greek profile, sensual lips, thick beard, narrow shoulders, slim build" and "big floppy ears" sounds like a combination satyr and rabbit. The "big floppy ears" according to Vitale were for soaking up the rumors he transmitted to The Hague (p. 16). Vitale winds up her description of Heeckeren by pointing out that the Ambassador's contemporaries, as early as 1833, viewed him as old, even though he was then only going on forty-three. Are readers supposed to be reminded of Wilde's Dorian Gray, whose quickly aging portrait reflects his depraved soul? At the other extreme, Vitale writes that Pushkin died a "martyr's" death as though he were a saint rather than an enraged husband who, following his inner demons, provoked a duel with a man who may or may not have been his wife's lover.

Typically for the collage style of this book, "The Chouan," which at first appeared to focus on the early history and character of d'Anthes, switches suddenly to "Paris, early summer of 1989, 152 winters and 153 springs since Georges d'Anthes mortally wounded Pushkin." Vitale's narrative adopts the tone of a Poe-esque thriller: "The attic of an apartment in the sixteenth arrondissement, a worn gray suitcase, old business papers ... photographs ..." (p. 20). Now we, the readers, can look over Vitale's shoulder and share in her ecstasy at finally finding documents no other scholars have had a chance to get their hands on: "Then all at once what you dream of yet dare not hope for: a bundle of old letters, from another era, another world ... Buried—or hidden?" Vitale proclaims her find to be "a virtually miraculous discovery" and "A gift from the winged herald of the gods" (p. 20).

Mark Twain commented that "Biographies are but the clothes and buttons of a man"—the real person always eludes biographers. Perhaps Twain should have warned that letters and diaries are also part of people's outer gear. The actual person probably won't be found there either, but through the writings of Pushkin and his contemporaries, Vitale provides a kaleidoscopic view of the poet's last days.

Bibliographical References:

There are endnotes (Notes) only for words and phrases in quotation marks (with no Note indications such as superscript numbers) in the text. It's up to the reader to be alert and discover the source of other assertions that are not in quotation marks. This often requires time-consuming, frustrating rereading. For example, if you should want to locate the letters from d'Anthes to Heeckeren, where would you begin to look? These letters are scattered in the text, and Note 16 informs you that "Hereafter the source of quotations from letters written by d'Anthes to Heeckeren between May 1835 and the autumn of 1836 will not be given." Often the source of authorial statements is not evident in the text; as Vitale belatedly explains, sometimes she paraphrases and summarizes multiple sources, without attribution. The index is a Name Index; given the quirky style of the book, it would be very useful to have something more than just page numbers after a name, especially when searching for a remembered bit of information about one of the main characters like Pushkin or Natalia.

Readers should check the notes carefully as they read, because in a curious reversal of the traditional pattern, subsidiary, variant information is sometimes given in the text, while the key point is made in the notes. A good example of this concerns Vitale's quotation of the words of Baroness Vrevskaia, Pushkin's good friend. When, on the afternoon of January 26, 1837, (the day before the duel) Pushkin visited her and told her he was going to duel, she "tried to dissuade him by reminding him of his responsibility to his children." Pushkin (according to Vitale) replied almost brusquely, that "the Tsar knows all about it and he'll take care of that" (p. 229). In Vitale's Note to this, we read that what Vrevskaia actually recalled Pushkin saying, was, "the Emperor, who is acquainted with all my affairs, has promised to take them [his children] under his protection." Vitale then explains the disparity by announcing that she decided to change Vrevskaia's words "to make [them] more coherent: the Tsar would never have promised Pushkin to take care of his future orphans, implicitly authorizing, almost pushing

him toward, the duel.”[3]

The translators and editors have let some syntax mistakes get past them, especially where pronoun antecedents are concerned: “A woman would have had both motive–jealousy–and purpose: to get d’Anthes and his new flame in trouble. They’re still there” (pp. 146-47); “... when the hot African blood rose to Pushkin’s head, your best bet was to stay out of his way until he got it out of his system” (p. 154) (that sentence is unnerving no matter what you take the pronoun antecedent to be); “... they moved heaven and earth to keep tainted young girls’ skeletons in the closet long enough to whisk them to the altar” (p. 157).

Notes

[1]. These are d’Anthes’s letters to Heeckeren, 1835-

36, which were first published by Vitale and Vadim Stark in *Zvezda*, 9: (1995), pp. 166-98.

[2]. See Leslie O’Bell’s essay, “Writing the Story of Pushkin’s Death,” *Slavic Review* 58, no. 2 (Summer 1999), 393-406.

[3]. Robin Edmonds, in *Pushkin: The Man and His Age* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 218, comments on Vrevskaia’s report: “This was a significant answer, if Pushkin really believed that this was so and if his belief was based on something said to him by Nicholas I at their last meeting.”

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia>

Citation: Katherine Bliss Eaton. Review of Vitale, Serena, *Pushkin’s Button*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. July, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3284>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.