

Ryleev, Pushkin, and the Poeticization of Russian History

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It has been common to equate the Enlightenment with a general progression towards reason and away from feeling. That narrative, however, omits the important role many thinkers attributed to emotion in developing an ideal society. Recent interpretations of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, identify *passion* as a key element of his civic vision.¹ The historians William Reddy and Nichole Eustace also posit that emotion was a central element of the cultures surrounding the French and American revolutions.² The work of an exemplary Decembrist, the poet and conspirator Kondraty Ryleev (1795–1826), shows that politically engaged feeling was a crucial part of the Decembrist intellectual milieu, which was itself indebted to French and American models. In addition to drawing attention to the political significance of feeling in early nineteenth-century Russia, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between Alexander Pushkin and the Decembrists, which in recent years has evolved beyond the Soviet tendency to conflate their positions.³

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¹Cheryl Hall makes this argument in "Reason, Politics, and Passion in Rousseau," *Polity* 34 (Autumn 2001): 69–88. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty offers a reconstruction of the emotional life of man in the various stages of social development as Rousseau describes them in "Rousseau's Therapeutic Experiments," *Philosophy* 66 (October 1991): 413–34. Laurence D. Cooper, "Rousseau on Self-Love: What We've Learned, What We Might've Learned," *Review of Politics* 60 (Autumn 1998): 661–83, suggests that self-love is the starting point for compassion—and thus equitable society—in Rousseau.

²See William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions*, (Cambridge, England, 2001); idem, "Sentimentalism and its Erasure: The Role of Emotions in the Era of the French Revolution," *Journal of Modern History* 72 (March 2000): 109–52; Nicole Eustace, *Passion is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 2011).

³See Igor Nemirovsky, "Why Pushkin Did Not Become a Decembrist," in *Taboo Pushkin: Topics, Texts, Interpretations*, ed. Alyssa Diniega Gillespie (Madison, 2012), 60–83. For a summary of a more standard Stalin-era Soviet interpretation see M. V. Nechkina, *Dvizhenie dekabristov*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1955), which begins with an epigraph from Pushkin's 1827 epistle to the exiled Decembrist Alexander Odoevsky that begins with the line, "Vo glubine sibirskikh rud": "Ne propadet vash skorbnnyi trud" ("Your sorrowful labor will not be in vain"; 1:3).

Ryleev's writing illustrates a phenomenon that I call *civic sentimentalism*, which is a second theme of this article. Sentimentalism exerted great influence during this era. As Reddy puts it, "in the eighteenth century, art was conceived to have, above all, a didactic purpose. By stimulating our naturally good sentiments, works of art could inculcate virtue."⁴ In several works, most significantly the second half of *The Navigation of Feeling*, Reddy links the rise of the public sphere to sentimentalist thought generally. Here, however, I propose that it makes more sense to refer to sentimentalism's public face with the specific term "civic sentimentalism." While many forms of sentimentalism considered emotion the origin of human morality, civic sentimentalism perceived a link between personal feeling and the public sphere. In the Russian context, sentimentalism was often linked to private life. In *Emergence of the Hero*, for example, Andrei Zorin specifically excludes Reddy's tendentious political focus from his study of Andrei Turgenev, focusing instead on the way literary texts transmitted cultural and emotional models.⁵ Ilya Vinitsky's research on Vasily Zhukovsky has considered both this poet's public and private life, but his most recent book focuses on the poet's "religion of love."⁶ Moreover, in previous work, Vinitsky argues that Zhukovsky engaged with the broader world in a specifically domestic way, and though he did not ignore the world of politics, his commitments were far from radical.⁷ An important exception to this trend was Aleksandr Radishchev, whose *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* (1790) used sentimentalist tropes to inspire sympathy for the oppressed and indignation against autocracy. He inspired Soviet scholars such as P. A. Orlov to distinguish his "democratic sentimentalism" from the "nobleman's sentimentalism" of Karamzin.⁸

The Decembrists employed a similar emotional logic. Poetry was one way of training proper feelings: taking advantage of the emotional associations carried by various poetic genres in this period, some Decembrist poetry was explicitly designed to both evoke and influence noble civic sentiments. I define civic sentimentalism as a specific cultural phenomenon in the early nineteenth century that linked emotional sensitivity with civic virtue generally and radical politics specifically. This version of sentimentalism explicitly rejected the domestic world of its earlier Russian exponents. Through a reading of Ryleev's poetry, it becomes clear that civic sentimentalism made an important distinction between positive *sentiments*—the origin of virtue—and negative *passions*—the source of human suffering. Though a discussion of additional writers would fall beyond the scope of this

⁴William Reddy, "The Anti-Empire of General de Boigne: Sentimentalism, Love, and Cultural Difference in the Eighteenth Century," in *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 34 (Spring 2008): 5.

⁵Andrei Zorin, *Poiavleniie geroia: Iz istorii russkoi emotsional'noi kul'tury kontsa XVIII–nachala XIX veka* (Moscow, 2016), 16–18, esp. 18: "In our view, the productiveness of the model proposed by the researcher [Reddy] is limited by its focus upon the political sphere, which makes the distinction of the 'emotional refuges' in many ways mechanical. In the end, his program leaves the analysis of an individual's unique emotional experience not completely realized."

⁶Ilya Vinitsky, *Vasily Zhukovsky's Romanticism and the Emotional History of Russia* (Evanston, 2015).

⁷Il'ia Vinitskii, *Dom tolkovatel'ia: Poeticheskaia semantika i istoricheskoe vobrazhenie V. A. Zhukovskogo* (Moscow, 2006).

⁸P. A. Orlov, *Russkii sentimentalizm* (Moscow, 1977). I avoid the term "democratic sentimentalism" because of its association with a specific form of government (democracy) rather than a general inclination to social justice, as well as its connections to a specifically Soviet Marxist interpretation of cultural development culminating in realist art.

paper, it should be noted that other Decembrists, including Fyodor Glinka and Wilhelm Kiukhel'beker, paid similar attention to emotion in their poetry.⁹

Ryleev offers an excellent case study for Decembrist civic sentimental literature. In addition to participating in literary society more extensively than any of his co-conspirators, Ryleev was both an active member of Nikita Murav'ev's liberal monarchist Northern Society and in communication with Pavel Pestel's republican Southern Society, the two main Decembrist organizations in existence between 1821 and 1825. In my consideration of Ryleev's Decembrist politics, I will focus not on the uprising itself, but rather on the social role played by literature. According to the civic-sentimentalist worldview, feeling the right way inevitably caused one to act in the right way. By using historical poetry to stimulate his readers' most virtuous sentiments, then, Ryleev was already engaging with the social—and even the political—realm.

Pushkin, on the other hand, considered this an overly simplistic approach, one that inevitably produced historical mistakes—not to mention literary infelicities. Though this poet did not strive for the same factual accuracy in his historical literature that he did in his more scholarly writings, we can see that he valued historical literature that was emotionally authentic to the period (as he understood it) rather than emotionally correct (in terms of inspiring readers to accomplish certain goals).¹⁰ Pushkin's priorities become clear when we consider what he wrote in response to Ryleev, and their conflict helps us better understand how Ryleev understood civic sentimentalism and its potential role in reforming Russia.

RUSSIAN HISTORY AND THE RUSSIAN NATION

The polemic between Ryleev and Pushkin emerged from a general conversation about the role of the literary historian in Russian society. In the early nineteenth century, Russian culture made little distinction between the roles of historians and literary writers.¹¹ Svetlana Evdokimova points out that while postmodern literary criticism began to explore the links between fictional and historical narratives only late in the twentieth century, literary awareness of this connection long predates the ideas of theorists like Hayden White.¹² This

⁹Pamela Davidson discusses Glinka's focus on "felt experience" in "Leading Russia as the New Israel: Authorship and Authority in Fedor Glinka's *Letters of a Russian Officer and Experiments in Sacred Verse*," *Russian Review* 77 (April 2018): 2–28. Kiukhel'beker's focus on emotion, especially rapture (*vostorg*), is well known from his article "O napravlenii nashei poezii, osobenno liricheskoi, v poslednee desiatiletie," in his *Puteshestvie. Dnevnik. Stat'i* (Leningrad, 1979), 453–59, originally published in his journal *Mnemosina* in 1824. Glinka belonged to the early Decembrist groups The Union of Salvation and The Union of Welfare. Ryleev would invite Kiukhel'beker to join the Decembrist Northern Society in 1825.

¹⁰This could be considered in the context of Lauren Berlant's notion of the "national fantasy," an affective construction shared by the "intimate public" of a nation that inscribes a shared positive fictional history over a morally compromised reality. Significantly, she examines the same era during which Ryleev wrote, but focuses on the United States. See Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago, 1991), 19–56.

¹¹For works relating to this period see, for example, Caryl Emerson, *Boris Godunov. Transpositions of a Russian Theme* (Bloomington, 1986); Svetlana Evdokimova, *Pushkin's Historical Imagination* (New Haven, 1999); Luba Golburt, *The First Epoch: The Eighteenth Century and the Russian Cultural Imagination* (Madison, 2014); and Andrew Wachtel, *An Obsession with History: Russian Writers Confront the Past* (Stanford, 1994)

¹²See discussion in Evdokimova, *Pushkin's Historical Imagination*, 1–28.

connection between literature and history extended to literature's traditional focus on emotion. Dan Ungurianu has pointed out that many romantic historical novelists, going back to Walter Scott, believed that while social mores (including notions of love and courtship) changed over time, essential human passions were immutable, and this focus on basic human nature constituted much of the interest in their works.¹³

The Decembrists associated the circulation of national historical narratives with civic development. Many of them cited the Kievan period of Russian history as an ideal democratic society, and this topos would appear in Ryleev's poetry.¹⁴ In his first famous "philosophical letter," Pyotr Chaadaev connected the failure of 1825 to Russia's "lack of history."¹⁵ These thinkers were not alone in their desire to tell the story of the Russian people: Nikolai Karamzin, who earned his initial fame as Russia's most famous author of sentimentalist prose and poetry, cemented his reputation with a twelve-volume history of Russia between 1816 and 1826.¹⁶ Moreover, before the rise of the novel, eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Russian literature was influenced by a demand for national epics, especially in the form of historical or pseudo-historical poetry.¹⁷

Soviet scholarship tends to identify the Decembrist use of history with a consistently anti-monarchist political program. For example, S. S. Volk, a Stalin-era scholar of Marxism and revolutionary movements, argues that the Decembrists embraced Karamzin's patriotism but challenged his monarchist views, while also noting that they adjusted his version of history to embrace a broader audience.¹⁸ In the case of Ryleev's numerous historical poems, *inspiring* his readers was the primary goal—one that eclipsed the expression of a specific political message and even factual accuracy. While Pushkin was well aware of the artistic necessity of the imagination in historical fiction, he took issue not only with the obvious historical mistakes that Ryleev made—which betray his exclusive focus on "inspirational content" over fact—but also with the civic-sentimentalist notion that noble feelings inevitably lead to virtuous actions, the worldview undergirding the Decembrist's entire poetic enterprise.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVES AND THE CITIZEN-POET

Ryleev's first important contribution to poeticized history was *Dumy (Meditations)*, a collection of verses composed between 1821 and 1823. They circulated privately and in journals before most were published as a book two years later. These works depict Russian and Ukrainian history from their medieval beginnings up through what was then the present

¹³Dan Ungurianu, *Plotting History: The Russian Historical Novel in the Imperial Age* (Madison, 2007), 58–63.

¹⁴See, for example, Ryleev's first letter to Pushkin, no. 44, in K. F. Ryleev, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii (PSS)*, ed. A. G. Tseitlan (Moscow, 1934), 479.

¹⁵Chaadaev was an "almost-Decembrist" who had belonged to both the Union of Welfare and the Northern Society, but left the country several years before the uprisings themselves.

¹⁶In 1811 he also wrote a shorter work, *Zapiski o drevnei i novoi Rossii*.

¹⁷This is reflected in the hierarchy of genres in the eighteenth century and continued to influence opinion in Pushkin's day. To give but one example, Kiukhel'beker in "O napravlenii nashei poezii."

¹⁸S. S. Volk, *Istoricheskie vzgliady dekabristov* (Moscow, 1958), 19–20, 26.

day, many focusing on the world of Kievan Rus'.¹⁹ Though little read now, Ryleev's *Dumy* were originally extremely popular. His *Polar Star* almanac, in which several *dumy* appeared, is remembered as one of Russian literature's early commercial successes, and when the collected *dumy* appeared in print as a stand-alone work, it sold out almost immediately.²⁰ (V. E. Vatsuro writes that the popularity of *Polar Star* in particular was unprecedented since Karamzin's *History of the Russian State*.²¹) The *dumy* even inspired a flurry of other historical lyrics in the 1820s, including works by poets like Nikolai Yazykov and Mikhail Lermontov.²²

Andrew Wachtel has pointed out that *Dumy* continues a long Russian tradition of blurring the boundaries between academic history and creative literature. For Ryleev, the most significant predecessor in this line was Karamzin.²³ When they were published as a collection, *Dumy*'s historical verses acquired brief accompanying prose fragments that contextualized their stories. This was a structure modeled directly on Karamzin's *History*, which also incorporated two distinct elements: the literary historical narrative and the scholarly footnotes. In Ryleev, these two narratives occasionally presented incompatible accounts of the same events, since the verse sometimes adjusted historical facts for artistic reasons.²⁴ Indeed, though other sources were also consulted, Karamzin's narrative clearly provided the bulk of Ryleev's historical material as well. This apparent declaration of allegiance to a writer with such conservative political leanings might surprise those aware of Ryleev's own convictions, even in the years before the ill-fated 1825 uprising was conceived. L. G. Frizman remarks that Ryleev was impressed by Karamzin's artistry even as he was horrified by the tyranny he used it to depict.²⁵ Yet the influence was substantial: indeed, the poet even requested a complete set of *History of the Russian State* when he was sent to prison in 1826.²⁶

¹⁹In this period, Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish nationalists had varying—and often mutually exclusive—understandings of their historical national borders. As Serhiy Bilenky points out in *Romantic Nationalism in Eastern Europe: Russian, Polish, and Ukrainian Political Imaginations* (Stanford, 2012), Russian and Ukrainian nationalists often united against their mutual foe, the Polish, even though their own national sympathies came into conflict. This trend is on display in *Dumy*, which exhibits sympathy for Ukraine but not for Poland, though its primary allegiance is to Russia.

²⁰Patrick O'Meara, *K. F. Ryleev: A Political Biography of the Decembrist Poet* (Princeton, 1984), 171.

²¹V. E. Vatsuro, *Severnye tsvety* in *Izbrannye trudy* (Moscow, 2004), 5. Neither the booksellers nor the publishers expected *Polar Star*'s success. Vatsuro goes on to posit that Ryleev and his co-publisher Aleksandr Bestuzhev saw the interest in their almanac as a sign that Russians might soon be able to earn livings as writers, like their counterparts in Europe. It should be noted that Ryleev himself worked as a manager for the Russian-American Company, which provided the bulk of his income.

²²See L. G. Frizman, "'Dumy' Ryleeva," in K. F. Ryleev, *Dumy* (Moscow, 1975), 210.

²³See Wachtel, *Obsession with History*, 84–85. With regard to Ryleev's inclusion of prose introductions to his poems, Wachtel writes, "Presumably ... what was important to Ryleev was not simply making the information available; rather, he was trying to balance the synchrony of his lyric genre with the diachronic principle of the prose biography" (p. 85).

²⁴See, for example, "Boris Godunov" and "Volynskii" in Frizman, "'Dumy' Ryleeva," 61–64 and 84–87, both of which present traditional, negative images of their subjects in prose, but make them appear heroic in poetry.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 191. Frizman discusses how closely Ryleev followed Karamzin's account as well (*ibid.*, 192–93).

²⁶Ryleev also asked for a Russian translation of Thomas à Kempis's *On the Imitation of Christ*, and began meeting with an Orthodox priest (O'Meara, *K. F. Ryleev*, 263).

In addition to Karamzin, Ryleev also drew from other historical sources with their own cultural associations. One was the *History of the Rus'* (also known as the Konysky History), a text that began circulating around this period. The historian Serhii Plokhly describes it as a possibly fabricated source text for Ukrainian nationalism, one that he argues is equivalent to Russia's *Lay of Igor's Campaign* or Scotland's songs of Ossian.²⁷ There were also the works of Julian Niemcewicz, a Polish nationalist poet whom Ryleev acknowledges in the introduction as the writer who first provided him with the *duma* genre—though he goes on to insist that Ukrainians and not Poles invented it, a claim I will discuss in more detail below. In addition, Ryleev collaborated directly with the historian Pavel Stroev, whom the poet acknowledges in his foreword as the author of most of *Dumy's* prefatory notes.²⁸ Stroev was a professional Russian historiographer who did not share Ryleev's radical views or obscure background; indeed, at this point he had distinguished himself as the author of an important 1813 textbook, and went on to become a member of the Academy of Sciences.²⁹

The disparate perspectives contained in *Dumy* make the collection difficult to interpret if one approaches the book as a traditional academic history, or even as republican propaganda. In fact, despite its literary popularity, most regarded this collection as an unsuccessful work of history. In particular, readers have frequently observed that narratives in the prose and verse sections appear to contradict one another. Even those favorably inclined toward Ryleev, including the nineteenth-century socialist poet and Herzen collaborator Nikolai Ogarev and a number of Soviet scholars, have regretfully noted his historical inaccuracies. The far more critical Pushkin, who three separate times pointed out the incongruity of Ryleev's errors, went so far as to joke that the name for Ryleev's new genre derived not from any poetic genre, but rather from the German word for “stupid”—“*dumm*.”³⁰

These dismissals—and Ryleev's own continual identification of himself as a “citizen” rather than a “poet”—suggest that these mistakes resulted from the carelessness of a man focused on political goals above all else. The contradictions in *Dumy* resolve themselves,

²⁷For more on *Istoriia rusov (History of the Rus')*, as well as the influence it had on Ryleev and other writers see Serhii Plokhly, *The Cossack Myth: History and Nationhood in the Age of Empires* (Cambridge, England, 2012), 1–65. With regard to the *Lay of Igor's Campaign*, it should be noted that most Slavists consider the work an authentic medieval text.

²⁸Ryleev did write several of them himself (Frizman, “‘Dumy’ Ryleeva,” 235n.1).

²⁹See O'Meara, *K. F. Ryleev*, 63; and E. Shmurlo, “Stroev, Pavel Mikhailovich,” *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar' Brokgauza i Efrona*, vol. 21a (St. Petersburg, 1901), 805–6. Ironically, Stroev was very critical of Mikhail Kheraskov's factual errors in his *poema Rossiada* and became famous for emphasizing the importance of carefully collecting and analyzing primary historical sources.

³⁰“The *Dumy* are trash, and the name comes from the German *dumm*, and not from the Polish, as it would seem at first glance.” See letter to Peter Andreevich Vyazemsky and Lev Sergeevich Pushkin from May 25 and near to the middle of June, 1825, in *The Letters of Alexander Pushkin: Three Volumes in One*, trans. J. Thomas Shaw (Madison, 1967), 226. See also Frizman's discussion of the Pushkin-Ryleev conflict, which summarizes some previous scholarship and argues that Pushkin's negative assessment of Ryleev's work largely predates the composition of the latter's *poema Voinarovskiy* (“‘Dumy’ Ryleeva”). This argument does not fully take into account the negative account of *Voinarovskiy* Pushkin published when he wrote his own *Poltava*, or the larger question of civic sentimentalism that I focus on here.

however, when one approaches it as a civic-sentimentalist project.³¹ This is not to deny that some of these discrepancies were simply mistakes, but we should recall that for Ryleev, political literature was fundamentally emotional. Factual adjustments that rendered part of history more inspiring or “emotionally correct” were consistent with this writer’s purpose.

In fact, Ryleev’s rare metapoetic writings describe *all* poetry as explicitly emotional. In his foreword to the *Dumy* collection, he quotes Niemcewicz to identify the purpose of his project in distinctly emotional language. Ryleev not only draws attention to the project’s affective orientation, but also establishes an explicit link between feeling and memory:

To remind the youth of their ancestors’ great deeds, to acquaint them with the brightest epochs of national history, to harmonize love for the fatherland with the first impressions of memory—this is a sure means of inculcating the people with a strong affection for their motherland: after that nothing will ever be able to wipe away these first impressions, these early notions. They grow stronger with the years and create warriors bold for battle, men worthy of counsel.³²

Particularly notable here is the elision of *personal* recollection with *national* historical memory. In a longer, unpublished draft of this text, Ryleev then goes on to explain how Niemcewicz favorably contrasted his own poetic task with a recent state-sponsored academic project, pointing out that traditional history was both forgettable and inaccessible to many young readers.³³ The emotional power of both poetry as a genre and memory as a mode are paramount for the Russian poet and his model.

Ryleev continued to develop his theoretical understanding of the link between literature, memory, and emotion. In “A Few Thoughts on Poetry,” a brief article composed in 1825 partially in response to Pushkin’s critiques of *Dumy*, Ryleev also rejects the distinction between classicism and romanticism that lay at the root of that period’s many literary debates. Instead, he advocates any sort of art able to inspire “noble feelings.” The final lines of this piece proclaim,

And so, let us highly esteem poetry, but not its priests, and, having left the useless quarrel about romanticism and classicism behind, let us try to destroy in ourselves the spirit of slavish imitation. Turning to the source of true poetry, we shall use all our strength to realize in our writings the ideals of noble feelings, thoughts, and eternal truths, which are always close to man and which he never knows well enough.³⁴

This passage demonstrates how crucial emotion was for Ryleev’s understanding of literature’s social purpose, especially when he calls for writers to focus on the pursuit of the “ideal of

³¹See, for example, Ungurianu’s research about Russian romantic historical fiction in *Plotting History*, 13–75, especially the chapter “Fact and Fiction in the Romantic Novel” (*ibid.*, 40–54), which argues that a tendency to simultaneously evoke and undermine a sense of factual accuracy about the past was a hallmark of the romantic historical novel that went back to Walter Scott. Polina Rikoun also comments on the tendency toward historical inaccuracy in romantic texts. See Rikoun, “The Makers of Martyrs: Narrative Form and Political Resistance in Ryleev’s ‘Voinarovsky,’” *Russian Review* 71 (July 2012): 436–59.

³²Ryleev, *Dumy*, 7.

³³*Ibid.*, 139–41.

³⁴Ryleev, “Neskol’ko myslei o poezii,” *PSS*, 313.

lofty feelings, thoughts, and eternal truths” instead of the “useless quarrel about romanticism and classicism”: this distinction makes it clear that, for him, “noble feelings” were more than just a literary device—they were a political goal in and of themselves. Moreover, in his final letter to Pushkin, Ryleev famously exhorts the former to “be a poet and a citizen” (*bud' poet i grazhdanin*), reminding the great writer that all of Russia was following his career.³⁵

This experiment in reinvigorating Russian history also served nationalist aims. Though the genre Ryleev used derived from Niemcewicz, the name for it also evoked an ancient Ukrainian genre similar to the Russian *bylina*.³⁶ Claiming a genre of Polish origin for Ukrainians, whom he calls the “brothers” of Russia, helped Ryleev establish Russia’s primacy over a vanquished rival. Associating the *duma* genre with Ukraine also fits with Ryleev’s general intention of presenting historical memory as an individual subjective experience. Since this country was frequently associated in the Russian imagination with the “Cossack spirit of freedom,” the history Ryleev claimed for his genre gave it the exotic flavor of an imagined ideal past. Moreover, as Edyta Bojanowska argues, Western European intellectuals at this time were engaged in similar projects, inspired by Herder to reimagine their national identities using a combination of history and folkloric genres. By imitating them, Russian writers could bolster their own country’s intellectual credentials.³⁷

This connection between nation, emotion, poetry, and memory makes it clear that *Dumy* were not merely an emotional supplement to history proper. As both the longer draft of the foreword and Ryleev’s notes for an essay called “The *Zeitgeist*, or the Fate of Mankind,” demonstrate, the poet considered emotional connections with the past to be part of a mechanism driving mankind toward a brighter future. While “ignorance” had brought man from his original free state toward tyranny, “enlightenment,” which somehow contained within it the emotional and ideological elements of “politics, morality, and religion,” was currently leading society back toward freedom.³⁸ The first version of Ryleev’s foreword to *Dumy* makes it clear that he saw his work as an enlightening project that would improve the well-being of his countrymen.³⁹ His understanding of enlightenment, obviously rooted in Rousseau, cannot be separated from sentiment or sentimentalism. Ryleev’s task here is to create an *emotional* understanding of the past, to remind readers of their *personal* connections with historical figures, engaging them directly in the historical process and linking them in a virtual emotional community with the past. Rather than supplementing the traditional

³⁵Ibid., 497. The letter is dated November 1825.

³⁶See the entry for “Dumy” in A. P. Kviatkovskii, *Poeticheskii slovar'*, ed. I. Rodniaskaia (Moscow, 1966), 107.

³⁷See Edyta Bojanowska, “A Ticket to Europe: Collections of Ukrainian Folk Songs and their Russian Reviewers, 1820s–1830s,” in *Ukraine and Europe: Cultural Encounters and Negotiations*, ed. Giovanna Brogi Bercoff et al. (Toronto, 2017), 227–49. She points out that Ukrainian thinkers used *dumy* to assert an independent national identity as well.

³⁸Ryleev, “Dukh vremeni, ili sud'ba roda chelovecheskogo,” *PSS*, 412 (composition date unknown).

³⁹Interestingly, in this text Ryleev also insists that those who believe enlightening the people will disrupt proper governance are wrong, for “despotism alone fears enlightenment.” This apparent support of “lawful governments founded on lawful freedom” represents a position closer to the young Pushkin’s (for example, in “Vol'nost’,” likely from 1817) than to the republican one that has come to be associated with the Decembrists generally (*Dumy*, 139).

history represented by the *Dumy*'s sources and paratexts, then, Ryleev's poetry interprets it, preserving and sharpening not factual details, but emotional episodes with personal relevance to his readers.

DUMY: AN EMOTIONAL READING

Space does not permit an in-depth consideration of all twenty-one poems in *Dumy*, so I will offer an extended reading of one representative work. "Rogneda" was originally published in Ryleev's *Polar Star* as a *povest'* in 1823. Though the presence of an extended narrative meant that the author did not consider it a "proper" *duma*, the poem's length allows it to illustrate the mechanisms of emotional communication that define the collection. In addition to being a historical poem itself, its characters tell emotionally engaging histories to one another—and also, by extension, to the readers. Here, following the precepts of civic sentimentalism, noble feelings are equated with virtuous, patriotic actions, while negative passions are destructive to both the individual and the state.

Like many other *dumy*, "Rogneda" diverges from both its prose preface and its primary source. When it appears in Karamzin's *History*, this story tells us that Rogneda was a Varangian queen, one of the Scandinavian rulers who preceded the rise of Kiev. As the Varangians fall, Rogneda's husband, father, and brothers are killed by the Kievan prince Vladimir, who then immediately marries her himself. Though she forgives these murders, Rogneda finds herself unable to forget Vladimir's subsequent romantic infidelities. She plans to take revenge by killing her husband in his sleep. At the critical moment, however, she recalls her murdered family and starts sobbing. Vladimir awakes before she can attack him, and begins preparing to kill her himself when their son Iziaslav arrives. The boy offers his father a sword to kill his mother, and declares himself a witness to the crime. This is an ambiguous gesture suspended between threat and moral judgment. On the advice of his boyars, Vladimir decides to give his wife and son a city to make peace with them.⁴⁰ In *Dumy*, Stroev's prose notes adjust Karamzin's version of the story by omitting the romantic infidelities and the boyars, implying that Rogneda's revenge had primarily political motivations and that Vladimir's change of heart resulted from forgiveness rather than political strategy.

Ryleev's poem develops this story differently. There, the emotional elements that the prose narrative only implies take up a central position. In it, Rogneda tells her son their family's history, explicitly stating that she is motivated first by sadness, then by righteous anger at her relatives' deaths. Ryleev's poetic framing clearly communicates to the reader that the process of narrating this history exerts a powerful emotional effect on the protagonist, stirring her dangerous passions. At the beginning of the poem, private memories of her husband move Rogneda to tears:

От вздохов под фатой у ней
Младые перси трепетали

From sighs underneath her veil
Her young breasts were trembling

⁴⁰Nikolai Karamzin, *Istoriia gosudarstva rossiiskogo*, vol. 1, (Moscow, 1989), 145–47.

И из потупленных очей Как жемчуг, слезы упали. ⁴¹	And from her downcast eyes Tears were falling like pearls.
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Comforting his mother, Iziaslav asks Rogneda to tell him stories of their family instead of crying. She agrees, hoping that the tale of her father Rogvolod will move her son. Indeed, Rogneda describes her goals in almost the same way that Ryleev described his own in the preface, explaining that she hopes that her tale will evoke an emotional response in her son that will inspire him to love his country and become a good ruler:

Пусть Rogволодов дух в тебя Вдохнет мое повествованьё; Пускай оно в груди молодой Зажжет к делам великим рвеньё, Любовь к стране твоей родной И к притеснителям презреньё ... (pp. 24–25)	Let my narration inspire The spirit of Rogvolod in you: In your young chest, let it Kindle a zeal for great deeds, Love for your native land And contempt for [its] oppressors ...
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Indeed, Rogneda’s story successfully elicits strong feelings not only from Iziaslav, but also from Rogneda herself. Unfortunately, the princess’s unhappiness predisposes her to the negative passions. When a messenger interrupts her tale to announce Vladimir’s return, “indignation” (*negodovanie*) flashes in her eyes. Though she also mentions marital discord, the recollection of Rogvolod has clearly played the central role in transforming her melancholy to anger.⁴² In a nod to the romantic ballad, Rogneda’s dissatisfaction immediately expresses itself in the natural world as well, manifesting itself as a storm.⁴³

This storm provides a transition to a series of emotional transformations in the primary actors. Considered from the perspective of civic sentimentalism, this section emphasizes how negative passions develop into a destructive cycle, promising dangerous personal and political consequences. When Vladimir arrives, he finds his wife, overcome with emotion after telling the story of her father, burning with “unknown passion” (*nevedomaia strast’*; p. 27). The prince orders a feast—at which Rogneda “grieves alone” (*grustit odna*), a detail that emphasizes her emotional isolation from Vladimir’s nation—and then commands his bard to sing of his own ancestors (p. 27).

This is another metapoetic moment. In describing the bard’s audience, Ryleev writes of “rapture” (*vostorg*), an important word that would later be used to describe the political importance of emotion in Kiukhel’beker’s poetry.⁴⁴ Rogneda’s isolation becomes even more explicit when the bard mentions Rogvolod, which evokes a hysterical “cry of despair” (*vopl’ otchaian’ia*) from his daughter. Although Ryleev explicitly contrasts her anguish

⁴¹Ryleev, “Rogneda,” *Dumy*, 24. Where appropriate, page references to this work will be given parenthetically in the main text.

⁴²The fact that romance plays a secondary role in Ryleev’s version of Rogneda’s tale inverts Karamzin’s retelling, where Vladimir’s political crimes serve a secondary function.

⁴³She spoke – and in her eyes there flashed/ The wild flame of indignation./ Meanwhile in the fields/ The midnight cries of the owl had already sounded .../ The darkness thickened ... the moon barely/ Shone with a trembling ray./ The cold wind began to blow,/ And a passionate storm began to howl!” (Ryleev, “Rogneda,” *Dumy*, 26).

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 148; Kiukhel’beker, “O napravlenii nashei poezii.”

with the “joy” (*radost'*) of the conquering Kievans, he also makes it clear that she, too, has been influenced by rapture (p. 28). When Vladimir catches her trying to murder him that night and asks her if she loves him, she enumerates his crimes and frames her revenge in angry political terms, repeating the word “rapture”:

С какую б жадностию я	With such eagerness would I
На брызжущую кровь глядела,	Have looked at the spurting blood,
С каким восторгом бы тебя,	With what rapture would I have looked at
Тиран, угасшего узрела ...!	You, tyrant, as you died ...!
(p. 31)	

Here, the careful reader may observe more than bloodthirsty frenzy. The favorite Decembrist term “tyrant” (*tiran*) underscores the stark contrast between Karamzin’s sordid romance and Ryleev’s political drama. Rogneda’s revenge fantasy is personally motivated, but her rapture connects these dark feelings directly to the more positive patriotism we saw the Kievan heroes enjoying earlier. Though Ryleev makes it clear that his Rogneda is more than just a jilted lover, the political here is also deeply personal, tied to private loyalties and passions.

But we see something different in her son, who arrives just in time to intervene in his parents’ quarrel. Iziaslav is stirred by sentiment rather than passion:

В тревоге все – лишь Изяслав	Everyone was anxious – only Iziaslav
В объятиях сна, с улыбкой нежной,	In the embrace of sleep, with a tender smile,
Лежит, покровы разметав,	Lies, having cast aside his blankets,
Покой вкушая безмятежный.	Enjoying a quiet peace.
(p. 32)	

Indeed, Ryleev gives so much emphasis to Iziaslav’s peacefulness that he does not explain how the boy even learns of his parents’ conflict. Yet just as Vladimir is about to punish Rogneda’s defiance with death and asks for a sword to kill her with, the child arrives with the weapon and reminds Vladimir of his cruelty:

И, быстро в храмину вбежав:	And, having run quickly into the room:
«Вот меч! коль не отец ты ныне,	“Here is a sword! If you are no longer a father,
Убей! – вещает Изяслав, –	Then kill!” proclaimed Iziaslav,
Убей, жестокий, мать при сыне!»	“Kill, O cruel one, a mother in the presence/ of her son!”
(p. 32)	

By appealing to the noble sentiment of paternal love, Iziaslav transforms the passionate frenzy of his parents. Ryleev lingers on this transformation for several lines, describing not just the prince’s emotions but also the physical sensations accompanying them. Finally, readers receive proof that Vladimir’s heart has changed when he begins to cry, a hallmark of sentimentalist literature:

Речь замирает на устах.	Speech dies on his lips,
Сперлось дыханье, сердце бьется;	His breath has stopped, his heart was beating;
Трепещет он; в его костях	He trembles; in his bones
И лютый хлад и пламень льется,	There is both a ferocious cold and flame,

В душе кипит борьба страстей:	In his soul a battle of passions seethes:
И милосердие и мщение ...	Both mercy and vengeance ...
Но вдруг с слезами из очей –	But suddenly with tears from his eyes
Из сердца вырвалось: <i>прощенье!</i> ⁴⁵	From his heart bursts out: <i>forgiveness!</i>

In this passage—the final lines of the poem—Ryleev emphasizes the emotional shifts in Vladimir’s “battle of passions,” giving particular emphasis to the transition in the striking rhyme pair *mshchen'e/proshchen'e* (“vengeance/forgiveness”).⁴⁶ The prince’s oscillation between mercy and vengeance explicitly contrasts positive and negative feelings, and, as we have seen earlier, these two poles have very different political consequences; while passionate anger tempts both Rogneda and Vladimir to perpetuate the cycle of violence, sentimental mercy offers peace. The solution that Iziaslav provides suggests that political strife can be addressed by emotional transformation, and harkens back to Ryleev’s sentimental political predecessors, like Rousseau and Radishchev. To understand his wife and the national suffering she represents, Vladimir must shed the same tears she did at the beginning of the poem.

“Rogneda” illustrates how stories about the past, told personally, can emotionally influence both the speaker and the listener—unlike academic history. Moreover, since sentiment transfers to the ordinary citizens who read the poems as well, this story of a king, queen, and prince ultimately becomes somewhat democratic. If we recall Ryleev’s “Zeitgeist,” we will remember that he saw history moving continually toward a state of greater justice and freedom. Reading *Dumy* shows us how emotion—indeed, the emotion that these very works are meant to evoke—functions as the motor for this progression.

PUSHKIN’S POLEMICS: “SONG OF OLEG THE WISE” AND “THE HERO”

In short, Ryleev wanted *Dumy* to serve as an emotionally engaging history lesson, with metalessons embedded within to model his audience’s response. However, not all readers responded to these poems as their author hoped: Alexander Pushkin objected to their factual inaccuracies, and in particular to “Oleg the Seer” (1822), a poem dedicated to the medieval conqueror of the Byzantine capital Constantinople.⁴⁷ The polemical response he formulates offers insight into not only Ryleev’s project, but also into the extent to which its broad civic goals might succeed or fail when tested in the real world.

“Oleg the Seer,” first published in the journal *Novosti literaturny*, depicts the hero hanging his shield “with the coat of arms of Russia” on the city gates as a mark of his victory. As Pushkin scornfully pointed out to his brother Lev and to Ryleev himself, Russia

⁴⁵Ryleev, “Rogneda,” *Dumy*, 33.

⁴⁶While mercy would not generally be considered one of the negative “passions,” this detail reminds us that the logic of civic sentimentalism, while generally useful as an interpretive framework, is not always consistent. I am grateful to one of my anonymous reviewers for the insight about this rhyme pair.

⁴⁷Ryleev, “Oleg Veshchii,” *Dumy*, 9–12. Though this article will follow Pushkin in focusing on the problems this work presents, one can find additional issues with works like “Boris Godunov” and “Volynskii,” in which the poetic sections veer widely from both the mainstream historical narratives of the day and their own prose prefaces. These works can be found in Ryleev, *Dumy*, 61–64 and 84–87, respectively.

did not officially adopt this coat of arms until the reign of Ivan III.⁴⁸ In fact, he remarks that this bird was originally the seal of *Byzantium itself*; indeed, the original chronicle of Oleg's deeds made no mention at all of the two-headed eagle.⁴⁹

Three years later, as Pushkin's first contribution to his Lyceum friend Anton Del'vig's almanac *Northern Flowers*, he published his own "Song of Oleg the Wise," a work that obviously skewered Ryleev, and was written the same year Ryleev's version was published.⁵⁰ The Decembrist poet had chosen to use an automatically recognizable symbol of Russia's historical and religious connection to Byzantium—the two-headed eagle—in his poem celebrating Oleg's glorious victory over this very power. But he exploited this image's emotional associations while overlooking the fact that the moment of history his poem described was defined by the *conflict* between the pagan Russians and the Orthodox Christian Byzantines. Meanwhile, Ryleev anachronistically presents the *Byzantines* as pagans, consulting astrology, and their emperor as a tyrant to boot:

Их император самовластный	Their despotic emperor
В чертогах трепетал	Trembled in his palace
И в астрологии, несчастный!	And, the unfortunate one
Спасения искал. ⁵¹	Sought salvation in astrology.

For Pushkin, this inconsistency could not be ignored, and his response to "Oleg Veshchii" highlights an anecdote from Karamzin's history that emphasizes Oleg's pagan religion, deemphasizes his heroism, and ironizes his prophetic reputation and epithet.⁵²

Pushkin's response returns to Ryleev's own primary source, Karamzin. In a side note at the end of Book One, Chapter Five of the *History*, Karamzin cites from Nestor's Primary

⁴⁸Pushkin makes this remark not only in an 1823 letter to his brother Lev but also in an 1825 letter to Ryleev himself (*Letters of Alexander Pushkin*, 106–7, 220–21). It also is in a note he made in the first 1825 *Northern Flowers* publication of his poem "Pesn' o veshchem Olege," in A. S. Pushkin, *Sobranie sochinenii v desiatii tomakh* (SS), vol. 1 (Moscow, 1959), 185–88.

⁴⁹A. A. Formozov, "K sporu Pushkina c Ryleevym o shchite Olega," in *Vremennik Pushkinskoi kommissii 1979* (Leningrad, 1979), 132–33. Formozov's note points out that in spite of Pushkin's objections, the Polish historian Maciej Strykowski identified the two-headed eagle with Oleg, although Russian historians like Karamzin rejected this hypothesis. However, as I have emphasized, strict historical accuracy was not Ryleev's goal.

⁵⁰V. E. Vatsuro, "Rozhdeniie al'manakha," in his *Izbrannyye trudy* (Moscow, 2004), 5–34; Pushkin, "Pesn' o veshchem Olege," SS 1:185–88.

⁵¹Ryleev, *Dumy*, 10.

⁵²In the first *Northern Flowers* publication of "Pesn' o veshchem Olege," Pushkin included a note to the line "Your shield on the gates of Constantinople": "But not with the Russian coat of arms, as someone said, first of all because in the time of Oleg Russia did not yet have a coat of arms. Our *two-headed eagle* is the coat of arms of the Roman Empire and represents its division into Western and Eastern [empires]. But in Russia it doesn't mean anything." The "someone" here is obviously Ryleev. It should be added to Pushkin's point that "Russia" did not exist at this moment in history, either. See Pushkin, "Iz rannikh redaktsii," *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 10-kh tomakh* (PSS), vol. 2, *Stikhotvoreniia, 1820–1826* (Leningrad, 1949), 346. Pushkin would later return to the theme of Oleg in 1829's "Olegov shchit" ("The Shield of Oleg"). For a discussion of this poem in the context of Russia's war with the Ottoman Empire, and other Russian poetry featuring this image, see Roman Leibov and Aleksandr Ospovat, "Siuzhet i zhanr stikhotvoreniia Pushkina 'Olegov shchit,'" in *Pushkinskie chteniia v Tartu 4: Pushkinskaia epokha: Problemy refleksii i kommentariia: Materialy mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii* (Tartu, 2007), 71–88.

Chronicle a legend about Oleg's death that directly related to the ruler's pagan beliefs.⁵³ Apparently, soothsayers had warned the prince that his favorite horse would kill him. Terrified, Oleg stopped riding the horse. Years later, however, after learning that the animal had died, Oleg laughed at the soothsayers and demanded to see his horse's bones. When he triumphantly placed his foot on its skull, a snake that had been hiding there bit him, and he died.⁵⁴

Karamzin does not emphasize the supernatural intrigue of the legend, which he immediately dismisses as a folktale, but instead the popular interest in the figure that led to its development. He follows the discussion of the legend with the assertion that "what the Chronicler relates about the consequences of Oleg's death is much more important and more trustworthy: *the people moaned and shed tears*."⁵⁵ Karamzin's focus—connecting admiration of a great Russian, and by extension admiration of the Russian nation and its history, to a visceral emotional response—employed the same sentimental logic as the Ryleev project that it inspired. It was exactly this element of the story that Pushkin deemphasized by retelling the legend alone, reducing Karamzin's emotional context to a single mention of a "tearful memorial feast" (*trizna plachevnaia*) in the final stanza.⁵⁶

The polemical thrust of Pushkin's poem did not go unnoticed. In an overview of Russian literature's developments for the year 1825, when *Northern Flowers* first came out, Ryleev's friend, collaborator, and fellow Decembrist Aleksandr Bestuzhev describes Pushkin's poem as a *duma*, a genre previously associated primarily with Ryleev.⁵⁷ Ryleev went on to distance himself from "Oleg" by indicating in *Dumy*'s introduction that though "Oleg" was far from his strongest work, it was also an imitation of Niemcewicz that he had included as a tribute to the Polish author.⁵⁸ In 1825 he gave further expression to his discontent with Pushkin's criticism in a poem entitled "To Bestuzhev." This item is worth citing in its entirety because, in formulating Ryleev's conception of his position vis-à-vis Pushkin, it also offers an even more explicit illustration of the way the Decembrist poet understood his own artistic task:

Хоть Пушкин суд мне строгий произнес
И слабый дар, как недруг тайный, взвесил,
Но от того, Бестужев, еще нос
Я недругам в угоду не повесил.

Моя душа до гроба сохранит
Высоких дум кипящую отвагу;
Мой друг! Недаром в юноше горит
Любовь к общественному благу!

⁵³Karamzin points out that this legend appears in an Icelandic Saga, and posits that the Varangians brought it to Russia (*Istoriia gosudarstva rossiiskogo*, 262–63 n.332).

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 109–10.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 110 (emphasis added).

⁵⁶Pushkin, *SS* 1:168.

⁵⁷See Vatsuro, "Rozhdeniie al'manakha," 30. In a restrained critique of an enterprise that obviously threatened his own, Bestuzhev also mentions—as he had earlier in a private letter—that *Northern Flowers* was excessively somber and that it was possible to read through the entire thing without smiling.

⁵⁸Ryleev wrote that the poem "is weak and poorly executed; but I decided to include it among the *dumy* in order to show the composition of the historical songs of Niemcewicz, one of Poland's best poets" (*Dumy*, 8).

В чью грудь порой теснится целый свет,
Кого с земли восторг души уносит,
Назло врагам тот всегда поэт,
Тот славы требует, не просит.

Так и ко мне, храня со мной союз,
С улыбкою и с ласковым приветом
Слетит порой толпа вертявых муз,
И я вдруг делаюсь поэтом.⁵⁹

Although Pushkin pronounced a severe judgment over me
And, like a secret foe, weighed my weak gift,
Nevertheless, Bestuzhev, because of this
I haven't become despondent for the pleasure of my foes.

My soul will preserve unto the grave
The seething valor of lofty thoughts;
My friend! Not for naught,
Does love for the public good burn in a youth!

In him into whose chest there sometimes crowds an entire world,
In him whom rapture of the soul carries away from the earth,
That one is always a poet to spite his enemies
That one demands glory, he does not ask for it.

And so, preserving their union with me,
With a smile and with a tender greeting,
At times a crowd of restless muses also flies down to me,
And suddenly I become a poet.

The background informing this poem includes both the personal relationship between Ryleev and Pushkin and the idealized role that friendship played in Decembrist circles. “To Bestuzhev” was probably written around May 1825, when Ryleev wrote a letter to Pushkin expressing indignation upon learning the latter’s negative opinion of *Dumy* and demanding an explanation.⁶⁰ In earlier correspondence with the other poet, Ryleev had acknowledged Pushkin’s potential criticism, but still hoped that they might find common ground. Not long before, in January, Ryleev had written his first letter to Pushkin, impulsively addressing him informally (using *ty*) before their mutual friend Ivan Pushchin (a man Ryleev knew through the secret Decembrist Northern Society) had officially introduced them—he was inspired by his recent reading of *The Gypsies*.⁶¹ In a later letter, from March, Ryleev acknowledged that Pushkin was merciless in his judgment of *Dumy*, but he expressed hope that Pushkin might find something interesting in them anyway—and called Pushkin a “great flatterer” (*velikii l'stets*) for the positive remarks Pushkin offered about his historical narrative poem *Voinarovsky*.⁶² From this context, we can see that the harsher critiques that Ryleev

⁵⁹K. F. Ryleev, *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvoreniĭ*, ed. A. V. Arkhipova et al. (Leningrad, 1971), 102.

⁶⁰Ryleev, *PSS*, 494 (letter 60).

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 479 (letter 44).

⁶²*Ibid.*, 489–90 (letter 54): “I know that you have no mercy for my *Dumy*; despite that, I asked Pushchin to send them to you too.”

encountered latter scuttled his hopes for a closer personal and professional relationship with the great writer. By making overtures of friendship towards Pushkin, Ryleev tried to identify him as one who shared his own social values.

The emphasis on friends and enemies in “To Bestuzhev” likely derives from Ryleev’s recognition that Pushkin was not the comrade he had believed him to be. Ryleev uses the word “enemy” (*nedrug* - literally “non-friend”) twice in the first stanza, addresses Bestuzhev specifically as “friend” (*drug*), transitions to the more direct word “enemies” (*vragam*), and in the final line uses a word for “suddenly” (*vdrug*) that evokes the etymologically unrelated *drug*. It is also worth noting that Ryleev describes his relationship—his “union” (*soiuz*)—with the Muses as essentially one of friendship: they approach him “with a smile and tender greeting.”

The way Ryleev comes to identify *himself* as a poet in spite of his “weak gift” is even more significant. His “love for social good,” the emotional rapture that inspires him “in spite of enemies,” and the friendly relationship with the muse that “suddenly” makes Ryleev’s lyric hero into a “poet” illustrate how emotion defines not only Ryleev’s relationship with other poets—as we have seen with Pushkin—but also his understanding of poetry itself. Here, Ryleev illustrates his notion that if a writer is inspired by feelings that are noble enough (recall the “love for social good” in line eight) and strong enough (as the penultimate stanza describes), this emotional state allows him access to the essence of poetry (represented by the Muses) and trumps the intellectual weakness represented by his “weak gift.”⁶³

The polemic between Pushkin and Ryleev did not end with Ryleev’s poem to Bestuzhev, or even with the Decembrist’s death. In spite of his positive remarks on Ryleev’s *Voinarovsky*, which was published in 1825, Pushkin explicitly polemicized with it in his own *Poltava*, published in 1829, which was written in the same genre and on the same subject.⁶⁴ Pushkin’s side of the conversation continued—though not overtly—in an important poem written one year after that, which dealt with the nature of historical truth. This work revisits Ryleev’s civic-sentimentalist approach to history. Here, we can see that, even though Pushkin had dismissed Ryleev’s ideas, they remained compelling enough to continue occupying the former’s artistic consciousness years later.

Pushkin’s “The Hero,” written in 1830 during the famously productive Boldino Autumn, was never published under its author’s name until after his death. This poem is structured as a dialogue between a “Friend” and a “Poet,” repeating two key terms Ryleev used in his poem to Bestuzhev. In it, the Poet tells his Friend that Napoleon represents his heroic ideal, not because of his fame or conquests, but because of the noble deed he allegedly performed in Jaffa during the Egyptian campaign, visiting his plague-stricken troops without fear of infecting himself. When the Friend points out that a “historian” (referring to the then-recently published memoirs of Napoleon’s secretary Louis-Antoine de Bourrienne) had written that the general had not actually risked his life during this visit, the Poet responds

⁶³The language Ryleev applies to his own poetic development here is similar to the language he uses to describe Derzhavin in the *duma* of the same name (*Dumy*, 91–95).

⁶⁴See Pushkin, “Predislovie k pervomu izdaniiu ‘Poltavy,’” *SS* 5:449–50. See also “Oproverzhenie na kritiki i zamechaniia na sobstvennye sochineiia” (*ibid.*, 342–52).

that he prefers an “illusion that elevates us” (*nas vozvyshaiushchii obman*) to “masses of low truths” (*t'my nizkikh istin*).⁶⁵

Though Evdokimova follows many other scholars in regarding this work as an authorial manifesto, Michael Wachtel’s commentary rightly points out that this work’s dialogic form means that “the reader cannot distinguish exactly where Pushkin himself stands” and that “it would surely be overhasty to identify the poet with Pushkin.”⁶⁶ While Evdokimova argues that the two voices in “The Hero’s” dialogue represent “complementary” sides of Pushkin’s own artistic personality—the sober historian and the inspired poet—the polemic this article has examined suggests that Ryleev’s insistence on representing an emotionally uplifting version of history, with clearly delineated heroes, had much in common with the Poet’s position.⁶⁷ In the context of their earlier disagreement, we might see “The Hero” as a more thoughtful consideration of this debate; rather than skewering Ryleev, Pushkin presents his old colleague’s position with both sympathy and criticism. By portraying their debate as a dialogue, with an ambiguous conclusion, he leaves the question of civic sentimentalism far more open than he had earlier.

Several contextual clues surrounding their poetic conversation support this association of “The Hero” with Ryleev. The Poet’s first response to the Friend, for example, is reworked from a stanza about Napoleon from the unfinished and unpublished tenth chapter of *Eugene Onegin*, which dealt with the Decembrists.⁶⁸ Indeed, V. I. Porudimovskii and N. Ia. Eidel'man point out that Pushkin began writing this poem on October 19, the same day on which he had also written a poem in memory of his Lyceum classmates (several of whom became Decembrists) and burned his draft of the tenth chapter.⁶⁹ Michael Wachtel’s commentary also notes similarities between this lyric and “The Poet and the Crowd” (1828).⁷⁰ This earlier work elucidates Pushkin’s understanding of the poet’s role, which he had developed partially in opposition to Ryleev’s own ideas. Moreover, like the conflict between Pushkin and Ryleev over *Dumy*, the two figures in “The Hero” debate the relative importance of historical accuracy and the potential of inspiration.⁷¹

This poem’s famous final stanza also acquires additional meaning when read in the context of their conversation:

Поэт	Poet
Да будет проклят правды свет, Когда посредственности холодной, Завистливой, к соблазну жадной, Он угождает праздно! – Нет!	May the light of truth be cursed, When it idly seeks to please mediocrity, Cold, jealous, eager For seduction! – No!

⁶⁵Pushkin, “Geroi,” *SS* 2:319–21.

⁶⁶Michael Wachtel, *A Commentary to Pushkin’s Lyric Poetry, 1826–1836* (Madison, 2012), 211. See also Evdokimova, *Pushkin’s Historical Imagination*, 107.

⁶⁷For a consideration of other literary and historical sources that may have informed this work, such as Voltaire and Chateaubriand, see Andrew Kahn, *Pushkin’s Lyric Intelligence* (Oxford, 2008), 217–77.

⁶⁸See T. A. Tsiavlovskaiia’s commentary in Pushkin, *SS* 2:725–26.

⁶⁹V. I. Porudimovskii and N. Ia. Eidel'man, *Boldinskaia osen'* (Moscow, 1974), 314.

⁷⁰Wachtel, *A Commentary*, 211–12.

⁷¹It should be noted that the account of the “strict historian” to whom Pushkin’s “Friend” refers, Napoleon’s secretary Bourrienne, turned out to be inaccurate.

Тьмы низких истин мне дороже	Dearer to me than a multitude of low truths
Нас возвышающий обман ...	Is the deceit that lifts us up ...
Оставь герою сердце! Что же	Leave the hero his heart! What
Он будет без него? Тиран ...	Will he be without it? A tyrant ...

And here at the very end of the poet's speech comes that key term in Decembrist literature—*tiran/tyrant*. According to formalist critics, “key words” appeared so frequently in works of some sub-genres from this period that, when set alongside certain contextual clues, they automatically alerted readers that the poems in which they appeared would be elegiac laments or expressions of liberal indignation.⁷² Besides “tyrant,” many other words that appear frequently in Ryleev's poetry—“freedom” (*vol'nost'*), “citizen” (*grazhdanin*), “star” (*zvezda*), and “dawn” (*zaria*)—appear in this poem as well. While he was certainly not the only Russian poet to use these words, their combination and frequency were hallmarks of the Decembrist's civic sentimentalist style.

The line “Leave the hero his heart!” is also consistent with the poetic strategies this article has considered. In this context, the word “poet” also stands out. While Ryleev repeatedly (and famously) used it negatively in reference to himself (“I'm not a poet, but a citizen”) and positively in reference to Pushkin (“Be a poet and a citizen”), here Pushkin identifies the figure linked to Ryleev's own civic-sentimentalist worldview as “the poet.” On one hand, Pushkin gives this figure a positive association that Ryleev did not publicly assign to himself; on the other, in the context of the poem as a whole, the title of “poet” also suggests that civic sentimentalism may be unrealistic and even potentially counterproductive to its own aims.

These potential negative repercussions become clear in the discussion of Napoleon, which also functions as a complicated allusion to Ryleev. After Byron's death in 1824, both Ryleev and Pushkin's Lyceum classmate and future Decembrist Kiukhel'beker immediately wrote odes celebrating the English lord as a poet and a freedom fighter: “On Byron's Death” and “The Death of Byron,” respectively. Indeed, in 1825, Ryleev even tried to compliment Pushkin by telling him that he had the potential to become Russia's own Byron.⁷³ But even in 1824, Pushkin regarded Byron more skeptically than he had earlier. His complicated tribute to the fallen romantic, “To the Sea,” considers him alongside Napoleon, also recently deceased, and additionally “fallen” by virtue of his exile.⁷⁴ Significantly, this poem also utilizes the key word “tyrant”:

Где капля блага, там на страже	Where there is a drop of good, there already
Уж просвещение иль тиран. ⁷⁵	Stands enlightenment or a tyrant on guard.”

⁷²For more on the Decembrist use of key or “signal” words see Viktor Gofman, “Ryleev-Poet,” *Russkaia poeziiia XIX veka* (Leningrad, 1929), 1–73; G. A. Gukovskii, *Pushkin i russkie romantiki* (Moscow, 1995), 153; and Lydia Ginzburg, *O lirike* (Moscow, 1964), 21–49.

⁷³Ryleev, *PSS*, 495 (letter 60). Ryleev does stipulate that he does not mean that Pushkin should emulate Byron's style, but rather his national status.

⁷⁴For a poetic evaluation of these three tributes to Byron see Iurii Tynianov, *Arkhaisty i novatory* (Petrograd, 1929), 209–13. It should be noted that Porudimovskii and Eidel'man also link “The Hero” to Pushkin's critique of Byron, suggesting a link between this exchange and a letter from Pushkin to Petr Viazemskii about the English poet (*Boldinskaia osen'*, 318).

⁷⁵Pushkin, “K moriu,” *SS* 2:37.

Here, imagining Napoleon's death in captivity, Pushkin inverts Byron's vision of him as heroic and powerful, subverting his positive romantic image even while paying it tribute.⁷⁶ Transitioning to a discussion of Byron, he writes,

Другой от нас умчался гений,	Another genius has left us
Другой властитель наших дум.	Another ruler of our thoughts.

In "The Hero," too, Pushkin both invokes and subverts the romantic Napoleon.⁷⁷

The specific image of Napoleon carried additional polemical weight when considered in conjunction with Ryleev. Ryleev was an ardent Russian patriot who lambasted the French emperor in several poems, including his famous 1823 ode "Civic Courage."⁷⁸ In an unpublished prose fragment about Napoleon, Ryleev described him in terms very similar to the ones he had applied in *Voinarovsky* to the Ukrainian rebel Mazepa, describing as an unethical man for whom the ends justified the means.⁷⁹ Insofar as "The Poet" in "The Hero" recalls Ryleev, he has deliberately made the same mistake as Ryleev's tragic hero Voinarovsky, who appeared in a poem about Mazepa, allowing the "uplifting deception" of an apparent hero to blind him to "a multitude of low truths" about Napoleon's true self. Pushkin's description of romantic and sentimental ideals is especially striking when one considers that Ryleev also regarded Napoleon as the one who "overthrew" the inspiring ideals of the French Revolution.⁸⁰

The date and place affixed to the end of the poem—September 29, 1830, Moscow—also refers obliquely to the Decembrist uprising. As numerous critics have pointed out, it does not reflect when or where "The Hero" was composed, but rather the day Nicholas I visited cholera-ridden Moscow.⁸¹ The Poet is perhaps meant to take comfort in the fact that the "uplifting deception" of a ruler putting himself at risk to comfort his people had in fact become reality. Ironically, the very tsar whose reign Ryleev and the Decembrists had tried to prevent turned out to embody the ideal they had sought.⁸² In Pushkin's view, the tendency

⁷⁶Napoleon went on to play an important role in Russian romanticism. For a recent analysis of this trend, see Jonathan Brooks Platt, "Child of the Age or Little Napoleon? Two Russian Responses to *The Red and the Black*," *Russian Review* 77 (January 2018): 7–29.

⁷⁷Pushkin, "K moriu," *SS* 2:37. Kahn's reading of "The Hero" discusses the evolution of Pushkin's image of Napoleon in great detail, assuming that Pushkin's word "*kartina*" ("picture") should be taken literally.

⁷⁸Ryleev, "Grazhdanskoe muzhestvo," *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvoreniĭ*, 91–93.

⁷⁹Compare the fragment on Mazepa ("For Mazepa, it seems, nothing was sacred, except for the goal for which he was striving ...") to the one on Napoleon ("All means were equal to you – as long as they led directly to your goal ..."). Though one cannot assume that Pushkin was familiar with these sketches, I cite them in order to illustrate the similarities between Ryleev's views of Mazepa and Napoleon, which did not diverge from those generally held by Russians in this period (Ryleev, *PSS*, 416, 417).

⁸⁰Ryleev, "Dukh vremeni," *PSS*, 412.

⁸¹Michael Wachtel suggests that Nicholas was "probably conscious of the Napoleonic precedent" (*A Commentary*, 211).

⁸²V. S. Listov discusses how Pushkin's poem might have been read as an idealization of the tsar, citing a letter from Mikhail Pogodin, as well as contemporary newspaper accounts likely familiar to the poet. See Listov, "Iz tvorcheskoi istorii stikhotvoreniia 'Geroi,'" in *Vremennik Pushkinskoi kommissii* (Leningrad, 1981), 136–46. N. I. Mikhailova suggests that a published speech from Metropolitan Filaret about the tsar's benevolence may have served as an additional source. See her "K tvorcheskoi istorii stikhotvoreniia 'Geroia,'" in *Boldinskie chteniia* (Gor'kii, 1987), 217–21.

of Ryleev and his comrades to identify allies and enemies emotionally, based on perceived compatibility with their civic sentimentalist worldview, rather than rationally, represented the essence of their tragedy.

CONCLUSION

William Reddy also associates sentimentalism and tragedy. He argues that while sentimental thought provided the impetus for the French Revolution, this movement's emotional logic was unstable; its idealism and focus on purity and virtue led directly to the destructive paranoia of the Reign of Terror. Reddy goes on to contend that postrevolutionary French culture "erased" sentimentalism, developing into what he calls "romanticism," a culture that regarded the notion of moral sentiment with much more skepticism. This narrative elucidates the conversation between Ryleev and Pushkin that I have just described. While the first exchanges surrounding *Dumy* reveal a playful polemic in which Pushkin mocks how Ryleev's single-minded adherence to writing inspirational poetry led to errors, in the more thoughtful "The Hero" he offers a nuanced consideration of how the emotional logic of civic sentimentalism might lead to unintended negative political consequences, like support for leaders who seemed inspiring but were in fact tyrants.

Pushkin's critique is significant, but it is important to remember that in Russian culture, the Decembrist legacy—and its logic of civic sentimentalism—were in fact not "erased" in the way Reddy describes. Though he did not live to see it, Ryleev and his poetry did succeed in inspiring generations of Russians, including the influential nineteenth-century socialists Herzen and Ogarev, as well as Lev Tolstoy, whose *War and Peace* began as a novel about the Decembrists, and generations of Soviet thinkers. While the image of the Decembrists changed, it did not disappear.⁸³ To a large extent this was due to the emotional resonance conveyed by the idea of the nation's brightest young men sacrificing themselves for a higher cause. Though their efforts to reform Russia did not bear fruit in their time, they did succeed in transmitting both their civic ideals and the emotional tenor surrounding them to future generations, belatedly fulfilling the hopes with which Ryleev had written *Dumy*.

⁸³For an extensive discussion of the evolving image of the Decembrists in cultural memory, especially in twentieth-century Russia, see Ludmilla A. Trigos, *The Decembrist Myth in Russian Culture* (New York, 2009).