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Class Difference and the Right to Privacy: The Ambiguous Moral Bets of Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades*

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Abstract: An ingenious blend of fear and irony, realism and fantasy, Pushkin's Gothic novella, *The Queen of Spades*, is a moral tale in which its protagonist-villain, Germann, is punished for violating the norms of the moral universe peculiar to the story. To understand this universe, it is necessary to take into account the intricate ways in which the story thematizes and represents two particular issues: class difference and privacy. Indeed, the story may be read as a commentary on the horrors of attempting to dispense with a class difference by way of violating private life. This article explores the ambiguous ways in which the story reveals the private life of its characters, focusing particularly on Tomsky's curious anecdote and Lizaveta's revelation of the secrets of the house. It also shows that Lizaveta is invested in a different kind of bet than that of Germann, which turns her into a veritable heroine and an existential gambler despite the pathetic description that Pushkin otherwise gives of her.

Keywords: Pushkin, Queen of Spades, class difference, private life, gothic literature.

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Sınıf Farkı, Özel Hayat ve Puşkin'in *Maça Kızı* Hikâyesinin Çelişkili Ahlaki Bahisleri

Öz: Gerçek ve fantazi, korku ve ironinin ustaca bir karışımı olan Puşkin'in Gotik hikâyesi, *Maça Kızı*, kahramanı Germann'ın hikâyeye ait ahlaki evrenin kurallarını çiğnediği için cezalandırıldığı bir meseldir. Bu ahlaki evreni anlamak için hikâyenin özellikle sınıf farkı ve özel hayat meselelerini nasıl işlediğini incelemek gerekir. Böyle bakıldığında hikâyenin özel hayatı ihlal ederek sınıf farkını ortadan kaldırmanın dehşetine işaret ettiği görülebilir. Bu makale, özellikle Tomsky'nin anekdotu ve Lizaveta'nın evin sırlarını ifşa edişi üzerine odaklanarak, hikâyenin karakterlerin özel hayatlarını açığa çıkardığı ikircikli yolları araştırır. Aynı zamanda hikâyenin kadın karakteri Lizaveta'nın Germann'den farklı bir bahisle ilgilendiğini ve bu bahisle birlikte, Pushkin'in onu acınası bir karakter olarak betimlemesine rağmen, gerçek bir kahramana ve varoluşsal bir kumarcıya dönüştüğünü iddia eder.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Puşkin, Maça Kızı, sınıf farkı, özel hayat, gotik edebiyat.

Giriş

The Queen of Spades is an ingenious narrative of fear and irony, which Pushkin forged from his contemporary Russia, drawing both a complex and entertaining picture of his own society. Best described as a Gothic novella (Simpson 1986), Pushkin's work is a fascinating blend of realism and fantasy, which continues to intrigue literary scholars, inciting ever-new interpretations and commentaries. Despite Terras' complaint that the text is "over interpreted" (1994, p. 241),[1] the story has proved to be a fertile ground for sustained literary speculation. Davydov reminds us that "Dostoevsky called *The Queen of Spades* 'the pinnacle of the art of the fantastic'" and goes on to observe that "its concealed galvanism and the seamless weaving of the fantastic with the realistic invites yet frustrates logical decoding" (1999, p. 327). Schwarz and Schwarz similarly note that "the story's atmosphere mingles the soberly realistic and the apparently fantastic, the aristocratic play of the social world and hidden demonic forces, ceremony and mystery, rules and secret violations" (1975, p. 275). While interpreting this fascinating blend of realism and fantasy, many scholars seem to have swayed toward interpreting its fantastic side. In a succinct yet incisive assessment of the secondary literature, Debreczeny observes that much attention has been devoted to "the arcane elements" in the story (2006, p. 248). While trying to explain the secret of the three cards and Germann's bizarre failure to pick up the right card in the end, for instance, some studies have had liberal recourse to some "arcane" disciplines such as numerology, Cabbalism, Russian exotericism and Freemasonry as may be attested to in the works of Leighton (1977) and Rosen (1975). In an alternative assessment, Gregg notes that scholars have generally been intrigued by the complex features or "'Chinese Box' aspects" of the story that is "replete with imbricated time frames, hidden codes, shifting points of view, symbolic dreams,

[1] See Cornwall 1998 for a bibliography.

stylistic legerdemain" (2000, p. 611). He intimates that partial approaches, which concentrate on these complex formal aspects one by one or in a piecemeal manner, have failed to provide holistic and comprehensive interpretations that address the overall moral aspect of the story (2000, p. 611).

Following in Gregg's footsteps, my intention in this paper is to develop an understanding regarding the moral and ideological universe of the story based on its more realistic chapters, namely Chapters I-IV. To a certain aspect, I agree with Gregg in tracing the moral aspect of the story back to Germann's "bad conscience" (p. 618).[2] As different than Gregg's interpretation, however, I think that the supernatural elements are not merely expressions of Germann's repressed guilt or "subliminal remorse as opposed to conscious repentance" (Gregg, p. 624), but of those societal norms that Germann violates in attempting to acquire the secret of the cards. *The Queen of Spades* is a moral tale through and through; seen in this way, Germann suffers not just pangs of conscience but also the doom and damnation of the story's moral universe that will not tolerate such violations. In order to understand this universe, I argue that it is necessary to take into account the intricate ways in which the story thematizes and represents two particular issues: class difference and privacy.

Regarding class difference, Pushkin's story shows both strains of liberalism and conservativism towards its precarious, lower class characters, namely Germann and Lizaveta. It is liberal because it understands the yearnings of such characters to vie for economic stability, on the one hand, and for romantic love, on the other. It is conservative because it hardly wants to destroy class difference or disturb the "aura" of the *Ancient Regime*, which it depicts in its all morally ambiguous splendor

[2] As Gregg rightfully observes, the ghost of the countess might be seen as "a manifestation of Germann's troubled mental state" (p. 621) or "an emanation of the troubled hero's conscience" (p. 622). For psychoanalytic approaches to Germann's guilt, see Schwartz and Schwartz (1975), Rosenfield (1996) and Barker (1984).

and luxury. In the logic of Pushkin's narrative, the relics of that regime, however annoying and fastidious they might have become, need to be revered only because they belong to a legendary past. The story is selectively kind towards those that comes from lower classes: it is lenient and generous towards Lizaveta, endowing her with a happy marriage at the end, but it does not let Germann overcome his predicament as a poor-born man by winning the definitive bet at the end. Puskin well respects the interdiction, undoubtedly a staple of the *Ancient Regime*, that class distinctions must not be violated. While sympathetic towards everyone's need to have a private life, amorous intimacy or "romance" regardless of their class status, the story is skeptical toward class-hybridization by way of romantic love. A conservative state of social balance is achieved at the end of the story where Lizaveta and Tomsky are married off to members of their own class while the overambitious Germann is transformed into the tragicomic protagonist of Gothic romance.

Despite its open sympathies towards the poor and pathetic Lizaveta and covert aversion towards the senile countess represented as an ancient and alien oddity, *The Queen of Spades* is a narrative that ultimately argues for the preservation of class difference. But in setting this argument in narrative motion, Pushkin chooses a rather complex way: he couples the issue of class difference with that of private life. More specifically, he recognizes privacy as a universal right as long as class differences are respected. In this article, I read Pushkin's story as a commentary on the horrors of attempting to dispense with class difference by way of violating private life. I show the ambiguous ways in which the story reveals the private life of its characters, focusing particularly on Tomsky's curious anecdote and Lizaveta's revelation of the secrets of the house. I also argue that Lizaveta is invested in a different kind of (existential) bet than that of Germann, which turns her into a veritable heroine, not to mention, an existential gambler, despite the pathetic description that Pushkin otherwise gives of her.

Germann and the Secrets Of Tomsky's Anecdote

It must be remembered that the supernatural elements and the subsequent turn to the Gothic genre emerge in the story only after Germann violates the countess' privacy. He begins to be haunted by her ghost, who reveals him the secret of the cards. In the story's final supernatural incident, he loses his last and most important bet by inexplicably failing to pick the right card. He is clearly punished for inducing the death of the countess by a supernatural power that represents regret, guilt or conscience. But Pushkin's is a morally ambiguous universe where wards allow obscure lovers into the houses of their masters and the same masters have tantalizing stories suggesting erotic license and even adultery. To understand what precisely Germann's guilt consists in, it is necessary to understand the complex and complexly ambiguous texture of the story's moral universe and Germann's standing therein. Indeed, Germann's violation of the countess' privacy would have been tolerated if he had not attempted to come *too close* to the countess. He, a commoner, suffers punishment for seeking the intimacy of the countess, and by extension, of aristocracy. Things would perhaps have been different if Germann had observed the boundaries and limits of class difference. In an alternate story, hinted at but unrealized, Germann and Lizaveta would have come together and established their own private romance. Their violation of the countess' privacy would have been merely venial since it would have been a secret act of love.

Germann, however, withdraws from betting on a romance with Lizaveta. A delusional romantic, he seeks unwarranted, unfit and fantastic intimacy with the countess. Here lies the source of the anxiety and horror in the story: by coming too close to the actual countess, Germann trespasses some very personal or private boundaries, unleashing monstrous ironies that lead to his inevitable demise. It is understandable that we may be intrigued by others' private lives, which may make us

seek an occasional glimpse into them in order to satisfy our curiosity. But there are also stricter limits that must be respected, and the story intimates that class difference is precisely such a limit.

One of the ways in which other lives are revealed in their privacy is by way of telling stories about them, gossiping or sharing intimate anecdotes. In the first section of the story, we listen to Count Tomsky as he shares a very intimate and rather scandalous anecdote about her grandmother, which reveals her intimate, secretive, private life during the *Ancient Regime*. The anecdote establishes the issue of privacy as one of the story's prominent themes and preoccupations. We may indeed look at the entire story in light of some fundamental questions related to the right to privacy: to what extent are we entitled to know the secrets of others? And what do we do with these secrets? In order to explore such questions. Pushkin principally deploys the fiercely romantic, mysteriously private Germann, whom he characterizes as a miser in his quotidian life and a spendthrift in his excessive imagination. Tomsky comments on his nonparticipation in the humble bets of an intimate gambling party:

> "But look at Hermann," exclaimed one of the party, pointing to a young officer of the Engineers. "Never held a card in his hands, never made a bet in his life, and yet he sits up till five in the morning watching us play."
>
> "Cards interest me very much," said Hermann, 'but I am not in a position to risk the necessary in the hope of acquiring the superfluous.
>
> "Hermann is a German: he's careful, that's what that is!" remarked Tomsky. "But if there is one person I can't understand it is my grandmother, Countess Anna Fedotovna." (Pushkin 2004, 155)[3]

[3] All subsequent references to the text are from Pushkin 2004. Unlike the translation, however, I transliterate the protagonist's name as "Germann" as opposed to the Anglicized "Hermann" in keeping with the Pushkin's play with German stereotypes through him as well as the phonetic and literal resemblance between "Germann" and "St. Germain." The references to the original Russian text have been taken from Pushkin 1960.

Germann's identity will remain a mystery throughout the entire story, unlike that of the aristocratic Tomsky, a public personality with a well-established provenance and well-defined social connections. In contrast, Germann is represented as an overly private individual who will not randomly bet in the company of others: indeed, he will not bet on intimacy at all. The harmless taunt of one of the guests, that Germann has not played cards since his birth ("отроду"), vaguely anticipates the theme of Germann's private history and the circumstances of his birth, which will surface later.

A variety of interpretations could be drawn from Tomsky's comment concerning the cautiousness of Germann. Some of the meanings of "расчетлив" include the senses of calculation, prudence and thriftiness. Tomsky is here deploying a national stereotype ("the miserly German") to scoff at the pettiness of Germann's not participating in the games where the stakes are only moderate. In view of Germann's excessive hesitation to trust and render confidence to things in general, what is truly baffling and wonderful is the delusional faith that he stakes on Tomsky's anecdote or the countess' story.

This anecdote, which recounts a distant episode in the countess' private life, is an exquisite exercise in nostalgic storytelling that reminisces about a bygone era of grandeur, license and decadence. Clayton quotes an insightful observation of his graduate student Emily McHugh, who thinks that "Pushkin's story is in large part a meditation on the nature of stories, and storytelling itself" and himself goes on to observe that the story is dotted with "metapoetic moments" where "unreliable narrators purvey 'stories,' or fantastic tales, which all prove far-fetched" (2009-2010, p. 2). Tomsky's anecdote constitutes precisely such a metapoetic moment. It discloses the countess' acquirement of the secret of the magical cards, which she apparently keeps without using or letting others use it. Tomsky tantalizes the curiosity of his friends by sharing intimate details from his grandmother's very private life:

> Well, listen then. I must tell you that some sixty years ago my grandmother went to Paris and was quite the rage there. People would run after her to catch a glimpse of *la Vénus moscovite;* Richelieu was paying court to her, running after her, and grandmamma maintains that he very nearly blew his brains out because of her cruelty to him. In those days ladies used to play faro. One evening at the Court she lost a very considerable sum to the Duke of Orleans. When she got home she told my grandfather of her loss while peeling off the beauty spots from her face and untying her farthingale, and commanded him to pay her debt. My grandfather, so far as I remember, acted as a sort of major-domo to my grandmother. He feared her like fire; however, when he heard of such a frightful gambling loss he almost went out of his mind, fetched the bills they owed and pointed out to her that in six months they had spent half a million roubles and that in Paris they had neither their Moscow nor their Saratov estates upon which to draw, and flatly refused to pay. Grandmamma gave him a box on the ear and retired to bed without him as a sign of her displeasure. (p. 155)

Full of playful innuendos, the anecdote gives us a curiously decadent picture of a grandmother proudly "maintaining" that she was once pursued by the great Richelieu. It also hints at countess' possible disloyalty to her husband: Richelieu is said to "very nearly" shoot himself from her cruelty, but was eventually saved from a suicidal act. One wonders whether he may have been saved by the countess herself, who, relenting in her cruelty, may have given Richelieu a positive sign, reciprocating his attentions.

Tomsky dots his story with references to curious historical names and fashions. All these references veil an erotic interest in the young countess: we imagine the young countess as she removes her "beauty spots" and take off "her farthingale" while she informs the husband about her gambling losses. Tomsky is explicit about the sexual punishment that the unsympathetic husband is made to suffer, being banished from their marital

bed by the whimsical countess. The tone of sexual innuendo may be felt in the continuation of the anecdote, in which the countess is shown to obtain the secret that leads her out of her troubles:

> Among her close acquaintances was a very remarkable man. You have heard of Count Saint-Germain, about whom so many marvelous stories are told. You know that he posed as the Wandering Jew and claimed to have discovered the elixir of life and the philosopher's stone, and so on. People laughed at him as a charlatan, and Casanova in his *Memoirs* says that he was a spy. Be that as it may, Saint-Germain, in spite of the mystery that surrounded him, had a most dignified appearance and was a very amiable person in society. Grandmamma is still to this day quite devoted to his memory and gets angry if anyone speaks of him with disrespect. Grandmamma knew that Saint-Germain had plenty of money at his disposal. She decided to appeal to him, and wrote a note asking him to come and see her immediately. (p. 156)

This is the first instance of the supernatural in the story: suspected of being a wandering Jew and having invented the elixir of life as well as the philosopher's stone, St Germain is related to wonderful and supernatural phenomena.[4] The passage also looks forward to a possible identification between Germann and St. Germain, as suggested in the kinship between their names; the secrecy of St. Germain reverberates with the secrecy of Germann. St. Germain's unconditional compassion for the countess insinuates the possibility of a romantic liaison between the eccentric old man and the young beauty. An illicit affair may be the reason behind St. Germain's revelation of the secret, which results in the countess' miraculous wins, and the revelation of the secret also hints at secret erotic possibilities.

These tantalizing insinuations, however, seem eclipsed by the denouement of the anecdote whereby the wealth of the aristocratic countess is restored. It must be emphasized that the

[4] See Cornwell 2002 for a discussion of the actual historical person, St Germain.

anecdote is strictly an aristocratic business, where aristocrats win, lose, regain moneys and sexual favors. The likes of the commoner Germann have no business in this high-class genre of storytelling. The story brims with fascination, desire and envy for the lower classes, who may enjoy the story from a distance without however hoping to participate in one. One of the guests attributes its miraculous ending to mere "luck" or chance, whereas the cautious Germann, in a final exclamation of his calculating reason, calls it a fairy tale ("сказка") (p. 156).

The anecdote gives the impression that the countess never goes back to gambling after this episode of implied vice, but Tomsky does go on to mention another episode that involves the countess' attempt to rescue a young Tchaplitsky by revealing him the secret. It is certainly not clear why the countess would disclose the secret to someone outside the family rather than a relative. This later episode continues to carry the erotic shades of the earlier insinuations, this time hinting at an affair between an older woman and a younger man.

Such speculations, insinuations and hints all point to the past grandeur of a fading aristocracy, which has already lost its charm: the present countess is eighty six years old and is awaiting death. The story of the secret of the cards is already a supernatural relic and romance of the now exotic *Ancient Regime*—significantly, the anecdote largely takes place in Paris just before the revolution. Tomsky is telling the story in a leisurely and frivolous way, much like Agnes who tells the amusing story of the Bleeding Nun to Raymond in *the Monk*, hinting that its secrets must not be taken too seriously or literally.

The tone of irony in the anecdote becomes even more unmistakable in relation to the following scene, which represents a completely insignificant countess suffering from old age. Part of the charm of the anecdote must derive from the association between the senile countess of today and the capricious beauty of the past, which must yield a sense of amused disbelief in Tomsky's audience. It is possible to interpret Tomsky's anecdo-

te as a commentary on the consumption of the supernatural stories in an enlightened age: one already knows that there can be no secrets that would lay bare the workings of fate, yet one cannot help being haunted by their playful and often ironic possibility. Tomsky does not seem to be committed to the existence of any metaphysical secrets as much as he is committed to the playfulness that arise from the hypothesis of such impossible secrets.

As revealed in the later part of the story, it is the romantic Germann who cannot resist the pre-enlightenment temptations of the anecdote, failing to create an ironic distance between its supernatural contents and himself. Initially, Pushkin's narrator tells us very little about Germann's background, and whatever is said is said in the solemn language of economy:

> Hermann was the son of a German who had settled in Russia and who left him some small capital sum. Being firmly convinced that it was essential for him to make certain of his independence, Hermann did not touch even the interest on his income but lived on his pay, denying himself the slightest extravagance. But since he was reserved and ambitious his companions rarely had any opportunity for making fun of his extreme parsimony. He had strong passions and an ardent imagination, but strength of character preserved him from the customary mistakes of youth. Thus, for instance, though a gambler at heart he never touched cards, having decided that his means did not allow him (as he put it) 'to risk the necessary in the hope of acquiring the superfluous'. And yet he spent night after night at the card tables, watching with feverish anxiety the vicissitudes of the game. (pp. 163-164)

Germann's life is characterized with the Germanic language of economy, squarely contradicted by the reference to his overly strong passions, which, in an ironic fashion, also suggest the excesses of German romanticism. His investment in the German capital ("капитал") and interest ("процент") is at odds with his fiery imagination, which ever pushes him towards excess, and which he keeps under control through his

superior thrift. While Germann is represented as being mysteriously charming from the outside, the omniscient narration also allows for an internal perspective revealed only to the reader, which depicts him as a pathetic fool readily given over to the extravagances and superfluities of fantasy:

> The story of the three cards had made a powerful impression upon his imagination and it haunted his mind all night. 'Supposing,' he thought to himself the following evening as he wandered about Petersburg, 'supposing the old countess were to reveal her secret to me? Or tell me the three winning cards! Why shouldn't I try my luck?... Get introduced to her, win her favour - become her lover, perhaps. But all that would take time, and she is eighty-seven. She might be dead next week, or the day after tomorrow even!... And the story itself? Is it likely? No, economy, moderation and hard work are my three winning cards. With them I can treble my capital - increase it sevenfold and obtain for myself leisure and independence!' (p. 164)

It is obvious that the anecdote, suggesting an intriguing array of romantic affairs, has inflamed Germann's already fiery imagination. He dreams about the possibility of becoming the lover of the octogenarian but calculates that the countess may not have enough time left for a full-fledged romance. His irrational investment in the veracity of the anecdote seems perhaps partially motivated by a deep-running *ressentiment* against the secretive workings of fate that endows some with all kinds of favors, while withdrawing them from others. Oblivious of the aristocratic core of the anecdote, he imagines that a romance with the countess might lead him to the riches that he unconsciously desires. His internal speculations in the passage point towards both envy and admiration: he is charmed by the possibility that the revelation of the story's secret may lead to the possibility of the elimination and leveling of the difference between aristocracy and his humble origins.

Germann's bet on the secret of this anecdote/story as opposed to others, however, is badly placed. This is not just beca-

use the unlikely high-stakes of his projects and projections (a love story with the countess!) may lead to total loss: he simply does not know how to read a story. His exclamation "fairy tale" after hearing Tomsky's delivery is infinitely more appropriate as an interpretation of the anecdote than his later hypostatization of it in total ignorance of its intricate ironies and blatant sensationalisms. He glosses over the intricacies of the story, being incapable of navigating its passages between imagination and reality, between the present and the past, and between aristocrats and commoners. He pretends that the historical distance between the past and present of Russian aristocracy, which gives the anecdote its fantastic character of reminiscence and nostalgia, could be willed away all at once. There is no better evidence for such interpretive folly than his gerontophilic speculation that he could be united with the countess and her riches in romantic love. More than his extreme ambition, Germann's insanity reflects his inability to account for the discrepancy between his own reality and the story with which he over-identifies. Such discrepancy results in an exquisitely crafted, elaborate irony in all the subsequent interactions between Germann and the countess, which the narrative partially frames as a parody of romantic pursuit.[5]

More than his financial avarice, the story satirizes the rapacity of Germann's desire, which will not recognize any boundaries between itself and its objects. Germann's folly consists in being too literally committed to the grand metaphysical secret of the cards akin to the philosophical stone of St. Germain, which alchemically transforms the scant medium of Germann's reality into the miraculously multiplying capitals of aristocratic fantasy. The secret of the cards is the ultimate metaphysical secret beneath all mundane secrets, from which Germann will

[5] Pushkin's ironic stance toward Germann has been discussed by Rosenshield (2011, p. 223) and especially by Shrayer (1992, pp. 401-402) who approaches Germann as a romantic-ironic and "Byronic/Napoleonic" figure with echoes of Goethe's Werther and Faust. For Pushkin's ironic framing of Germann as the countess' "midnight groom" and "angel of death," see Rosen 2002, pp. 720-721.

be able to draw riches without the labors and toils of reality, including those intimate pleasures of private life. For Germann, the secret is the door to social mobility: he well knows that, no matter how hard he tries and how diligently he saves, he is doomed to the life of a commoner. It is obvious that his profession as an engineer in the army is not going to enable significant gains in terms of social mobility: he will always need to be restlessly thrifty and envious of the spendthrift aristocrats. Not far from the mindset of today's gamblers, the only way to live the glorious life of an aristocrat is to win by betting on a metaphysical secret. Germann's story is a parody of the folly of imagination: not only does he believe in the literal truth of Tomsky's anecdote, which he takes to be a transparent piece of reality, but he also imagines that class difference could be overcome simply through the revelation of a secret. In retrospect, the supernatural horrors of *The Queen of Spades* derive from the return of the insurmountable secrecy of secrets. Among such secret is the secret of class difference, which has determined him as a commoner at birth and will continue to do so till his death.

The Secret Passages of the House

In *The Queen of Spades*, the aristocrats enjoy their anecdotes, privileges and privacies, and, as the later part of the narrative will starkly reveal, lower classes, represented by the tragicomic Germann, must watch them, listen to them from a distance, and must not vie to come too close. Germann's terrible crime consists precisely in imagining that class difference could be leveled by some means, be it the attainment of the secret or a secret romance with the countess. But Puskin is not blatantly intolerant of the possibility of such leveling; what's more, he is in fact, secretly and surreptitiously, a champion of the universal right to privacy. His sympathies with the lower classes could be patently detected in his representation of Lizaveta, who, being the impoverished ward of the countess, seeks to establish her privacy and private romance by betting on a romance with

Germann. There are indeed two plots in the story belonging to Germann and Lizaveta: while Germann's plot involves the violation of the countess' privacy for the sake of acquiring the secret, Lizaveta's plot is motivated by the desire to establish a sense of privacy or a space for private romance.

The house is at the intersection of these two diverging plots and discourses in relation to private life. Pushkin's representation of the house and its secrets constitutes the crux of the story. We first get a very brief glimpse of the countess' house as Germann, wavering between the desire for the countess' secret and the voice of reason ("calculation, moderation, diligence"), finds himself uncannily in front of it:

> The street was lined with carriages which followed one another up to the lighted porch. Out of the carriages stepped now the shapely little foot of a young beauty, now a military boot with clinking spur, or a diplomat's striped stockings and buckled shoes. Fur coats and cloaks passed in rapid procession before the majestic-looking concierge. Hermann stopped. (p. 164)

The environs of the house is here represented briefly with sensual references to "the shapely little foot of a young beauty," "striped stockings" and "fur coats and cloaks," which resonates with Germann's erotic investment in Tomsky's story. The encounter with the house results in Germann's return to his extravagant fantasy: Germann finds a material correlate to the anecdote of the countess in the house of old architecture. The story moves in a thematic direction that concerns the secrets of the house, which Germann is intent on disclosing. But such direction also brings the story to its more mundane and more significant concerns about privacy, intimacy and secrecy as related to the house and domestic life.

This direction is already suggested in the intricate, nonlinear telling of the story and in the depiction of the ordeals *and* secrets of Lizaveta, the ward and caretaker of the old countess. Liza's plot constitutes an intricate contrast and counterpoint to Germann's: it performs as a deceptively simple commentary on

the nature of mundane, non-metaphysical secrets. In fact, the second chapter, which introduces Lizaveta for the first time, may be characterized as a tableau of quotidian life in the countess' household. The detailed description of the capricious countess interacting with Liza and her servants results in a cruel irony: there seems nothing romantic, mysterious or alluring about this old woman, poles apart from the sensuously intriguing, secret-bearing Moscovite Venus of Tomsky's story. The chapter presents the countess as a public, perhaps too public demonstration of old age lacking in any individuality or interiority. Old age appears to have reduced her to an exterior frame that must be valued for its historic value:

> The old Countess X was seated before the looking-glass in her dressing-room. Three maids were standing round her. One held a pot of rouge, another a box of hairpins, and the third a tall cap with flame-coloured ribbons. The countess had not the slightest pretensions to beauty - it had faded long ago - but she still preserved all the habits of her youth, followed strictly the fashion of the seventies, and gave as much time and care to her toilette as she had sixty years before. A young girl whom she had brought up sat at an embroidery frame by the window. (p. 158)

The passage, where we see the charmless old countess in the midst of her *toilette*, dramatically contrasts with Tomsky's tantalizing description of the undressing beauty and looks forward to yet another passage of undressing, this time conveyed through Germann's oddly voyeuristic gaze. We see Lizaveta for the first time while she is sitting "at an embroidery frame by the window" in what appears to be a moment of respite from the oppressive presence of the tyrannical countess. The window expresses a movement towards the outside of the house while staying inside, a place where Liza seeks her sense of privacy, which is always in danger of being invaded and intruded upon by the countess.

Pushkin depicts Lizaveta as "the household martyr," who will run around after the countess, obeying her every word

while remaining virtuous (p. 162). It is clear that part of this martyrdom consists in Lizaveta's not having a private life of her own. We are told that, unlike the maids and servants in the house, Lizaveta will not steal from the miserly countess although she does not get paid with regularity. In the scenes with the countess, she is constantly seen to be pushed around and reprimanded. She lets out her complaints only in thought and silence; the awfully oppressive scenes with the countess give rise to the unarticulated thought: "and this is my life" (p. 161). Other representations of Lizaveta are rather pathetic: we are told that she is "a most unfortunate creature" (p. 161) who is not in a position to expect any immediate salvation while she "looked about impatiently for a deliverer to come"(p. 158). The context makes it clear that Lizaveta is longing for a marriage that would allow her to leave her terrible job and acquire a life of her own. Even more pathetically, we are told that "everybody knew her and nobody gave her any thought"(p. 162). Pushkin's somewhat extended description of Lizaveta ends with a curious description of her bedroom:

> Many a time she crept away from the tedious, glittering drawing-room to go and weep in her humble little attic with its wall-paper screen, chest of drawers, small looking-glass and painted wooden bedstead, and where a tallow-candle burned dimly in a brass candlestick. (p. 162)

This is a strange sentence that hides Liza's dramatic crying behind what first appears to be a superfluous description of her bedroom where the furniture items are listed one after the other. It conveys an acute sense of dullness and boredom that reaches a low point in the dim light of the tallow-candle. But the drawing room, which Liza leaves behind in a movement from the more public to the more private, is also tedious and dull despite being luxurious. The problem in the bedroom appears not so much its poverty as its dullness, and more than actual poverty, the passage invokes the poverty of Liza's boring, secret-less private life. It is not just the material pleasures of life that Lizaveta is missing, but also those spiritual ones that

can come with a private life of her own. If everything is dull, this is because Lizaveta does not have a private life, which means, any secrets of her own.

If the narrative critiques the unwarranted interest in the secrets of others, which may be seen in Germann's plot/pursuit of the secret of the cards, it also defends the right to secrecy in the story of Lizaveta's affair with Germann. Despite being represented as pathetic, Lizaveta is ultimately vindicated as the secret heroine of the story. As Clayton observes, Lizaveta "manages to survive as the heroine of the sentimental novel, retaining her virtue and making a good marriage, as such a heroine should" (2009-2010, p. 3).[6] It must be emphasized that to the extent that she reveals the secrets of the house to Germann, Lizaveta is also guilty of causing the death of the countess. But Pushkin completely exonerates her; as we read the story till the end, we never think about her blatant guilt. This is because we are made to identify with her desire and *plot* for a secret romance despite its obvious risks and perils associated with letting a complete stranger (Germann) into the house of her employer. Lizaveta is also a gambler, one who takes an enormous risk by investing in a secret romance with Germann. It is irrelevant that she ends up being manipulated or used by the cunning Germann; in taking risks and betting in the secrets of a romantic other, she has shown enough courage and become a heroine.

The beginnings of the doomed affair, evocatively depicted by Pushkin, proceed with revelations, withdrawals and intrusions that take place through the medium of the window, which performs as the interstice between the inside and the outside. Lizaveta is stepping into the unknown by betting on a window-romance with the mysterious Germann. Puskin does not entirely dissipate the probability that Germann may actually be

[6] For a rare analysis of Lizaveta and particularly of the "open-ended" way Pushkin characterizes her, using and shifting in between different genres such as the sentimental romance and the fairy tale, see Grenier 1996.

romantically interested in Liza. He discloses amusing ironies and further secrets as he narrates their secret correspondence. Receiving a letter from Germann,

> [Lizaveta] read it. The letter contained a declaration of love: it was tender, respectful and had been copied word for word from a German novel. But Lizaveta Ivanovna did not know any German and she was delighted with it. (p. 166)

The narrator's tone is ambiguous: one may equally feel compassion and condescension towards the somewhat ignorant Liza being insidiously seduced by Germann. The following letters, we are told, are no longer translations from German novels:

> But Hermann did not give in. Every day Lizaveta Ivanovna received a letter from him by one means or another. They were no longer translated from the German. Hermann wrote them inspired by passion and in a style which was his own: they reflected both his inexorable desire and the disorder of an unbridled imagination. Lizaveta Ivanovna no longer thought of returning them: she drank them in eagerly and took to answering - and the notes she sent grew longer and more affectionate every hour. (p. 168)

Germann has now given up the translations, and is now writing in a language, i.e. Russian, "in a style which was his own." One may look at this passage as a contemporary Russian romance-in-the-making that is not just a faint imitation or a veiled translation of works in other languages. A literary language is secretly being invented, a language of fiery desire and unbridled imagination that incites Lizaveta's reading revels. It must be emphasized that this literature does not sprout from the private lives of aristocrats but from the lower classes. Lizaveta's romance concerns those secret lives, which, just like Lizaveta herself everybody knows about but no one notices, and which now becomes noted and noticed *in writing*. The greatest literary achievement in their correspondence belongs not to Germann, who appears to have discovered both his originality and Russianness in writing his letters, but to Lizaveta, who

sends Germann the final note of their romance. This note includes the revelation of the quintessential secret of the narrative:

> At last she threw out of the window to him the following letter:
>
> *There is a ball tonight at the Embassy. The countess will be there. We shall stay until about two o'clock. Here is an opportunity for you to see me alone. As soon as the countess is away the servants are sure to go to their quarters, leaving the concierge in the hall but he usually retires to his lodge. Come at half past eleven. Walk straight up the stairs. If you meet anyone in the ante-room, ask if the countess is at home. They will say 'No', but there will be no help for it - you will have to go away. But probably you will not meet anyone. The maids all sit together in the one room. Turn to the left out of the ante-room and keep straight on until you reach the countess's bedroom. In the bedroom, behind a screen, you will find two small doors: the one on the right leads into the study where the countess never goes; and the other on the left opens into a passage with a narrow winding staircase up to my room.* (pp. 168-169).

Pushkin does not forget to include a note of playful irony in Lizaveta's passionate gesture of throwing the secret note to Germann. Although the secret method of throwing notes from the window has been mentioned earlier, there is a finality ("Наконец") in the passage that betrays the intensification of sexual desire. This is Lizaveta's final bet: she is here throwing (in) her lot with Germann. A sexual tryst is possible; the note reveals a secret passage to the private quarters of the countess. The sensual innuendos are hard to miss: we see an overly virile Germann, as he trembles (трепетал), "like a tiger, waiting for its prey" (p. 169).

It is possible to argue that Liza's note, in which she reveals the house's secret, constitutes the crux of the text, its secret essence. *Crux* must be thought with all the suggestions of the word's etymology as *crux interpretum*. Lizaveta's note is a crossing of interpretation, a crossroad or a cross-passage, which all interpretations must cross in order to reveal the secrets of the text, just like the secret passage from the entrance to Lizaveta's room. This is indeed a difficult passage whose success is not

guaranteed at all: in describing it, Liza frequently uses hypothetical expressions. There is a chance (случай) that the two can meet alone if the usual order is observed; perhaps (вероятно) the servants will disperse: if (коли) he meets someone in the hallway, he will have to return, but again perhaps (вероятно), he will meet no one. Lizaveta's description refers to the multiple spaces, interiors and recesses of the aristocratic house, that fascinating work of old architecture. More specifically, the passage includes references to the entrance hall, the ante-room, the stairs, the countess' bedroom, the screen in the bedroom and the doors behind, the right one that opens to the study, the left one that leads to a corridor with narrow winding stairs, and finally Liza's bedroom. A list of the Russian architectural words in the description, in their various prepositional inflections, would include "в сенях, каморку, лестницу, в передней, в одной комнате, Из передней, до графининой спальни, за ширмами, двери, в кабинет, в коридор, лестница, в мою комнату." The passage moves in the direction of the more private, the more secretive and therefore the more charming and charmed. In retrospect, it turns the dull and dim room of Lizaveta into a bright site of incipient fantasy touched by romance. Previously represented in its vague separation from the luxurious drawing room, Lizaveta's room here features as the end of an elaborate secret: behind the countess' bedroom, behind a screen, through a secret corridor, through a secret flight of narrow stairs, as if located in a *more* secret house within this house of secrets. The description fits in well with the way Liza desires to carve out a place for privacy for herself in her tormented everyday spent mostly in the oppressive company of the old countess who will not let any of her actions undetected. In the private fantasy of her romance with Germann, she has managed to raise herself above the countess, in fact above all aristocracy, to the status of a heroine, residing in a house within a house and for whose amorous favors secret passages must be crossed.

Privacy is a right, and in seeking privacy, Lizaveta is just even when this means letting out secrets to a stranger. Private life, and the secrecies, intimacies and romances it entails, cannot be the exclusive property of the aristocrats; viewed in the way, Lizaveta's letter is a declaration of the universal right to privacy. But it is ultimately a right fraught with internal tensions and contradictions. Liza does not own the house and her letter constitutes an infringement of the countess' property rights. Her revelations enable German to intrude upon the countess and induce her fatal fear. It is the secret ruse of Pushkin's omniscient narrator, however, to distract us from Liza's blatant culpability. It is not just because we identify with a pathetic underdog waiting for salvation and believe in her innate naivety or innocence at odds with the scheming Germann. It is also because we identify with her will to privacy, which we deem a universal right that must be enjoyed regardless of any consideration of social class.

The text's sympathies lie with Liza, and the reader's even more so, and this is perhaps by dint of the *Schadenfreude* that Pushkin makes us experience at the expense of the entire class of aristocracy, of which the countess is a faded luminary. Liza's revelation of the secrets of the house, its passages, staircases and entrances invokes the subtle and surreptitious ways in which the underclasses appropriate the spaces which they inhabit without ownership for the sake of inventing a modicum of private life. The story has effectively exonerated Liza: there is no crime in attempting a secret romance even when this involves the invasion of some other's privacy.

The likes of Lizaveta and Germann must be able to bet on their own romances. The story hints that there is tremendous literary potential in such romances; it injects literature with a shot of contemporary and quotidian realism missing in the legendary and debauched anecdotes of the aristocracy. If Germann had properly bet, there would have been a double win: he would have wedded Lizaveta in a marriage of equals and

excelled in his epistolary writing skills. He, however, commits a most scandalous misjudgment by not seeing the implicit powers of his love game with Liza both from an existential and literary perspective.

Conclusion

Consequently, the two doors behind the screen take upon symbolic value, representing the two bets or two kinds of literature that give shape and substance to the story. The one leading to Liza's room promises a contemporary love story, while the other leading to the study reverts to an antiquated story belonging to some sixty years ago to be remembered as an ambiguous homage to the very old and very rich. As Solodkia perceptively observes, the doors represent two different bets in a house that has become "one big faro game" (2008, p. 65).[7] In the first bet, i.e. the romance with Liza, Germann is both the maker of the story and its actor, hero, protagonist while in the second, i.e. the countess' story of the secret, he is principally a mere reader and outsider. Germann's troubles arise from making the wrong bet: he chooses to bet on the riches of aristocracy rather than those of a Russian commoner's romance. He reneges on the more realistic latter bet to engage in an improbable, fantastic bet. In colloquial terms, the story suggests that you do not "mess" with the myths, riches and privacies of the aristocracy while you are welcome to create the humble ones of your own, more fitting to your humble origins. While Lizaveta loses her first bet on Germann, the story's ending intimates that she eventually lands a life-altering win by marrying someone from her own class. In contrast, Germann loses everything in a Gothic "mess" that results from the incompatibility between what

[7] According to Solodkia, while the one door represents the orderliness of marriage, the other represents the chaos of gambling (2008, p. 75-6). Based on Pushkin's correspondences, Solodkaia argues that around the time when he wrote the novella, Puskin was likely in favour of Lizaveta's door, that which leads to marriage (p. 74).

he is and what he desires. In a delusional fantasy of overcoming class difference, he misinterprets Tomsky's anecdote, pretends that he can become the confidante and even the lover of a very old aristocrat, but ends up becoming a murderer and a lunatic. The implicit God of realism, i.e. that of *moderation* strikes him down for desiring more than what is permissible by the social system. While *The Queen of Spades* allows for the universal right to privacy, it denies Germann, and the lower classes that he represents, the right to question and obliterate aristocratic privilege.

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