Life Is Elsewhere
Lounsbery, Anne

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CHAPTER TWO

Before the Provinces:
Pastoral and Anti-Pastoral
in Pushkin’s Countryside

Однако вкус был, на манер столичный,
Во всём фасаде сохранён отличный.

And yet the capital’s fine taste
Was clear throughout the manor’s face.

—A. Fet, 1856

Pushkin’s provinces are simply not provincial in the sense that later writers’ are. And while his vision of Russian space was to resonate powerfully with certain writers (such as Tolstoy and Aksakov) who resisted the capital/provinces binary, in a book about peripheral places, Pushkin must be shifted a bit toward the margins. Among his most famous settings—most notably the Larins’ countryside home in *Eugene Onegin*—are cozy estates and villages, places that are limited and behind the times but also culturally coherent and authentic, often presented with warm humor. Such places have nothing to do with the overdetermined emptiness that will characterize *Dead Souls*’ Town of N. For my purposes, Pushkin’s vision of the provinces—the *Onegin* version—serves mostly to emphasize the inventedness of the *provintsia* trope that we see elsewhere. Indeed much of the present chapter focuses on spaces that could later be marked, in works by other writers, as provincial in the new sense of derivative, culturally barren, and homogeneous. These are qualities we will see foreshadowed in Pushkin’s work only very occasionally: instead, in Pushkin’s world, provincial places are more
likely to be the site of a homey and reassuringly authentic Russianness, frequently tinged with affectionate irony.

Rarely does Pushkin turn his attention to the provincial capital (gubernskii gorod), a setting that for later writers will often serve as a prime locus of negative provinciality. And his representation of the imperial borderlands, as I explain below, is outside this study’s purview: for my purposes, texts like the Southern poems are noteworthy mostly for the illuminating contrast they present with the provintsiiia trope, since the exoticness of the Southern poems’ settings helps make visible the dull nativeness of the provinces’ decidedly non-exotic near-periphery. The main settings of Pushkin’s provincial geography are countryside and village (derevnia), gentry estate, district town (uezdni gorod), and the steppes. This chapter analyzes how these places figure in Eugene Onegin (1825–32), “A History of the Village of Goriukhino” (1830), and The Captain’s Daughter (1836).

As it appears in Eugene Onegin, the village or countryside is the repository of an intact, authentic culture that is at once local and emphatically Russian. Derevnia is also the setting of the parodic (and unfinished) story “History of the Village of Goriukhino”; in fact, on an imaginary map of Russia we might locate Goriukhino not far from the Larins’ estate. But Goriukhino is altogether lacking in the meaningfulness, order, and authenticity embodied in Tatiana’s estate-world. Instead, Goriukhino’s comical incoherence—both spatial and temporal—and its messy, meager culture begin to anticipate what provintsiiia will signify for other writers in decades to come. The Captain’s Daughter, in contrast to these texts, is set in the liminal environment of the steppe, a space that was, in Pushkin’s day, symbolically situated somewhere between exotic foreignness and familiar Russianness. In fact, The Captain’s Daughter is about the process of transforming the wild steppes into the familiar provinces—the ongoing cultural work of imagining this territory as an integral part of “European” Russia. And the liminal space of the steppe, as we will see, was where Russians confronted most dramatically the conceptual challenge posed by a contiguous empire.

In contrast to the steppe—an almost-but-not-quite-Russian space that elites tended to experience neither as homeland nor as colorful periphery—the empire’s borderlands were clearly marked as exotic (and thus in the Romantic period they provided Russian writers with material that was thought to merit attention to local detail). As such they are not addressed here. Even though Pushkin famously honed his poetic talents in a version of the “Orient” (an East that in his case was actually the South, the setting of the “Southern Poems”), his treatment of such places has little to do with this book’s topic, precisely because these places are not “the provinces.” In works such as The Fountain of Bakhchisarai, The Prisoner of the Caucasus, and Journey to Erezrum, the emphatically non-Russian nature of the geographic setting is key. In some of these works the imperial periphery is represented as
forbidding and masculine (The Prisoner of the Caucasus); in others, it is yielding
and feminine, with borders vulnerable to the depredations of Orientalized outsid-
ers (The Fountain of Bakhchisarai). But in any case, when reading these texts we
always know ourselves to be somewhere other than “Russia proper.”

A great deal of sophisticated scholarship has explored how the metaphorical
East provided a space where the nineteenth-century (male) poet could go to shake
off ennui, experience awe upon seeing dramatic landscapes, indulge in passions
proscribed at home, reflect on what might be lost by those who become civilized,
and generally enjoy being “free” (because what happens in the Caucasus stays in
the Caucasus).

This body of scholarship has done much to illuminate the rela-
tionship between Pushkin’s poetics and Russian empire, but it has had far less to
say about the more native geography that this chapter aims to illuminate.

**Eugene Onegin: Province as Idyll, Culture as Nature**

The Larin family’s home and its surroundings epitomize a certain literary ver-
sion of Russian rural life—derevnia as pastoral or idyll. As I explain in chapter 1,
derevnia—like glush’, a word evoking a remote but sometimes cozy rural spot—
usually signifies not provintsia as the word will be understood for most of the
nineteenth century (and beyond), but rather the countryside, the village, even the
estate (indeed at times vocabulary like derevnia and glush’ can facilitate a conve-
nient blurring of such categories). This version of derevnia may evoke isolation
and drowsiness, but not, as will be clear in Eugene Onegin, the shamefully subor-
dinate forms of cultural derivativeness that would later be so strongly associated
with provintsia.

Instead Onegin draws on a recurring topos of Russian Sentimentalism and
Romanticism, movements that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centu-
ries produced a number of paeans to small-town and small-estate ways. In writers
ranging from Andrei Bolotov (along with others who “retreated” to their estates
in search of a contemplative life) to Nikolai Polevoi (who wrote romanticized de-
scriptions of village life as a model of social harmony), we note a departure from
the earlier eighteenth century’s straightforward vilification of rural backwardness,
of the kind seen in writers like Novikov and Fonvizin. The roots of these newly
positive depictions of nonurban Russia are likely traceable to the Sentimental and
Romantic ideas exemplified in a text like Karamzin’s (Rousseauistic) Poor Liza. It
is also worth noting, though, that the new focus on rural patriarchal virtues may
have been encouraged by the Russian gentry’s real-life desire to construct for itself
a more positive and autonomous group identity: hence various efforts to represent
their abodes as the “real” Russia. In any case, this essentially positive vision of the
Russian provinces—on which Onegin draws—is neither riddled with vices (à la
Novikov) nor ridiculously gauche and incoherent (as in the later trope that is this book’s main topic). Instead we might characterize Pushkin’s provintsia as charmingly patriarchal.

Certainly at the Larins’ estate we know ourselves to be in a markedly authentic and Russian place. While there is little in Onegin to indicate precisely where the family property is located, Nabokov places it “two hundred miles W of Moscow.” Of course its geographic location is of minimal significance: the important thing is that this section of Onegin is essentially a pastoral, related to the classical pastoral but set in an explicitly Russian version of the countryside. (Nabokov concedes as much: even after having located the setting “between parallels 56 and 57,” he allows that it is also “encroaching here and there upon Arcadia.”) Since the aim of pastorals and idylls is to “[oppose] simple to complicated life, to the advantage of the former,” the countryside always takes on meaning in opposition to a larger “outside” world: thus Onegin does not open in the village (just as Goncharov’s Oblomov will not open in Oblomovka), but in the metropole, in a chapter showcasing Petersburg’s worldliness. And Eugene’s sophistication derives above all from his close attention to the capital’s ever-changing fashions. Artifice and foreignness, theatricality and keeping up—these are the influences that shape Eugene’s pastimes, his intellectual life, his friendships, his love affairs, his meals, his toilette. Only after seeing the thoroughly modern Petersburg dandy in his element do we travel with him to the countryside. As a result, even when we are in Tatiana’s derevnia, we remain aware of the capital and the gaze it trains on outsiders—thereby bearing out Raymond Williams’ point that only city people can write idylls.

Literature generally represents places like the Larins’ home as always already lost (like Oblomovka) or in the process of disappearing, simply because such places cannot be represented by those who still live there. Everything in Tatiana’s environment, from her nanny’s folk culture to the peasant girls’ songs to Mme. Larina’s taste for eighteenth-century novels, is vaguely associated with a past that has been lost to more up-to-date Russians in Pushkin’s time. In place of development, change, and fashion, the idyllic chronotope emphasizes what is iterative and cyclical: in Bakhtin’s analysis, “idyllic life and its events are inseparable from . . . [a little] corner of the world where the fathers and grandfathers lived and where one’s children and their children will live.” These are apt descriptions of country life as it is depicted in Onegin, which emphasizes the continuity of rural ways. Here even houseguests conform to eternal types (fatty, fop, rogue, glutton), and the mazurka is still danced with a vigor that the capitals long ago rejected in favor of refined attenuation. Derevnia is above all a place “unaltered by that tyrant, fashion” (6:115); it is the locus of a supposedly eternal folk culture that is precisely the opposite of ever-changing fashions. Thus if the provincial ball in Dead Souls
will showcase the inept copying of the capital’s taste, in *Onegin* it preserves the real mazurka: one version of the provinces is where culture is degraded, the other where it is preserved.

A self-sufficient world, with its own intact and relatively rich culture, the Larins’ *derevnia* is authentic. It is therefore unselfconscious, and Pushkin’s narrator invites us to be highly conscious of this unselfconsciousness. In fact the sections devoted to the Larins’ country life (especially chapters three and five) are primarily a celebration of this authenticity—a “simple Russian family” (6:51) eating simple Russian food, following simple Russian folkways (name day parties, fortune-telling, etc.). The countryside serves as an archive of Russianness, and it offers those in the capitals the possibility of “return”: Tania’s mother, originally a coquette from Moscow, has long ago forgotten her spoken French and given herself over to the local ways preserved in *derevnia*.

In literature this “authentic” version of estate life is very often construed as a remembered phenomenon, whether explicitly (the adult Oblomov lies on his couch in Petersburg and dreams of his long-ago childhood in Oblomovka) or implicitly (the Larins’ way of life feels as marked by past-ness as do the reading habits of Larina-mère, who favors eighteenth-century sentimental fiction). Certainly the typical life trajectory of a well-off nobleman—early years on a country estate followed by education and work in the capitals, where the provincial arrives “always in the role of pupil”—encouraged a strong association between estate, childhood, and memory. And it is important to note that such an association held only for *derevnia* life, not for provincial cities.

Of course Tania herself, despite her taste for French novels, is all Russian all the time; even her love for winter, we are told, is attributable to her “Russian soul” (6:98). Our belief in the Larins’ paradigmatic Russianness requires us to accept the premise that there exists an implicit unity between the traditional gentry and the peasantry, that they share a similar “folk” culture. Compared to, say, a landowner like *Dead Souls*’ Manilov or a Town of N dweller like Stepan Trofimovich in Dostoevsky’s *Demons*—both of whom are entirely cut off from local, peasant culture—the Larins are meant to have a great deal in common with the common people. Tatiana’s instinctive love for the countryside around her family’s home reinforces this message, particularly in the long, fond good-bye preceding her departure (6:151ff). Indeed her love of nature is perhaps the most important mark of her Russianness, just as Eugene’s indifference to it marks him as a troublesome outsider.

Yet even as Pushkin insists that Tatiana is nothing if not Russian, we sense that her authenticity and naturalness are not entirely uncomplicated. A prime locus of her Russianness, for instance, is her family’s English garden (*angliiskii sad*, the usual term for the “natural” landscape design that by Catherine’s day had begun
to replace the French formal style). By Pushkin’s time these gardens had come to reflect something of the dilemma faced by a generation of nobles torn between the imported aesthetic that shaped their tastes and the Romantic age’s imperative to “be Russian.” The Europeanized Russian nobleman was unlikely to feel at home in rural Russia, where life on his estate often felt anything but natural (a phenomenon I discuss in chapter 1): thus gardens on grand estates were walled enclaves, off-limits to most serfs and deliberately isolated from the surrounding countryside, full of objects and structures (e.g., gothic ruins) that were “in the Russian context . . . doubly foreign.” The English garden in Russia, especially in its grander manifestations, was quite obviously nature in quotation marks.

*Onegin* does not reflect this reality. Not only does Pushkin emphasize the Larin garden’s coziness and intimate scale (for example, diminutives like mostik, luzhok, and lesok—little bridge, little pond, little forest—make it clear that this is not the vast, impressive park of a grandee, 6:71), he draws no distinction between this space and the surrounding countryside. There is no hint of any barrier between the family’s little angliiskii sad and the “peaceful valleys,” “familiar forests,” and “cheerful nature” with which Tatiana communes. Thus *Onegin* finesses the problem of (un)naturalness, allowing the “native virtues” exemplified by Tatiana and her (English) garden to stand as simply natural—as the pastoral mode requires. Of course, sustaining a pastoral vision requires that labor be either aestheticized or hidden: Pushkin suggests as much in *Onegin* by informing us that the Larins’ serf girls are required to sing as they pick berries, lest it occur to them to eat the fruits of their labors (a rule that implies “a certain unpastoral paranoia” on the part of the landowner). This moment undermines *Onegin*’s fantasy of derevnia as an unproblematically capacious category, not only encompassing gentry estate, garden, village, farmland, and uncultivated countryside, but also magically eliding the economic divisions among these categories.

A somewhat less idealized version of rural reality does make itself felt here and there in *Onegin*. Lensky’s grave—which at first conforms adequately to pastoral convention (babbling brook, ploughman, shady nook)—soon gives way to a much less Romantic reality (dead wreath, weeds, and a bedraggled shepherd plaiting bast shoes [6:142]). And in the excised chapter detailing “Onegin’s Journey,” a stanza picturing Russian rural life stands in marked contrast to those describing more exotic locales. Here Pushkin gives us a pointedly anti-pastoral description of the village: broken gate, grey sky, cabbage soup, balalaika, and drunken peasants (6:200–201). Strikingly similar images, including threshing floors and drunken peasants dancing, recur in Lermontov’s oft-quoted 1841 lyric “Rodina” (Motherland), which describes the poet’s response to a peasant village: both Pushkin and Lermontov are probing the contrast between Russian reality and idyllic fantasy.
“Onegin’s Journey” suggests anxieties—largely repressed in the work as a whole, as we have seen—that are almost inevitably present beneath the surface of Russian pastoral. This is the same tension Pushkin hints at, but does not fully develop, in his punning epigraph to chapter two, where Horace’s Latin “O rus!” (roughly, “Oh countryside!”; footnoted in some Russian editions as “O derevnia!”) is translated as “O Rus!” (i.e., Oh Russia!, 6:31). And indeed it is the same dissonance that would be experienced by any sophisticated landowner returning to rural Russia, whether from state service or the capitals or abroad, with visions of settling down to a pastoral life. The most basic requirement for conceiving of pastoral—distance from the countryside, as noted above—creates problems for the “returning” Russian landowner: the reality he faces is unlikely to be compatible with the pastoral ideal. Thus it is in such fleeting moments of failed pastoral that we can discern in Onegin—but just barely, and just maybe—a hint of what would later become the provintsiia of Gogol’s estates in Dead Souls. Such passages hint at Russian pastoral’s capacity to “veer easily into the realm of the squalid and the mundane, or even into the realm of nightmare.”

Since Tatiana, effortless and “natural,” stands for the authenticity of derevnia, we might expect Eugene to embody a kind of provincialism, given the manifestly derivative nature of his thought and taste. Indeed, upon uncovering Eugene’s “sources” (Byron, Napoleon, etc.), Tatiana wonders if he is nothing but “an imitation, a trivial phantom, a Muscovite in Childe Harold’s cloak” (6:146–49)—questions that are never answered. But even if the answer is yes, there is no blaming geography. If Eugene’s thinking is derivative, this lack of originality is attributable not to the provinces, but to his light-weight (Petersburg) education and his lazy tendency to “make others’ thoughts his own” (6:23). If Eugene is bored in the countryside, this is not because the countryside is boring: he was equally bored in the city (6:28).

In the end Eugene’s life on his estate has nothing in common with the cultural incoherence and attenuation of Gogolian provintsiia. Instead everything about him testifies to a thoroughly portable cultural stolichnost’ (“capitalness”): where Eugene is, there is the capital—for better or worse. Just as the Larins’ version of derevnia is inextricably linked with the peasant culture of the village, so is Eugene’s linked with that of the capital. Because stolichnost’ is portable in Onegin, the text is able to imagine a prosperous, sophisticated nobleman’s estate serving as “the image of true civilization and social cultivation” in the provinces (as British country houses were supposed to do), or as what Pushkin called the nobleman’s “study” (his kabinet [8:52], an “ideal locus of intellectual, spiritual, and artistic development”). Such an estate could convincingly represent itself as the self-sufficient center of its own universe—“a closed model of the world,” with “its own space and time, its own system of values, its own ‘etiquette’ and norms of behavior,” as one critic describes the ideal Russian usad’ba. Here the whole world can be “seen from
the manor house window” (to quote again a description of Afanasy Fet’s poetry); the estate is both center and commanding point of view.26

And in such a scenario the estate is the mirror, not the antithesis, of the capital: both claim to bring together everything good the world had to offer, creating an environment where good taste can find comfortable, unstrained, even automatic expression. We see this possibility manifested in the serene tastefulness and dignity of Eugene’s manor house, which was built in accordance with a stable canon of taste that was both “simple” (an elusive quality, as I will discuss) and entirely Russian, down to the portraits of tsars on the walls:

Почтенный замок был построен,
Как замки строиться должны:
Отменно прочен и спокоен
Во вкусе умной старины.
В гостиной штофные обои,
Царей портреты на стенах . . .
(6:31)

The ancient manse had been erected
For placid comfort—and to last;
And all its solid form reflected
The sense and taste of ages past.
Throughout the house the ceilings towered;
From walls ancestral portraits glowered . . .27

Pushkin’s description here recalls Fet’s 1856 poema “Two Lindens,” in which the severe façade of a patriarchal manor house exemplifies “the taste of the capital.”28 This self-confident air of comme il faut could not be further removed from the cultural mishmash and insecurity that mark the estates of provincial imitators like Gogol’s Manilov. Eugene may be affected (indeed by chapter eight, Petersburg’s high society asks mockingly what role he’ll play today—perhaps “Childe Harold, or a Quaker?” [6:168]), but he appears to be supremely secure in all his affectations—and without anxious imitation, there is no provintsial’nost’. Nabokov suggests as much in his commentary on Onegin when he quotes Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s 1828 novel Pelham, in which one Lady Frances admonishes her son, “Whatever is evidently borrowed becomes vulgar,” whereas “original affectation is sometimes good ton.”29

What we might call Eugene’s masterful affectation has something in common with the truly complicated “simplicity” that Tatiana achieves in Petersburg high society. At the Larin family’s modest country estate, it is not difficult to convince us that Tatiana is effortlessness incarnate: firmly embedded in folkways and nature,
making no attempt to conform to standards borrowed from the capital, at home she is predictably authentic. What is striking, though, is that she remains just as authentic after having reached the pinnacle of Petersburg's social world—a point that the text makes most insistently by lauding her naturalness and “simplicity” at a ball. Of course, the way one behaves at a ball is anything but natural: to comport oneself correctly—“naturally”—in this environment is the result of intense acculturation, requiring knowledge of myriad subtle conventions (which is why in later texts, the small-town ball would become an ideal showcase for displaying provincial ineptitude: already by 1840 Herzen would write, “the provincial ball has been described a thousand times”).

Tatiana's exemplary behavior reflects the same values as the Onegin stanza, combining formal intricacy with the appearance of ease and naturalness—a combination much admired by the social world that Onegin portrays. When Tatiana is reintroduced to us in Petersburg high society, she is first identified only as “a lady” entering a ballroom, seen through the eyes of the admiring crowd.

By praising his heroine's lack of “manner” in the voice of the crowd of socialites who observe her, Pushkin pays tribute to her “natural” grace while implicitly acknowledging its artfulness, thereby hinting that naturalness is an illusion sustainable only by those who can erase all traces of the effort that mastery costs.
Furthermore, in this passage where we might expect a description of Tatiana, we encounter instead a series of negations: the lady is unhurried, not cold, not chatty, without an arrogant demeanor, without pretension or ambition, without any little affected gestures, without imitative artifice. What, then, is she? She is “quiet” and “simple,” apparently—but even these two terms suggest absence rather than presence. Finally, we are told that she is the epitome of a French expression—comme il faut—that the poet finds untranslatable. We already know that Tatiana’s mysterious naturalness is closely linked with her Russianness, yet here we are told it can be described only in an untranslatable French expression. In the next stanza we find a similar reluctance to attribute positive qualities to the heroine, and another refusal to translate into Russian a word used to describe her:

Никто б не мог ее прекрасной
Назвать; но с головы до ног
Никто бы в ней найти не мог
Того, что модой самовластной
В высоком лондонском кругу
Зовется vulgar. . . . (6:172)

One couldn’t label her a beauty;
But neither did her form contain,
From head to toe, the slightest strain
Of what, with fashion’s sense of duty,
The London social sets decry
As vulgar. . . .

No one could call her beautiful, Pushkin tells us, but “no one could find in her any trace of what London high society’s autocratic fashion would call vulgar.” Pushkin gives us “vulgar” in English, allowing it to stand as another untranslatable evocation (along with comme il faut) of Tatiana’s je ne sais quoi.

In such passages we are again put on notice that Tatiana’s simplicity is in fact strangely complicated. Her essence—authentic and Russian—remains impervious to any form of dilution or adulteration, even in the most Europeanized and “artificial” domains of Russia’s highest society. And here we see the degree to which Tatiana’s character reflects the aesthetic values of Onegin itself: even when she is described in foreign vocabulary (comme il faut), Tatiana is native; even when she imitates markedly conventional Sentimentalist fiction (her first letter to Eugene), she is sincere; even when walking in her English garden, she is Russian. By happily acknowledging Tatiana’s acts of cultural adaptation and thus the complicated, hybrid nature of her (Russian) selfhood, Pushkin signals his own comfort with the
many self-conscious and self-confident acts of literary borrowing, imitation, and bricolage that permeate Eugene Onegin—a text that is anything but anxious when it comes to its own mastery of cultural codes, and thus anything but provincial.

Pushkin’s heroine too, whether in the countryside or at a high society ball, is the opposite of provincial, at least in the sense that this descriptor would come to be understood in the next decade or so. The qualities Tatiana lacks—artifice, affectation, imitativeness—are precisely those signs of effort that Russian writers would soon be using to signal their characters’ provinciality. These are the signs of trying—and when it comes to manifesting the correct relationship to culture (whether culture in the sense of the highbrow or merely the conventions of polite society), to be seen as trying at all is to be trying too hard. If the marks of your labor remain visible, even getting it exactly right gets you nowhere. For instance, in Lermontov’s A Hero of Our Time, Pechorin’s déclassé rival Grushnitsky manages to look ridiculous—to look as if he is quite obviously making an effort—while wearing an ordinary greatcoat. But Pechorin’s taste is so impeccable (or rather, so unimpeachable are the Petersburg credentials that underwrite this taste) that he looks “natural” even when decked out as an “ethnic” native: “on horseback in Circassian costume I look more like a Kabardian than many Kabardians themselves.”

With these words Lermontov winks at us to confirm that Pechorin’s naturalness is not really effortless (Pechorin does not claim to be more natural, but rather to look more natural—that is, “more like a Kabardian”), but his act is authoritative enough to make Grushnitsky’s unnaturalness that much more visible.

Like Pechorin, and quite unlike poor Grushnitsky, Tatiana attains to what her social world deems the only legitimate relation to culture, a relation that “least bears the visible marks of its genesis.” The truly cultured individual will never reveal anything “studied” in his or her taste, instead “[manifesting] by ease and naturalness that true culture is nature.” Thus Tania attains to what will always be out of reach for a provincial—“indifference to [her] own manner,” an indifference that can be depicted as having no manner at all.

“A History of the Village of Goriukhino”:
Life Outside of “Public Time”

“The district town has no history”: Pushkin makes this declaration in his working notes to the unfinished manuscript titled “A History of the Village of Goriukhino” (8:719). The parodic “Goriukhino” represents an attempt to write the history of a history-less place, and as such it comments on the comically strange shape, or non-shape, of (provincial) Russia’s past, with its randomness and supposedly
nonteleological character. The “Goriukhino” fragment consists of some dozen pages Pushkin attributes to an uneducated landowner named Belkin, who might be described as the ultimate provincial. Belkin is provincial in a way that Tatiana Larina is not: the Larins’ estate draws on a rich local culture while maintaining a healthy connection to the “outside world” (Tatiana’s reading, Eugène’s library), whereas Belkin’s isolated manor house is effectively cut off from anything we might call culture (no journals, no books besides a primer and a composition manual, no interlocutors, no correspondents). Belkin’s interaction with the larger world has been limited to three months at a Moscow boarding school followed by a brief stint in the army. And the cultural resources available to him in Goriukhino are decidedly meager, so meager that an “extremity” of boredom drives him to “sew some pages together” so as to “to fill them with anything whatsoever” (8:129, 131). He attempts and abandons various genres (epic, tragedy, ballad, essays, tales) before settling on history.

But history, too, proves difficult. Belkin finds that its highest ranges (“universal” and “national” history) have already been exhausted by scholarship, and writing the history of the provincial capital (gubernskii gorod) would require too much research. Moving further down the hierarchy, he considers writing “a history of our district town [or county seat, uezdnyi gorod],” only to learn that “the one significant event recorded in [the town’s] annals was a terrible conflagration that destroyed its marketplace and courthouse ten years ago.” Finally he settles on writing a history of his little village (selo) Goriukhino, thanks to some household records he uncovers in the attic. This pile of calendars and account books, long buried in a basket of trash, seems to Belkin an “inexhaustible store of economical, statistical, meteorological, and other scholarly observations” promising to disclose the “full history of my ancestral estate for almost a full century, given in the strictest chronological order” (8:132–33). On the basis of these sources, Belkin ends up producing an impossibly incoherent text, characterized by an “agglutinative character and amorphous shape,” full of hilariously adventitious observations. We learn, for instance, that the elder Terentii (“who lived around 1767”) could write with both hands as well as with his foot, that a “half-witted girl” used to tend swine near the swamp, and that “the male inhabitants of Goriukhino are mostly of medium height” (8:134–36): “Goriukhino” is funny precisely because it bears the marks of its author’s “total lack of discrimination between significant and trivial events.”

Perhaps this is a history of a place that has no history. But what do we mean by history if we say, as Chaadaev said of Russia itself, that a place has none? Judging from the case of Goriukhino, it seems that the unstructured time and space of provintsiiia cannot be assimilated to what J. G. A. Pocock defines as “public time”: “History—in all but a few, rather esoteric, senses of the term—is public time. That is, it is time experienced by the individual as public being, conscious
of a framework of public institutions in and through which events, processes and changes happened to the society of which he perceives himself to be part." Provincial places are often characterized precisely by being cut off from public time. Goriukhino is a village, but in this sense it corresponds to the Bakhtinian chronotope of the provincial city or town (gorod), which we might see as a thoroughly degraded version of pastoral. Bakhtin's provincial town is defined by the absence of "advancing historical movement"; what it can accommodate are not "events," Bakhtin writes, but "only 'doings' that constantly repeat themselves." Deep provintsiia's spatial isolation results in a kind of temporal stasis: provincial time is stagnant and repetitious (rather than dynamic and progressing) because provincial space is cut off from other spaces.

Geographic insularity creates a temporal disjunction, depriving events of meaning by depriving them of connections to larger systems, because any individual occurrence becomes "intelligible" only once it is seen in relationship to the great "plot" of which it is a part: "the significance of all . . . stories depends in part on seeing their narrative relationship to expanding circles of plots within plots." In the oft-quoted words of Hayden White, only "the form of a story" (key to which is the demonstration of causality) can guarantee the truth value of a historical narrative. In place of "the form of a story," Pushkin's aspiring historian gives us a welter of details, from dun-brown cows and snippets of folk laments to notes on mushrooms. Declaring himself incapable of ordering information, "linking component parts," or "stringing together fictitious events," Belkin instead "writes down separate thoughts, with no connection or order, just as they presented themselves" (8:131–32). The result:

6. The dun cow has died, Senka thrashed for drunkenness.
9. Rain and snow. Trishka thrashed on account of the weather.
11. Clear skies. Fresh snow on the ground. Killed three rabbits. (8:134)

"Trishka thrashed on account of the weather": the source implies a causal relationship where there should be none, and Belkin follows its lead, implying linkages where they cannot be "uncovered." What scholars have called the "unique realia" (!) of life in Goriukhino—the often baffling facts of everyday provincial existence—seem to resist the causal linkages necessary for creating a plot. In other words, the pervasive triviality of provincial life is funny because it resists narrativization, overcoming efforts to impose order on it.

Historical narrative is always mediating between two poles: "On the one hand there are all the occurrences of the world . . . in their concrete particularity,"
whereas “on the other is an ideally theoretical understanding of those occurrences that would treat each as nothing other than a replicable instance of a systematically interconnected set of generalizations.”\textsuperscript{45} “Goriukhino”—the Russian provinces—is “all the occurrences of the world in their concrete particularity.” The European historians from whom Russians took their cues in Pushkin’s time assumed that their task was to establish the linkages among all these elements, to uncover the relationships capable of revealing history’s progressive nature—in Guizot’s words, “to link together facts so diversified . . . into one great historical unity.”\textsuperscript{46} And while Russians tended to judge their past by comparing it with that of European nations, Russia’s history defied the paradigm of orderly development. Besides centuries of “regression” (e.g., the period of Mongol-Tatar rule), it offered striking evidence for the importance of accident and randomness, thanks to the concentration of power at the very top of the social hierarchy. (Voltaire, for one, declared that if Peter the Great had died in the midst of his labors, “the vastest empire in the world [would have fallen] back into the chaos from which it had barely emerged.”)\textsuperscript{47} To Pushkin and his contemporaries, their nation’s history appeared erratic, marked by ruptures and diversions, and thus ever at risk of sinking into mere contingency. In Yuri Lotman’s words, Russia’s past was characterized by an “inconsequentiality” that rendered it “inorganic; illusory, or nonexistent” (‘neorganichnymi,’ prizrachnymi, nesushchestvuiushchimi)—words that could also be enlisted to describe the culture of provintsiiia as it appears in literature.\textsuperscript{48}

\textbf{The Captain’s Daughter:}

\textbf{Turning the Steppes into the Provinces}

Lotman’s characterization of Russian history notwithstanding, in \textit{The Captain’s Daughter} Pushkin draws on a famously chaotic episode in this history to write a famously tidy narrative. \textit{The Captain’s Daughter} treats the mass upheaval known as the Pugachev rebellion, a Cossack-led uprising that convulsed the western reaches of Imperial Russia in 1773–75.\textsuperscript{49} The Russian empire had worked throughout the eighteenth century to “assimilate” the Eurasian steppes, but at the time of the rebellion, the region still had many of the hallmarks of a frontier. When Pushkin was writing his historical novel in the 1830s, one could probably have described the area around Orenburg (where most of the action takes place) as the eastern edge of “European Russia,” with Asia perhaps just over the horizon; during the 1770s, when the story is set, the area’s status as “Russian” was far less secure.

The novel opens on a gentry estate in Simbirsk guberniia, several hundred miles west of the open steppe around Orenburg and Ufa. When we meet the young
protagonist and narrator Grinev, he is in the act of cutting up a map—a map, he says, “[that] had been obtained for me from Moscow and had been hanging on the wall of my room without being the slightest use to anyone.” Given the map’s uselessness, the boy opts to make it into a kite; thus his “study of geography” stops with “fixing a bast tail to the Cape of Good Hope” (8:280). It seems Moscow may produce and disseminate as many maps as it likes, but that does not guarantee that anyone will look at them: the capitals are very far away from Simbirsk guberniia. And as the sociologist Michael Biggs writes, “we should not underestimate the difference of rulership in a mapless world.”

Here it is useful to compare the opening of another novel, roughly contemporaneous with The Captain’s Daughter, that also meditates on relationships between geography and power. Near the beginning of Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park, the children of an English baronet mock their déclassé cousin for her ignorance of crucial matters. “Only think,” one child says, “my cousin cannot put the map of Europe together—or my cousin cannot tell the principal rivers of Russia—or she never heard of Asia Minor . . . ! Did you ever hear anything so stupid?” The father of these children, Sir Thomas Bertram, derives his income not from his Mansfield Park estate but from his Caribbean plantations: geographic knowledge stands here as a sign of the mastery and control that English colonialists aimed to exercise over their “holdings” in various parts of the globe. In Austen’s world even children understand the Foucauldian relationship between knowledge and power, especially when it comes to things like mapping Asia Minor and “the principal rivers of Russia.”

But in the place where The Captain’s Daughter begins—the Grinevs’ remote estate—it is not hard to see why a map of the world would be judged irrelevant. In Bakhtin’s terms, the estate chronotope is a world of isolated and ahistorical domesticity, as is signaled to us in The Captain’s Daughter by the fact that the “action” opens with jam-making (a scene we might just as easily envision at the Larins’ rural home). An estate typically provides the setting for a “family novel” or a “provincial novel,” genres that have their roots in the idyll and thus in folkloric temporality. Such narrative forms privilege the clan (the family as it stretches across time, over generations), fostering a circle-of-life view of the world and imagining places where “the cyclical repetition of the life process [is] of crucial importance.” In other words, this is not a chronotope that deals with “the central, unrepeatable events of biography and history.”

But Grinev is soon posted as an officer to a remote fort on the steppes, whereupon he leaves behind the “estate world” of the book’s opening passage and enters the “unrepeatable events of biography and history.” On his way east across the steppes, he meets a mysterious Cossack: this Cossack will later turn out to be Pugachev himself, the rebel leader and pretender who claims to be the true tsar.
When the rebellion breaks out, Grinev, who has since fallen in love with Masha, the daughter of the fort’s commander, is able to save his fiancée thanks to his previous relationship with Pugachev; after the rebels are vanquished, revelations about Grinev’s interaction with the arch-traitor call into question his loyalty as a Russian subject. In the end Grinev is saved from prison when his betrothed—now the orphaned daughter of a war hero—appeals directly to Catherine the Great, convincing her that there was nothing treasonous in Grinev’s dealings with Pugachev.

By initiating its hero into historical time, *The Captain’s Daughter* reflects on the process by which the Russian state was establishing control over the steppes, how it was bringing this liminal and problematic geographic region (problematic from the state’s point of view, that is) into the “correct” relationship with both history and power. Places that have History in Pocock’s sense (i.e., where time is “experienced by the individual as public being, conscious of a framework of public institutions in and through which events, processes and changes happened to the society of which he perceives himself to be part”) are places that are on the map. But as Pushkin’s Grinev learns, the steppes in the 1770s were only *in the process* of being mapped—that is, being physically and intellectually appropriated—by the Russian state. Beginning in the reign of Peter and continuing through the nineteenth century, Russians were engaged in the projects of data-collecting, resource-identifying, place-naming, ethnicity-categorizing, and land-mapping that were deemed necessary to modern forms of rule. Proceeding in the name of utility and military security, they did more or less what other European powers did when attempting to bring territory under control.

Thus Catherine issued clear instructions to the servitors she dispatched to remote parts: “You must proceed to learn about the province that has been entrusted to you . . . and for this purpose, you are to obtain reliable map[s] of sufficient detail.” Imperial officials were supposed to be able to *place on the map* all “regiments, towns, settlements, villages, outlying farms, seasonal work camps, monasteries, hermitages, manufactures, and any places of human habitation, as well as rivers, lakes, marshes, woods, farmland, steppes, roads, and the location of [all] . . . borders.” But despite Catherine’s list of items that were to be mapped, the steppe was also supposed to be *empty*, and for a long time Russian officials insisted on this emptiness even though they knew the land was populated by hundreds of thousands of nomadic people and by growing numbers of Russian settlers. As Willard Sunderland puts it, in the eighteenth century “the steppe was claimed by geographical science and promptly turned into a void”: no matter who might actually live there, Russian elites generally persisted in seeing the steppe as “an alien and empty frontier.” And an “empty” space, in the mind of the modern state, is a transformable space—indeed, it is a space in need of transformation. Consider, for example, the orgy of re-naming that took place under Catherine: New Serbia
became New Russia, the Iaik River became the Ural River, Turco-Tatar names were replaced with Hellenic ones, etc.\textsuperscript{59}

None of this is surprising, given the fact that from Peter’s time on, the autocracy’s goal had been to “turn . . . formless emptiness into formed space” (beginning with the city of Petersburg itself, which rose dramatically from nonbeing into being).\textsuperscript{60} In the eyes of the autocracy, as Sunderland writes, “the old steppe was Asian and stateless,” while the new one was to be “state-determined and claimed for European civilization.”\textsuperscript{61} But at the time of the Pugachev rebellion, the question of where Russia actually was had no obvious answer: given the empire’s constant expansion, it took a great deal of effort (surveying and resurveying, mapping and remapping) to make borders appear as “natural and permanent” as the state wanted them to.\textsuperscript{62} The century following Catherine’s—Pushkin’s century—was characterized by an “obsession with borders,” a preoccupation that went along with “the birth and spread of the \textit{clearly marked territorial limit} as a ‘peripheral organ’ . . . of the sovereign state, equipped with symbols of majesty and guarded by policemen, soldiers, and customs officials.”\textsuperscript{64}

Yet as we see in \textit{The Captain’s Daughter}, on the steppe there is nothing easy about what geographers call the territorialization of rule, the “symbolic fusion of political authority and geographical area.” This process has produced the maps that teach us to see the earth’s surface as crisscrossed by distinct borders, with lines dividing land (and even sea) into unambiguous state territories, and blocks of different colors “implying that [each] interior is a homogeneous space, traversed evenly by state sovereignty.”\textsuperscript{65} But such a way of imagining space is the end result of a long conceptual and technological process—a process that was difficult enough in Europe, and that proved even more challenging in the great flat expanse of the southern Eurasian landmass, where people encountered very few “natural” frontiers and where nomadism had long been the rule. Given what one nineteenth-century traveler called the steppe’s “exhausting uniformity,”\textsuperscript{66} where were the borders supposed to be? And without borders, where was the modern state itself?\textsuperscript{67}

Characters in \textit{The Captain’s Daughter} repeatedly confront such problems, in part because much of the text is devoted to covering ground. After Grinev leaves his home estate to take up the military posting his father has arranged for him, he makes his way first to Simbirsk, then to Orenburg, and finally to Fort Belogorsk—a fictional outpost “forty versts from Orenburg” that the protagonist anticipates will be “a godforsaken [\textit{glukhuiu}] fort on the edge of the Kirgiz-Kaisakh steppes” (8:293–94).\textsuperscript{68} During the fighting he moves around even more (e.g., to Belogorsk; to the village of Berda, where Pugachev has his headquarters; to Tatar hamlets, Kazan, and various destroyed villages).

The landscape Grinev traverses is always an unmarked “dreary wilderness” “[extending] in every direction,” “crosscut with ridges and ravines,” usually “covered
with snow.” In this environment even natural topographic features fail to establish boundaries: Grinev finds that things look exactly the same on one side of the Iaik River’s “monotonous banks” as they do on the other. When he is told they are approaching Belogorsk, Grinev still sees nothing: “where is the fort?” he asks. There is no impressive boundary setting off this supposed outpost of state power—which is actually nothing more than a “small village surrounded by a palisade”—from the empty space all around. Once settled, Grinev looks out his window and sees “a melancholy steppe [stretching] out before [him],” where the ragged edge of civilization—a few huts, some chickens, an old woman gathering her pigs—bleeds imperceptibly into an undifferentiated flatland (8:294–96).

The landscape in The Captain’s Daughter is above all illegible: if one goal of the modernizing state was to make space legible, this landscape was going to present difficulties. When a storm appears, for example, sky merges with land, leaving nothing distinguishable in the “darkness and whirling snow”: “everything disappeared . . . darkness everywhere” (8:287). Utterly disoriented, Grinev “[looks] in all directions hoping to see some sign of human habitation or roadway, but [cannot] discern anything” (8:288). Pushkin was not alone in suggesting that the steppe’s unrelieved horizontality threatened to disable the systems of scale and contrast that we rely on for the distinctions necessary for making meaning. As the French traveler Leroy-Beaulieu wrote in the 1890s, the Eurasian landmass offers “hardly any juxtaposition”—and in a landscape where everything blurs together, signs become unreadable.

The land is not the only thing that is unreadable: the people of the steppes are equally hard to figure out. When Grinev first arrives at Belogorsk, the only “ethnics” initially present are a few Bashkirs and the Cossack soldiers themselves (who turn out to be more “ethnic” than anybody had anticipated). Only gradually does the bewildering diversity of the population become evident: Grinev explains that the region is in fact “inhabited by a number of half-wild peoples [note the half-] who had only recently accepted the Russian Emperors’ suzerainty. Because of their frequent revolts, their ways unaccustomed to law and civilized life, and their instability and cruelty, the government could keep them under control only by maintaining constant surveillance over them” (8:313). Soon the list of ethnic designations lengthens, though these peoples are never clearly differentiated: Kirgiz, Tatars, Kalmyks, and unspecified “half-savage peoples” appear along with the Bashkirs and—most threatening and destabilizing of all—those “shifty” Cossacks, who are “not to be relied on” (8:314, 316).

The Cossacks are the most threatening precisely because they are the closest thing to “Russians” around: they are the internal other. In the eyes of the state, the Cossacks’ duty—their reason for being, in effect—was to guard the borders of the Russian empire. But Grinev tells us that “these Iaik Cossacks, whose duty it was
to guard the peace and safety of the region, had themselves for some time been restless subjects, posing a threat to the government” (8:313). The Cossacks are imperial border guards who turn on the empire, “half-literate” people who write imperial manifestos (8:317), Orthodox Christians who team up with heathens, semi-Russians (or maybe semi-Ukrainians?) who dress in Kirgiz robes (8:347). Their instability is mirrored in characters like the neither/nor “baptized Kalmyk,” who is willing to follow Russian orders and torture a captured Bashkir (8:313), only to end up being killed himself by a Cossack who has defected to the rebels: nearly everyone’s position, it seems, is potentially fluid among these “half-savage” and “semi-barbarian” peoples.

The Cossacks and various “others” in *The Captain’s Daughter*, all of whom are liable to melt back into the unmapped and unreadable landscape at any moment, suggest that this part of Russia might not have borders at all. The best the Russian empire has been able to do here is to write its bloody history on the rebels’ bodies (the old Bashkir prisoner whose ears, nose, and tongue were cut off as punishment for another uprising thirty years earlier; Pugachev’s lieutenant with his slit nostrils and branded cheeks; the laboring convicts with faces “disfigured by the executioners’ tongs” [8:338]: but despite these marks their loyalties remain unstable, and the land itself, it seems, remains unmarked.

Franco Moretti has pointed out that historical novels set along internal borders—those that divide states within—are often about treason, or near-treason: an internal borderland is where the son of Gogol’s Cossack hero Taras Bulba takes up with the Polish enemy, where *Waverly*’s hero gets mixed up with the Jacobites, and where Balzac’s Marquis de Montauran in *The Royalists (Les Chouans)* makes a last stand against the French revolutionary state. *The Captain’s Daughter*, too, has to do with near-treason and with what we might call the elasticity of state loyalty, and if Pushkin’s tale is set along any border at all, it is probably an internal one. But in a sense what is notable about *The Captain’s Daughter* is that the borders in this text are so hard to locate. How is one supposed to be loyal to a state that is so hard to find on the map?

From its epigraphs to its closing lines, Pushkin’s text returns again and again to questions of honor and dishonor, paternity and paternal blessings, ranks and regiments, legitimate and illegitimate hierarchies. It is a text that wants all these lines to be clear (family lines, lines of command, lines on the map). But Grinev’s story implies that out on the steppe, even an upstanding Russian nobleman risks getting mixed up with a traitor like Pugachev—a figure who first appears out of a blinding snowstorm in an unnamed “remote place, in the middle of the steppe, far away from any habitation” (8:277). Fighting against those you deem to be half-savage and semi-barbarian peoples does not offer the same pay-off, one might say, as fighting against a more clearly defined enemy: as Savelich tells Grinev, “it’d be
something else if you were marching against Turks and or Swedes, but here one’s even ashamed to say who you’re fighting with!” (8:344). And Grinev recognizes that the landscape itself favors the rebels in a “tedious and petty war against brigands and savages,” who are always “disappearing” and “reemerging” into and out of the steppe (8:363).

At the end of The Captain’s Daughter, the “pacification” of the rebels is represented more as the dying down of a storm than as a military victory—and it is certainly not represented as the definitive claiming of a clearly demarcated territory. In fact the story ends not with Pugachev’s defeat but with Grinev’s reintegration into the structures of imperial power: Catherine II, in response to Masha’s appeal, exonerates him. Masha, having made her way to the imperial court from Simbirsk, delivers her petition to Catherine in the gardens of Tsarskoe Selo: and significantly, we are told that she never even sees the capital itself (she returns to Simbirsk “without as much as taking one curious look at Petersburg”). There is no need for Masha to go to the capital, since this is a story about the capital’s effort to extend its own power and authority over far-off places. And at the very end of The Captain’s Daughter, the state does seem to be making some progress in this regard, as evidenced by the framed letter “in Catherine’s own hand” that is still displayed at the family estate in Simbirsk Guberniia, where Grinev’s descendants “thrive to this day.” (8:374)

The Captain’s Daughter does not focus on a decisive moment of conquest or surrender. Nor does it represent one definitive claiming of “foreign” territory for (or as) Russia; indeed, the action takes place in territory that is nominally Russian already. The process of “domesticating” the Eurasian steppelands was intermittent and irregular, a somewhat undramatic process that anticipates the undramatic and “boring” kind of space the steppes would later become. Once the state consolidated power over this region, the steppes would go from being dangerous and foreign to being dull and Russian—in other words, to being provincial. In Pushkin’s time you could travel more or less south from Orenburg and get to the (metaphorical) “east,” but already by the 1830s the steppes were not an exotic, capital-R Romantic periphery. Then again, they were certainly not the Russian heartland either. This was an environment that was fairly hard to exoticize, but where it was fairly easy to feel alienated: liminal and uncomfortable, yes; foreign and exotic, not really.

As we have seen, Pushkin’s version of rural Russia is most often positive, pastoral, and gently comical—quite unlike what we find in the slightly later provintsia trope that is this book’s main focus. But Belkin’s garbled “history” in “Goriukhino” points to one link between Pushkin’s generally benign (if condescending) image and the darker ones that predominate a bit later. Witness the fact that Lotman’s characterization of Russian history—inorganic, illusory, nonexistent—draws on
the same vocabulary that writers of the 1830s and 1840s enlist when describing provintsiia: in the provinces as in Russian history, things happen and artifacts turn up without rhyme or reason (thus we read of a painting hanging in a provincial landowner’s manor house in Dead Souls, “there was no way of knowing how or why [it] had gotten there”). The parallel hints at links between provintsiia and Russia’s putative ahistoricity—the comically shapeless “non-history” that Pushkin highlights in “Goriukhino,” where the only available version of the past is ridiculously inconsequential, and the equally chaotic conditions confronted by Catherine’s armies in the featureless landscape of The Captain’s Daughter.

The chaos and eclecticism of life in a place like Goriukhino—or Russia—can serve to expose the weaknesses of theoretical programs or all-explanatory meta-narratives like those that claim to discern history’s “universal laws.” Provincial settings, besides being funny (recall the elder Terentii, capable of writing with both hands as well as with his foot), highlight the inapplicability of (European) theories to (Russian) realities, particularly when it comes to history and temporality. In the decades after Pushkin’s death, many literary texts would fixate on the provinces as a way of examining Russians’ relationship to historical time. And as we will see in subsequent chapters, the provinces as they are represented in such texts are often not simply “behind”; rather, they exist in a strange and ambiguous temporality, in which ideas have no roots in real history and real places.

And finally, in Pushkin’s work we see the beginning of the processes that would soon allow formerly exotic places like the steppes to accommodate provincials like Belkin—“ordinary” Russians who understand that the places where they live are far away from what counts, but are nonetheless quite clearly within Russia proper. In the texts addressed in the following chapter, Russia’s open spaces are no longer associated with what is liminal and uncanny; instead, they have been assimilated to a version of “merely provincial” culture that is unmistakably Russian. This culture is typically characterized by repetition, imitation, and distortion; over and over, we are told that it is boring. No longer a site of adventure or danger, and only sometimes a site of humor, the little steppe town will become a gorod N (Town of N), a gorod kak gorod (a town like any other)—just another component of what Herzen’s memoirs call “the land of silence and dumbness.” But as boring as it is said to be, this version of provintsiia becomes a locus of great aesthetic productivity because in these texts we begin to see the provinces imagined in the bizarrely paradoxical terms that will prove so artistically fruitful for the rest of the century.