

Prophet as Sacrifice: Biblical Themes and Variations in Pushkin's "The Prophet."

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An Essay  
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Abstract

This article presents a reading of the Alexander Pushkin’s “The Prophet” as a “re-creation” of Isaiah’s account of his call in Isaiah chapter six. Begins by establishing previous critical reception of the poem as a about Pushkin himself, or about a poet, or a retelling of Isaiah. Examines the text of Isaiah 6, discusses the major difference—Isaiah’s purification comes through animal sacrifice, the prophet has to sacrifice himself. Examines significance of the desert as a setting; discusses the juxtaposition of gentleness and violence in the speaker’s purification in terms of Girard’s concept of sacrifice; examines the violence in detail; presents a reading of the burning coal as a parallel to the seraphim by discussing the meaning of the word *seraphim* and its Biblical role; argues that the speaker belongs to the Hebrew prophetic tradition, rather than the poetic tradition; ultimately concludes that the encounter with the sacred in “The Prophet” requires the complete destruction of the self and its re-creation as part of the sacred.

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## The Prophet

By Alexander Pushkin

Racked by my spirit's thirst, I trod  
Along a desert path, in pain,  
And saw a seraph sent from God  
Appear on six-bright wings of flame.  
His fingers, gentler than dreams fly,  
Brushed both my blind, unseeing eyes,  
Then like a hatchling, slow with fright,  
I looked with penetrating sight.  
He touched my ears and made them swell  
With sounds of Heaven, earth and hell.  
I heard the clamor of the skies,  
And angels in their upward flight,  
And creatures far below the light,  
And growing vines, with sullen cries.  
He, reaching through my unclean lips,  
Tore out the tongue that often quipped  
With idle strife and wicked words,  
Then placed a fiery serpent's bite  
Into my mouth, arms glowing white,  
But dripping with my crimson blood.  
Then with a sword, He swiftly slashed  
My chest, wrenched out my trembling heart,  
Then took a burning coal in hand  
And thrust it in the gaping gash.  
I tumbled in what seemed death's fall,  
Then heard God's voice proclaim my call:  
"Rise prophet. Heed thy Lord's command;  
Filled with the tidings thou hast heard,  
Go thou to every tongue, and land,  
And sear men's hearts with holy word."

Translated from the Russian by Ray Alston

## Prophet as Sacrifice: Biblical Themes and Variations in Pushkin's "The Prophet"

Much of the critical discussion of Pushkin's 1826 lyric, "The Prophet," arises from its disputed relationship to the Bible. For readers of the tradition of Dostoevsky and Gogol, the poem is Pushkin's assertion of his own prophetic ability. T.J. Binyon's Biography, for instance, strongly implies that "The Prophet" is a personal allegory of Tsar Nicholas I setting Pushkin free to write<sup>1</sup> after his years of exile. Stephanie Sandler asserts that such an interpretation of "The Prophet," is the product of cultural myths surrounding Pushkin. Sandler suggests that identifying the speaker with Pushkin himself stems from "generations of readers [who] have simply wished to see Pushkin himself as a prophet, and thus found it immensely appealing to think that he announced himself as such" (20). Vladimir Nabokov takes such criticism even farther, deriding Dostoevsky's deification of Pushkin as "elephantine platitudes...the roar of which so ridiculously demotes Shakespeare and Pushkin to the vague level of all the plaster idols of academic tradition" (3.192). For Nabokov and for Sandler, regarding Pushkin as a prophet actually hinders appreciation of his works.

But even without associating the speaker of "The Prophet" with its author, critics typically characterize the speaker as a poet. Sandler, herself, argues convincingly that the speaker "refuses to behave like a prophet (who tells of what will come) and insists that he is, through it all, a poet (who speaks of what is)" (21) by focusing on imagery and experience. Andrew Kahn focuses on the violence of the seraphim's actions against the speaker as "a process of physical annihilation and rebirth" that expresses "the spiritual cost of the poet's epiphany" (31).

Considering the importance of meta-poetry in the Pushkin canon (think for example of the importance of self-referential poetry in *Eugene Onegin*, "Autumn" and, more obviously, "The

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<sup>1</sup> Binyon states, "Occasionally he would affix to a poem when it was published a date which was not that of the poem's composition: it symbolically linked, rather, the poem with a fatidic date in his life or with some significant event...to ["The Prophet"] he added the date '8 September 1826' the day of his meeting with Nicholas" (237).

Poet,”) interpreting the speaker of “The Prophet” as a poet presents profound implications for the view postulated by David Bethea that Pushkin had no other religion except poetry (“Pushkin at the Imperial Lyceum”).

Other critics identify Pushkin’s “The Prophet” as the portrayal of a prophet’s calling in the Biblical tradition, rather than as the development of a poet. Pamela Davidson asserts that “although some aspects of Pushkin’s work suggest the possibility of a parallel between the prophet and the poet, there is a fundamental difference between the two figures, which hinges on the issue of moral purity and social commitment” (“The Moral Dimension” 500). According to Davidson, Pushkin’s concept of prophet is that of a spokesman for morality and Divine Justice, whereas the poet is bound only by an aesthetic obligation to the source of his inspiration. Such an analysis precludes any mingling of the roles of prophet and poet in Pushkin’s lyric “The Prophet,” which ultimately portrays “the process of spiritual and moral cleansing” (Davidson “The Moral Dimension” 499), a process Pushkin identifies with the prophetic rather than the poetic. Victor Terras similarly suggests a purely (inter-)textual study of the poem, arguing “‘The Prophet’ is a close paraphrase of Isaiah and must not be read as related to the poet’s condition” (184). For Terras, the substance of the poem is in the calling of the prophet, a theme and treatment that Pushkin transplants from the Book of Isaiah and “exploit[s] to the hilt” (184) through his poetic treatment. Most critics agree that Pushkin’s poem finds its origin in Isaiah<sup>2</sup>, specifically in Isaiah’s account of his Theophany and calling. Since Isaiah’s account has crucial parallels with Pushkin’s “The Prophet,” I turn now to a consideration of the passage from Isaiah chapter six as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> Davidson observes alternative analyses in the poem’s critical history, but asserts that the identification with Isaiah is the most prevalent. “Although some critics have sought to relate the prophet described in the poem to the Koran, most readers, from Pushkin’s contemporaries onwards, have associated him with the prophet of the Hebrew tradition, modeled on Isaiah” (499). Because my study focuses on the relationship between Pushkin’s lyric and the Bible, a consideration of Koranic parallels calls for a separate study.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts at the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. Then said I, woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts. Then flew one of the seaphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me (KJV Isa. 6: 1-2, 5-8).<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, Pushkin also portrays the speaker's encounter with the "seraphim," his purification, and his calling. However, comparison between Isaiah 6 and "The Prophet" highlights a central difference between Isaiah's account of his calling and that of Pushkin's speaker, which lies in the portrayal of the purification "rite" that makes the prophet fit for his calling; in Isaiah, a coal from the altar, laid on the prophet's lips, is enough to make the prophet wholly clean. In Pushkin, however, the ceremony is far more violent, the speaker's old self must literally be killed before he can rise as a prophet. Such differences between the actions of purification undercut the view that the poem is simply a "paraphrase of Isaiah," and suggests, rather, *variations* on Isaiah.

I propose that the relationship between Pushkin's "The Prophet" and Isaiah's calling in the Bible is analogous to the relationship Donald Loewen perceives between Pushkin's *Feast in Time of a Plague* and John Wilson's *The City of the Plague*. Although Pushkin's *Feast in Time of a Plague* claims to be a translation from Wilson's English drama, Loewen asserts that "taking an existing structure, Pushkin injects a new core which transforms its 'host' material and forces a

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<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Solov'ev implies that "the Prophet" finds its basis in the Church Slavonic Bible (Kovelman 138). V.S. Listov as well asserts Pushkin's familiarity with the Church Slavonic translation (48). For the sake of my essay, I defer to the King James translation of the Bible, focusing on the contrast between the action of Isaiah's account and that of Pushkin, rather than specifying the differences between nuances of language in "The Prophet" and the Church Slavonic Bible.



new, fundamentally different reading. Pushkin was not a translator but a re-creator” (47). Similarly, while Pushkin’s “The Prophet” parallels Isaiah receiving his calling, Pushkin “injects a new core” into Isaiah’s account of his Theophany by creating an experience of overt violence. Violence in Isaiah is purely implied; Isaiah’s purification possibly alludes to the Hebrew rites of sacrifice. The purifying coal is taken “from off the altar,” the locus of sacrifice. In Isaiah the implied death of an animal serves as a source of purification. In Pushkin’s poem, however, the violence is more direct, leveled ultimately at the prophet. The sanctification of the prophet requires that he, essentially, become a sacrifice himself. I propose that the contrast of Isaiah’s portrayal of sacrifice with the portrayal presented in Pushkin is crucial to understanding the “new core” of Pushkin’s “The Prophet” in that such a contrast explores an unmediated encounter with the sacred as an experience requiring the complete sacrifice of the physical self and its rebirth as part of the sacred. In other words, whereas Isaiah remains part of the human world after his calling, the speaker of Pushkin’s “The Prophet” is “undone” as a human and recreated as a purely sacred being.

The sacrifice of Pushkin’s speaker in “The Prophet” is underscored by the difference of setting. Isaiah’s encounter with Divinity takes place in the Temple, “in Biblical times, considered to be a place where God resided” (Temple). J.E. Cirlot identifies the temple “as the focal point of the intersection of the two worlds of heaven and earth” (333). Appropriately, Isaiah receives a Divine manifestation and call at a crossroads of the earthly and Heavenly. Pushkin similarly places his speaker “на перепутье”<sup>4</sup> when the seraphim appears. Like Isaiah, Pushkin’s speaker is brought to a point where the earth and Heaven intersect. However, Pushkin’s “crossroads” happens also to be “в пустыне.”<sup>5</sup> The desert, according to Cirlot,

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<sup>4</sup> literally “at the crossroads” (“*Pereput’e*”)

<sup>5</sup> “in a desert” (“*Pustynja*”)

symbolizes “the most propitious place for divine revelation” in that its separation from society puts it “outside the sphere of existence...susceptible only to things transcendent” (“Desert” 79). The desert setting suggests that Pushkin’s speaker does not remain at a crossroads, but is ultimately absorbed into the sacred. Whereas the temple setting allows Isaiah to stand simultaneously in the human realm and in the realm of the sacred, the desert setting symbolically allows Pushkin’s speaker to be taken entirely out of society and encounter the sacred in an unmediated manner. The sacredness of the setting is underscored by the fact that the speaker re-states his desert location in line twenty-five, “Как труп в пустыне я лежал,”<sup>6</sup> one line before the voice of God begins to speak. Re-emphasizing the desert setting before relating the call from God demonstrates the symbolic role of the desert in providing a location of proximity to God. Such a direct encounter proves, frankly, dangerous, in that it causes/requires the speaker to become a sacrifice. René Girard argues that communities dealing with the sacred must do so at an “optimum *distance*. If the community comes too near the sacred it risks being devoured by it; if, on the other hand, the community drifts too far away, out of range of the sacred’s therapeutic threats and warnings, the effects of its fecund presence are lost” (268). Considering Girard’s concept of “optimum distance” from the sacred, the desert setting of “The Prophet” becomes a necessity, in that wandering in the desert severs the speaker from society and brings him into the sacred. Such separation serves as the first step in the sacrificial process of purification.<sup>7</sup>

Departing from society and reaching a crossroads in the desert, the speaker attains an encounter with the sacred. Through the appearance and subsequent acts of the seraphim, the speaker is brought into the sacred and, in Girard’s terms, is ultimately devoured by it. This

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<sup>6</sup> “Like a corpse in the desert I layed”

<sup>7</sup> That the speaker is a member of any society is never explicit in the poem, society itself being mentioned only by the voice of God in the final line of the poem’s last line. I accept the complete absence of other human beings from the action of the poem as evidence of the speaker’s necessary separation from society.

devouring, for reasons I will approach below, consists of the prophet being absorbed wholly by the sacred, having his previous identity and person destroyed. The purification Pushkin's speaker undergoes at the seraphim's hand destroys him as a human being, and he is recreated and called to rise as a part of the sacred.

The purification of the speaker and his absorption by the sacred begins with the speaker departing from society, and then continues with his physical alteration at the hand of the seraphim. Beginning with the touching of the eyes and ears that heightens the speaker's senses, the process is at first gentle. The speaker states that the seraphim touches his eyes "перстами легкими как сон."<sup>8</sup> The light touch of the seraphim essentially transforms the speaker's eyes and ears to perceive that which he was unable to perceive. His senses, in fact, seem to have become spiritual; after the seraphim touches his eyes, he opens them as "вещие зеницы,"<sup>9</sup> suggesting not only that his physical senses have been augmented, but that they have been made spiritual. He is beginning to transform from a human to a part of the sacred. Thus, he perceives with greater depth not only the earthly vines and sea creatures, but also hears the "горний ангелов полет."<sup>10</sup> The transformation of the speaker's senses is necessary for his calling as a divine ambassador; he must sacrifice his own senses and learn to see and hear as God sees and hears. Even so, the change in his senses is only the beginning, because his transformation must be absolute.

Thus the poem shifts dramatically in line fifteen with the violence of the seraphim, who removes and replaces the speaker's tongue and heart. The speaker's encounter with the sacred brings about both blessing and suffering. Even if the violent images of the poem are more memorable, Pushkin gives an equal ten lines to both the gentle and the violent aspects of the purification. Such duality suggests what Girard refers to as "the double nature of all primitive

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<sup>8</sup> "With light fingers like a dream" ("*Perst*")

<sup>9</sup> Literally "prophetic pupils" ("*Veshii*"; "*Zenitsa*")

<sup>10</sup> "Heavenly flight of angels" ("*Gornii*")

divinities, the blending of beneficent and maleficent that characterizes all mythical figures who involve themselves in mortal affairs” (251). The duality of deity, for Girard, is made manifest in sacrificial ritual. Sacrifice displays destructive and creative forces, both of which are ascribed to the deity of any given religion. Walter Burkert similarly suggests “perhaps both aspects of sacrifice, the dread of death and the certainty of life, are subject to the same god” (134). The gods of sacrifice pour out both blessing and suffering, and an encounter with the divine or the sacred presupposes an encounter with both elements. That the transformation of the speaker is both gentle and violent suggests that the speaker serves a sacrificial role by becoming a victim to the sacred.

In Pushkin’s “The Prophet,” as well as in Isaiah, the encounter with God demands a sacrifice for purification. When Isaiah recognizes his unworthiness, his sin is purged by “a live coal” that the seraphim had “taken...from off the altar.” Gray asserts that the coal came from the altar of burnt sacrifice (ref. in Smith 192), tying the account of Isaiah’s call to the sacrificial rites of ancient Israel. In Isaiah’s case, the moment of Theophany creates the necessity of the sacrifice (although in Isaiah’s case it requires contact with items made sacred by their relationship to sacrificial ritual). Isaiah reasons “I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts” (KJV Isa. 6:5). For Isaiah, contact with the ritual implements of sacrifice bring about the purity necessary to stand in God’s presence, which would otherwise necessitate the destruction of the self. Pushkin’s speaker, however, in coming into contact with the divine receives the blows of the sacrificial demand. Unlike Isaiah, the speaker of “The Prophet” does not see God. However, the encounter with the divine is just as complete in Pushkin as it is in Isaiah, in that the Hebrew tradition of prophecy allows that “sometimes the divine manifestation takes place ‘in a vision’ or

‘in a dream’ ...or by means of an angel” (“Revelation”). Thus, the encounter with the seraphim can itself constitute a divine manifestation. Significantly, however, Pushkin’s speaker does not hear the words of God until the seraphim has finished the work of purification, suggesting that the purification is necessary for the prophet’s communion with God, or at least necessary for his calling.

Specifically, sins of speech mark the uncleanness that necessitates sacrifice in both Isaiah and Pushkin. Just as Isaiah speaks of his “unclean lips,” Pushkin’s speaker identifies speech as the source of his personal uncleanness. He states that the seraphim “вырвал грешный мой язык/и празднословный, и лукавый.”<sup>11</sup> Whereas contact with an implement of sacrifice is sufficient purgation in Isaiah, in “The Prophet” the offending tongue must be torn out and replaced. As previously cited, Davidson observes that the seraphim’s actions are a “process of spiritual and moral cleansing” (499). The fact that the seraphim tears out the speaker’s tongue—his self acknowledged source of sin—highlights the spiritual and moral nature of the cleansing, because the speaker recognizes his tongue as the source of guilt. Herein “The Prophet” departs from Isaiah: whereas a symbolic allusion to sacrifice is sufficient in Isaiah, Pushkin’s speaker must be “undone” and re-created as a part of the sacred.

The speaker being “undone” and re-created is most evident at the poem’s climax, in which the seraphim removes the speaker’s heart and replaces it with a burning coal. Here also the violence is most markedly at odds with the account in the Book of Isaiah. Whereas the speaker of “The Prophet,” like Isaiah, acknowledges the sinfulness of his tongue, there is no comment about the sinfulness of his heart. His heart is described only as “трепетное”<sup>12</sup> a result, most likely, of the “dread of death” incidental to the violence of the sacrificial experience, since

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<sup>11</sup> “Tore out my sinful tongue/and idle-worded, (“*Prazdnoslovie*”) and cunning [i.e. wicked]” (“*Lukavyi*”) in Russian the two adjectives on line 17 refer to the tongue.

<sup>12</sup> “trembling”

the text gives no reason to suggest that the speaker is guilty of chronic fear. It may be argued that explicit reference to the sinfulness of the heart would be redundant, since the heart functions as the symbol of desire and any sin committed would naturally proceed from it. However, I contend that the removal of the speaker's heart also enables the complete separation from the human world that is necessary for the speaker's purification, or rather, sanctification. Mikhail Epshtein asserts that losing his heart "makes the prophet literally heartless and thus inhuman" (ref. in Sandler 21). In "The Prophet," hearing the voice of God and thus coming into unmediated contact with the sacred requires that the speaker sacrifice his membership in the human race, necessitating what Kahn terms "a process of physical annihilation and rebirth" (31). However, the speaker's *rebirth* seems not to take place in the text of the actual poem; as the speaker relates, between the seraphim's actions and the call of God he was lying "Как труп,"<sup>13</sup> emphasizing his deathlike state. The voice of God commands him "Восстань"<sup>14</sup> but the physical action of rising is nowhere portrayed in the poem, suggesting that the complete process of rebirth (or re-creation) reaches completion only after God issues the speaker his calling.

The seraphim uses a burning coal as an instrument of purification in the accounts of both Isaiah and Pushkin. As discussed previously, in Isaiah the coal probably derives efficacy from its association with sacrifice, thus Isaiah is ritually purged by the coal being placed on his lips. However, I contend that in "The Prophet" the coal's efficacy as an agent of purification derives from its association with the seraphim. Its insertion into the heart of the speaker enables his transfiguration from a human being into an extension of the sacred by enabling him to sacrifice whatever previous identity he had and take on a seraphic role.

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<sup>13</sup> "Like a corpse" see notes on page 5.

<sup>14</sup> "Rise" ("Vosstat")

I turn now to a consideration of the implications the presence of the seraphim add to the poem. The word *seraphim* is a transliteration of a Hebrew plural noun, the plural form of *saraph* (“Seraphim”). The fact that Pushkin uses the word *seraphim* as a masculine singular noun underscores his limited knowledge of the Hebrew language. Kovelman confirms the fact that Pushkin’s knowledge of the Hebrew language was cursory at best<sup>15</sup>, which may suggest to some that Pushkin was unaware of any linguistic associations presented by the word *seraphim*, that he used the word simply because of its appearance in the account of Isaiah adapted for the purposes of the poem. However, despite his lack of knowledge of the Hebrew language, Pushkin was deeply acquainted with the Hebrew poetry of the Bible. Russian poet and philosopher Vladimir Solov’ev, who himself undertook a “thorough study of the Hebrew language, grammar, scriptures and the Talmud” (Davidson “Vladimir Solov’ev” 661), commented that not only “the overall tone of the poem [“The Prophet]...stems from the Bible,” but “the very grammatical structure of Hebrew...is beautifully retained in the poem” (Kovelman 138). I assert that Pushkin’s familiarity with the Bible justifies a close examination of his use of the word *seraphim* in “The Prophet,” because the study of the Bible would have acquainted Pushkin with the nature and role of the seraphim.

The coal is associated with the seraphim partly by means of its description as, “пылающий огнем.”<sup>16</sup> The word *seraphim* itself “suggests a translation of ‘fiery ones’ and probably stems from the fiery imagery often associated with the presence of God” (“Seraphim”). One Biblical commentary links the seraphim to the cherubim, whom Ezekiel describes as “like burning *coals* of fire or like torches” (Smith 189 emphasis added). With a flaming coal as a

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<sup>15</sup> Kovelman states Pushkin was planning to study Hebrew,” and on a page of his notebook “dated March 16 (probably 1832), one finds the complete Hebrew alphabet,” probably dictated to him by an acquaintance familiar with Hebrew (138-139). Note that the publication of “The Prophet” precedes the probable date of the entry of the Hebrew alphabet by six years.

<sup>16</sup> “flaming,” or “blazing with fire” (“*Pylat*”)

heart, the speaker is no longer human, but has become more like the fiery seraphim who performed his purification. The speaker's original self is sacrificed by the sacred seraphim, and his re-creation is that of a sacred, even seraphic, being. God calls the speaker, commanding, "глаголом жги сердца людей."<sup>17</sup> Sandler observes "Both processes are violent, then, the [speaker's] transformation and the hearers' reaction; both are felt in the body as a jolt of force that leaves one scorched by the sheer intensity of the encounter" (21). Sent out to burn others with the word, the speaker is essentially serving in a role similar to that of the seraphim, purifying others in a manner similar to that by which he himself was purified. That the speaker has become seraphic is further substantiated by the fact that the seraphim replaces his tongue with " жало мудрая змеи."<sup>18</sup> The Hebrew noun *saraph* used in Isaiah's account of his Theophany is used also to "describe the 'fiery serpents' that afflicted Israel in the wilderness" ("Seraphim"). The association of the seraphim with serpents suggests that, having received a serpents sting as a tongue, the speaker is called to a seraphic role as an "[emissary] of divine judgment" ("Seraphim"). He is called to administer the sanctifying violence of which he himself has been a victim, although the violence he is called to administer is on a lesser scale.

Called to a seraphic role, the speaker is commander to rise, reborn as part of the sacred. As such, he is called to use the word as sanctifying instrument. The significance of the word as sanctifying force has given particular credence to the view that the speaker of "The Prophet" is in fact a poet. As cited above, Sandler argues that the speaker is a poet, rather than a prophet, because he "speaks of what is" rather than offering predictions of the future. Such an analysis implicitly argues that the nature of a prophet's calling is that of a foreteller of future events. In contrast, V.S. Listov asserts the following:

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<sup>17</sup> "With the word burn ("Zhech") the hearts of people"

<sup>18</sup> the "sting of a wise serpent"



Главное назначение пророка – вовсе не попытка предсказать будущее (это дело прорицателя, может быть, даже волхва языческого. В библейской традиции пророк – тот кто боговдохновенно, от имени Бога, обличает свой народ, грозит ему карами небесными.<sup>19</sup>

Sent to burn men's hearts with the word, the speaker of the prophet fits Listov's criteria for the Hebrew tradition of the prophet as an agent of Divine rebuke rather than a foreteller of the future. He is called to deliver what René Girard terms "the sacred's therapeutic threats and warnings" (268) by burning the acknowledgement of the sacred into the hearts—and thus the feelings and consciousness—of men.

Called as an instrument of God, the speaker of "The Prophet" no longer belongs among men; we might say that he is sent back to society as a Divine ambassador, but his citizenship belongs to the sacred. As such, his interaction with human beings must take place within the "optimum distance" Girard suggests is necessary for the relationship between civilization and the sacred. Kahn observes that the "theatricality and sacral distance manifested by the high Romantic mode make works like 'The Prophet' majestic but disconcertingly impersonal" (31). As opposed to Pushkin's more characteristic, conversational tone, the "faceless" speaker of "The Prophet" speaks impersonally with his audience, maintaining "optimum" or "sacral distance." Narrating his experience in the past tense, the speaker has already been absorbed wholly into the sacred, and therefore must relate his transformation while remaining apart from society. "The Prophet," thus seems to demonstrate that the danger of being overtaken by the sacred applies only to a *direct*, unmediated encounter with it. Whereas Isaiah's account of his calling shows him called to bear the word but remaining wholly human, in "The Prophet" the speaker can never truly again

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<sup>19</sup> "The chief purpose of a prophet is not at all the attempt to predict the future (such is the work of a soothsayer, ["*Proritsatel*"] perhaps even a heathen sorcerer). In the Biblical tradition a prophet is he who, divinely inspired, in the name of God points out the sins ["*Oblichat*"] of his people, threatens them with the punishment of Heaven."

be a part of human society after his calling. However, the “sacral distance” employed by the speaker suggests that the overtaking by the sacred applies to the prophet alone; he does not engulf or absorb his audience with a highly personal encounter. Thus, he does not require the audience of the “The Prophet” to undergo the complete transformation he himself has endured. He is commanded to burn men’s hearts, but has no commission to alter their eyes and ears and replace their tongues and hearts. Whereas the speaker undergoes such a complete transformation, perhaps a transfiguration, he is sent only to burn the word into the hearts already in place, suggesting that he is sent to turn humanity toward the sacred, to keep them mindful of it even while retaining their humanity. The presence of the sacred in society still involves some danger or at least pain—the word, after all, is going to *burn* men’s hearts—but the true danger of being absorbed into the sacred is reserved for those who come into a direct contact with it. In contrast to the speaker’s unmediated contact with the sacred, society has the benefit of encountering the now sacred speaker through the mediation of language

Conclusions about the role of the sacred in Pushkin’s “The Prophet” as contrasted with the Biblical calling of Isaiah do not necessarily inform the study of Pushkin’s personal beliefs. B.V. Tomashevsky notes the impossibility of assigning a system of thought to Pushkin and his poetry, in that “for Pushkin himself every thought was to be judged as an artistic theme, from the point of view of its aesthetic potential” (132). Thus, reading “The Prophet” as a personal *credo* of Pushkin misses the mark, in that Pushkin’s interest is primarily aesthetic rather than theological. However, such an assertion does not render Pushkin’s poetry meaningless; as A.D.P. Briggs observes, “in actuality [Pushkin’s] works teem with ideas worthy of consideration even if they are often expressed *in statu nascendi*” (188). Pushkin’s works, according to Briggs, suggest crucial themes and concepts that are left incompletely expressed simply because he expects

readers to “seize on to the tiniest hint and appreciate its full implications” (188). Such are the concepts of the sacred in “The Prophet;” nowhere in the thirty lines of the remarkable lyric does Pushkin wax didactic, nor does he even reveal the nature of the prophet’s message. But by focusing on the moment of the prophet’s call and purification at the hands of the seraphim, Pushkin creates intertextual tension with the Biblical account of Isaiah’s calling. Pushkin draws attention to the poem’s similarity to Isaiah, but creates a desert setting and violent encounter that dramatically “re-create” the portrayal of the prophet’s call. He creates a speaker who narrates with “sacral distance” in order to establish that the speaker belongs in the realm of the sacred rather than in the human world. Pushkin’s recreation ultimately stresses the potential dangerousness of a direct encounter with the sacred, for in “The Prophet,” the encounter with the sacred not only results in the call to bear the word, but in the utter transformation of the prophet; tongue torn out, heart replaced with a burning coal, Pushkin’s speaker rises a part of the sacred sent back into the human world to perform a work of inner sanctification, similar to what he underwent, but on a much smaller scale. Ultimately the work of igniting “the hearts of men with the word” resembles the calling of Isaiah, but the purification requisite for the call is far more strenuous, the transformation more complete, and the separation from human society absolute. In Pushkin’s “The Prophet,” the call as emissary of the sacred requires a complete sacrifice of the self, a transformation of horrifying violence that results in sanctifying Epiphany (in the sense of a manifestation of God) and rebirth. The speaker is stripped of his selfhood and membership in the world, and in place of these sacrifices he is given the purposes of God, the call to use language as a tool in burning the acknowledgement of the sacred into the hearts of men. The speaker’s encounter with the sacred requires terrifying sacrifice, but it is also sanctifying and

ennobling, in that the sacred grants the speaker gifts and abilities in direct proportion to the earthly elements that have been destroyed.

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