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Speaking Volumes: Pushkin, Coleridge, and Table Talk

IT IS A rare text by a great writer that has not been analyzed, categorized, and interpreted in often conflicting ways. Letters, diaries, fragmentary outlines, and variant drafts all attract critical attention and with good reason: seemingly marginal texts help us to know the indisputably great ones better, and our ideas of what constitutes minor as opposed to major writing can come into question when we stray outward from the center of the literary canon towards the periphery. As structuralists and formalists have shown in their analyses of everything from detective novels to diary entries, and, more recently, as post-structuralists have shown by attention to margins, borders, frames, and disruptive details, the peripheral text itself and that which is peripheral within a text have much to teach us about our ways of thinking and valuing.¹

We might agree, then, that no extant bit of writing by a respected literary figure need escape our attention. Alexander Pushkin wrote no minor prose, and one might attribute equal importance to the legacy of his much admired contemporary Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Yet neither the lengthy collection of Coleridge's *Table Talk*, nor Pushkin's much shorter work by the same name, has drawn the focused attention of a single modern scholar.² These works are read, to be sure, and

¹ For a brilliant instance in recent criticism, see the analysis of a partial signature and its post-script in Huet.

² Iana Levkovich's recent book on Pushkin's autobiographical prose, however, does include a chapter about *Table Talk* (198-210). It discusses generic antecedents of Pushkin's *Table Talk* and describes in some detail the condition and ordering of the text.

frequently cited to support interpretations of other texts, but they have eluded close examination. In both cases, the apparent secondary status of a *Table Talk* can be the occasion to reconsider generally how hierarchies are established within the canon.

What constitutes a "table talk"? There were several other instances of the genre during the nineteenth century (William Hazlitt's in 1821-1822, Leigh Hunt's in 1851), and the differences among them are so great as to suggest that "table talk" might be an evocative and fashionable title rather than a genre. Hazlitt's collection consists of lengthy essays on subjects ranging from Italian painting to literary taste; Coleridge treats everything from painting and politics to religious reform and literary opinions; Pushkin's *Table Talk* consists of historical anecdotes and a few literary observations. There is, though, something that separates a book called "table talk" from one published as a "miscellany" (Coleridge also published a book with the latter title).³ It has to do with both the tables and the talk. The dinner table was present in the earliest form of table talk, which was written in classical Greece and Rome as a symposium. It was even then a loosely-defined genre, where food and drink would loosen the tongue and liberate the mind for conversation on many, any, or one topic. Plato's *Symposium* is well-known today, though there are others by Xenophon, Plutarch and several more. Minus the table (and usually on more sober topics), the Socratic dialogues preserve something of this genre in their staging of speech. More important than the table, then, is the talk, the sense of a piece of writing as a transcription of spoken discourse. The presence of a speaker and the assumption of a listener is the fiction that generates bits of table talk, and it is in the different uses to which they put this fiction that Coleridge and Pushkin can most valuably be distinguished.

I begin with Pushkin's particular shaping of this fiction of voice. Voices are the most important element of his *Table Talk*, but the voice we most expect, Pushkin's own, is quite hard to hear. Of the 66 entries in his *Table Talk*, the overwhelming majority relate anecdotes that place all judgment, praise, and blame in someone else's mouth. In some cases a general opinion is reported, for example, in the entry that begins "Many people complain about the improper tone of our journalistic criticism" (8: 67).⁴ More common is the structure in which an impersonal narrative voice quickly sets up a situation where some spoken words, either one person's *bon mot* or the dialogue of a few, will require little narrative explanation. Some are literary: "Del'vig disliked

³ See the self-conscious prefatory remarks in *Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism* (vii-x).

⁴ All translations from Pushkin's works are my own, based on the texts in Pushkin's *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*.

mystical poetry. He used to say: 'The closer you get to heaven, the colder it is'" (8: 80).⁵ Others play on words: "A certain lord, a well-known lazybones, parodied a well-known saying for his son: 'Never do anything yourself that you can force someone else to do.' N., a well-known egotist, added: 'Never do for another what you can do for yourself'" (8: 67). So many of the entries in *Table Talk* bring to our attention the ways that other people besides Pushkin expressed themselves that one wants to ask why the speech of other people plays such a prominent role.

One explanation for Pushkin's choice of quotation as a central device for the *Table Talk* is that it is precisely a device, one with more political than literary interest. So Dmitrii Iakubovich has suggested in his essay on Pushkin's diaries; there Pushkin often noted what was being talked about, complained about, or gossiped about in Petersburg. Iakubovich seems particularly astute in this judgment of the role of quoted speech in the diaries. Certainly Pushkin had every reason to fear that his papers would be read by unfriendly officials after his death, if not before: he complains in the diary about a letter to his wife, Natal'ia Nikolaevna, that was opened and read by the Tsar (8: 38; compare a letter to his wife with a more explicit version of the same complaint, 10: 383); and, in the beginning of an autobiographical fragment, he tells of burning his pre-1825 diaries for fear they would be used to incriminate his friends (8: 55-56).⁶ Self-protection is a logical explanation, particularly well-illustrated in the journal entry of November 29, 1833, where Pushkin seems to trail off, imagining explanations as to why Brinken, an officer accused of stealing, is to be tried outside the usual channels. He reins himself in quickly to conclude, "these are the questions being repeated everywhere" (8: 24). Iakubovich asserts that such a reading would apply to *Table Talk*, "many of whose entries seem like leaves torn out of the *Diary*" (24).

The two genres are different, however, as Iakubovich begins to suggest, in that *Table Talk* is "not united by the personality of the author" (24). The apparent absence of an authorial personality indeed distinguishes *Table Talk* from diaries. In the diaries, the narrative of balls attended and avoided, of days spent at court or with friends, lets

⁵ The reference is to Baron Anton Del'vig (1798-1831), a close friend of Pushkin's and a noted poet and editor.

⁶ Several of Pushkin's friends and acquaintances had been implicated or convicted for their roles in the uprising of December 1825; Pushkin was in exile in Mikhailovskoe at the time. Among the documents used to incriminate some of the Decembrists were clandestinely circulated poems by Pushkin. Thus he had some justification for the anxiety that his words could damage others. For a fine account of Pushkin's links to various Decembrists, see Eidel'man, *Pushkin i dekabristy*.

one follow Pushkin from one informant to another: we hear, with him, the gossip of the day. How much difference the small references can make is clear when one looks at the story of Count Kochubei's death, told both in *Table Talk* and in the diaries. First, from *Table Talk*:

Count Kochubei was buried in Nevskii Monastery. The Countess asked permission from the Tsar to surround the part of the floor beneath which he was buried with a railing. Old Novosiltsova said, "Just think how it will be for him during the Second Coming. He'll still be climbing over the railing while everyone else is already in Heaven." (8: 80)

From the diary:

Two weeks ago we received news here of the death of Prince Kochubei. It produced a strong reaction: the Tsar was inconsolable. The new ministers hung their heads. The death of such an insignificant man should not, it seems to me, have brought about any such change in the course of events. But Russia is so poor in rulers that there isn't even anyone to replace Kochubei! Here's what is said about him: C'était un esprit éminemment conciliant; nul n'excellait comme lui à trancher une question difficile, à amener les opinions à s'entendre, etc. . . . Without him the Council came almost to blows sometimes. He had to be summoned even when sick in order to quell disturbances with his presence. Simply put, he was a well-educated man—something altogether rare for us. It has been said about Kochubei:

Under this stone lies Count Viktor Kochubei.
Beat me as the devil might, I couldn't say
How much good he did in his life.

Agreed. But the epigram is being attributed to me and, once again, the government will be after me. (8: 40-41)

In the second (diary) excerpt, Pushkin's own views are conveyed. Like the speaker in the epigram, he cannot begin to say why Kochubei is so admired except negatively, that is, because of the dearth of talent among men of his class. Moreover, Pushkin's personal biography is drawn into the anecdote in the final sentence, which condenses a whole history of government surveillance and suspicion.⁷ The story of Kochubei is brought back, in the end, to Pushkin's story, as a poet struggling to live and work in repressive circumstances. Not so in the story from *Table Talk*, however; the anecdote about the fence leaves one to deduce Pushkin's quizzical attitude toward Kochubei from Novosiltsova's irony. And, like every other entry in *Table Talk*, there is no narrative to connect this anecdote to any other. It is as fenced off as the widow would have her husband's final resting place, separated by the blank white page from the stories that surround it.

Pushkin compensates for this absent narrative of the self with the richness of quoted speech in *Table Talk*. To replace the always interest-

⁷ Pushkin's position with regard to the Russian government has been surveyed in Modzalevskii and in the excellent biography by Iurii Lotman.

ing, ever lively voice that relays his many ups and downs in Petersburg society in Pushkin's diaries, there are many other voices. Their varying tones (from anger to pathos to scabrous humor) and stylistic markings turn the *Table Talk* into a richly variegated text where everyone, except the narrator, is characterized by his or her style of speaking. If one Pushkin scholar (I. Feinberg) is correct in his assertion that the main interest in Pushkin's late historical writings is characterization (263-312), then it should be said as well that the personages who appear in *Table Talk* are characterized principally by the way they speak.⁸ We hear from rulers, favorites, subordinates, and poets, and we hear them speak Russian, French, and combinations thereof. We are drawn into *Table Talk* as if we were seated around a table of familiar friends. As we listen to their words, we are attuned to the individuality of the stories. In the 1830s, Pushkin worked in government archives to gather material about the age of Peter the Great and about the Pugachev rebellions of 1773-1775. He demonstrates a particular view of historiography in *Table Talk*, where readers can hear for themselves how others tell of their lives.

Nothing could be further from the apparent interests of Samuel Taylor Coleridge at the time that is covered in his *Table Talk* (1822-1834), or at any other time in his life. While Pushkin as poet seems ever on the path toward becoming a historian, Coleridge as poet is more than a little bit of a philosopher. Thus, for July 13, 1832, we read in his *Table Talk*:

I have read all the famous histories, and, I believe, some history of every country and nation that is, or ever existed; but I never did so for the story itself as a story. The only thing interesting to me was the principles to be evolved from, and illustrated by, the facts. After I had gotten my principles, I pretty generally left the facts to take care of themselves. I never could remember any passages in books, or the particulars of events, except in the gross. (2: 35-36)⁹

Coleridge reiterated these views elsewhere: the editor of *Table Talk* provides a footnoted quotation from Coleridge's *Statesman's Manual* to argue that history read for the facts is like reading novels—indeed, novels are in this sense to be preferred.

One can well imagine, then, the texture of Coleridge's *Table Talk*. These are the large, expansive ideas (with a great many small opinions

⁸ The transformation of a historical actor into his or her mode of speaking also occurs in the diaries, where Pushkin writes of the Tsar's facility in speaking Russian and French: "He speaks very well, not mixing the two languages, without making the usual mistakes and using present-day expressions" (8:29).

⁹ Citations in the text are from the 1835 edition of Coleridge's *Table Talk*, identical to the London edition of the same year, which was in Pushkin's library at the time of his death.

mixed in) of a man whose definitions of “imagination” and “fancy” are still influential in literary criticism. Coleridge’s is a synthesizing mind, and his *Table Talk* produces fine statements on everything from political economy to grammar. Coleridge means to have his say in *Table Talk*, and there can be no mistake that it is *his* voice that we are meant to hear. Here is his sense of how ideas ought to be put across to the reader:

I cannot but think that a great philosophical poet ought always to teach the reader himself as from himself. [...] I am always vexed that the authors do not say what they have to say at once in their own persons. The introductions and little urbanities are, to be sure, very delightful in their way; I would not lose them; but I have no admiration for the practice of ventriloquizing through another man’s mouth. (2: 37-38)

None of the staged dialogue that marks Pushkin’s *Table Talk* for Coleridge—he assumes that readers will want to know his opinions and that a book should fulfill that desire with as few obstacles as possible.

Coleridge’s capacity to speak in lengthy monologue, no matter how many guests or potential interlocutors are present, has been noted (1: vii-ix); in an uncharacteristic aside from *Table Talk*, Coleridge is reported to have said, after comments on hypotheses, theories, Mr. Lyell’s system of geology, and Gothic architecture, “I am glad you came in to punctuate my discourse, which I fear has gone on for an hour without any stop at all” (2: 104). Thus we have, in *Table Talk*, Coleridge’s spoken thoughts over a period of some 12 years, transcribed *verbatim* and usable by readers curious about opinions or ideas less fully elucidated in other Coleridge texts. Such, precisely, has been the history of the response to *Table Talk*, which frequently appears as quoted material in discussions of better-known Coleridge texts. *Table Talk* makes available for quotation or reference some well-distilled versions of favorite Coleridgean ideas; because there are no transitions between thoughts (like Pushkin’s *Table Talk*, no connecting narrative to distract from the discrete entries), the quotable passages are ready to leave the page for other contexts.

Quotability, to be sure, is a comparable characteristic of Pushkin’s *Table Talk*. These are stories ready for retelling, phrases for the quoting. Peter the Great pulls an intestinal worm from his manservant; General Alexander Suvorov coldly remarks that he only asks questions, never answers them; the imprisoned rebel, Emelian Pugachev, tells someone who has come to look at him in his cage that he has never seen anyone uglier in his life. Pushkin seems to have deliberately preserved the kinds of comments others would want to quote: he is supposed to have said to Aleksei Vulf that writers should describe contemporary

events, noting them down, so that others could quote them.¹⁰ One Pushkin scholar has argued that throughout his life, Pushkin was creating an autobiography, scattering bits of it in notes, journals, and fictional fragments (Levkovich 136).¹¹ But if this is autobiography, it is a curious instance of the genre. Pushkin's modern editors place *Table Talk* among his historical writings. Yet the absence of analyses of *Table Talk* in essays or books devoted to Pushkin's historical writings suggests that, if this is history, it is marginal to the central tasks of historical writing as Pushkin conceived them.¹²

In its very fragmentariness, however, *Table Talk* exemplifies Pushkin's view of historiography. It is, I believe, as much the recording as it is the event that Pushkin cares about; he seeks to explore the way materials about lived experience both do and do not become a part of a historian's sense of the past. One can also see Pushkin's fascination with documentation in his history and his novel about the great eighteenth-century peasant rebellion led by Pugachev: to the *History of Pugachev* (1834), Pushkin appends documents that evidence his claims; in *The Captain's Daughter* (1836), Pushkin incorporates a wealth of written material that conveys the atmosphere of eighteenth-century Russia.¹³ Indeed, *The Captain's Daughter* presents itself as a kind of document, a narrative that ends with Grinev's note to his curious descendants, for whom he has supposedly penned these family notes.

What is different in *Table Talk* (and here *The History of Pugachev* with its oral histories is immediately relevant) is the talk. This collection of what others have been saying becomes an experiment in making

¹⁰ See *Pushkin v vospominaniiaakh sovremennikov* (1: 416) and Eidel'man, *Pushkin: Istoriia* (305). In a journal entry from December 1834, Pushkin begins a long description of a day in the Anichkov Palace with the intention of describing it "in detail, for the benefit of a future Walter Scott" (8: 43); in describing another ball, he parenthetically comments that he has noted the ball for the amusement of those who come after him (8: 46).

¹¹ Pushkin's autobiography, as a work dispersed in fragments, might in this sense be typical of Romantic writing as described in McFarland. Monika Frenkel Greenleaf studies Pushkin's fragmentary fictions in a book to be published by Stanford University Press.

¹² Among the best recent books about Pushkin as a historian is N. Eidel'man, *Pushkin: Istoriia*, a formidable and erudite study of Pushkin's historical researches, but not one in which the fragmentary and open-ended nature of Pushkin's history writings is considered

¹³ For a good discussion in English of these two narratives, see Debreczeny (239-273). I would argue that Pushkin creates in *The Captain's Daughter* the variegated linguistic enterprise that typifies the novel, as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin. For Bakhtin's theories of the novel, see "Epos i roman" and "Slovo v romane," in *Voprosy literatury i estetiki*; excellent English translations are included in *The Dialogic Imagination*.

spoken evidence available to future readers. By writing the spoken words, Pushkin makes them usable, that is, verifiable and quotable in future historical investigations. The title which in its English form is yet another quotation,¹⁴ points toward the central difficulties faced in Pushkin's late historical writings. How can history, the genre most intensely involved in the project of writing down—and thus finalizing—discourse be opened up to include oral testimony?¹⁵ How can the historical writings themselves be brought closer to speech? I have suggested, so far, that Pushkin's answers to these questions are simple. He features anecdotes in *Table Talk* that reproduce conversations. But, as is typical of Pushkin, such seductively elegant answers are embedded in a text that resists the seduction. *Table Talk* is not talk, but a stubborn meditation on how history might itself aspire to both reliability and spontaneity.

The theme of writing and speaking is brought up in one entry of *Table Talk* in the form of a reflection on reading vs. listening. An anecdote that might at first seem a convenient illustration for Pushkin's ongoing battle against slanderers can also be read as a moment of great textual self-consciousness.

The Jesuit Possevino,¹⁶ so well known in our history, was one of the most zealous persecutors of the reputation of Machiavelli. He brought together in a single volume all the slander and all the attacks that the immortal Florentine drew onto his works, and he thereby stopped the publication of a new edition of those works. The scholar Conringius, in publishing *The Prince* in 1660, proved that Possevino never read Machiavelli, but only interpreted him on the basis of what he had heard. (8: 64)

Possevino's error is in his singular dependence on hearsay, which produces an ignorant and harmful book about Machiavelli, whom Pushkin admires as an "immortal Florentine."

The story of Possevino confounds the attempt to read *Table Talk* as an unqualified endorsement of history-as-speech; it serves, too, as a reminder of the many ways *Table Talk* depends on written antecedents and participates in a literary tradition. Although anecdotal evidence in *Table Talk* is largely comprised of tales heard from others, some

¹⁴ Pushkin's title is, to be precise, "Table-talk," the hyphen and small "t" changes made from Coleridge's version (William Hazlitt, to name Pushkin's other possible source for the title, also spells it "Table Talk"). To avoid confusion, I have referred to Pushkin's and Coleridge's texts by a title spelled the same way.

¹⁵ This formulation owes much to the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, particularly as explicated by Emerson and Morson, who argue: "Bakhtin's central concept was 'unfinalizability' (*nezavershennost'*), his name for the human tendency to defy all that purports to be fixed and stable" (44).

¹⁶ Antonio Possevino, the Pope's Jesuit ambassador to Ivan the Terrible and the author of *Moscovia* (Antwerp, 1587).

specifically noted by their sources (for example, A. N. Golitsyn, N. K. Zagriazhskaia), there are also tales from written sources (for example, a correction of something Pushkin has read in Golikov). Moreover, Pushkin includes in his *Table Talk* literary criticism like the often quoted discussion of Shakespeare. *Table Talk* thus resists any attempt to name it as “talk” just as powerfully as it battles the continuous, unified narrative of most written history.¹⁷

For Coleridge, too, the boundaries between speech and writing are to be crossed and recrossed, but for an entirely different purpose. Here we compare the histories of the two texts. Pushkin's *Table Talk* consists of entries that he left in a single packet.¹⁸ Had Pushkin not died in 1837, there might have been more entries, perhaps an introduction, and we might have had a complete version edited by the author, rather than the posthumous collections now available. We can at least say with some certainty that Pushkin himself assembled the anecdotes and that he seems to have intended them for publication.¹⁹

Coleridge's *Table Talk* had an entirely different genesis. Whereas Pushkin himself wrote down the anecdotes that are presented as “talk,” Coleridge spoke them and someone else wrote them down. That in itself might not matter since, for example, Coleridge dictated his greatest work, the *Biographia Literaria*, and many other writers have used stenographers in ways that may or may not make problematic the question of spoken as opposed to written language.²⁰ He never saw his *Table Talk* in written form and may not even have known that it existed. His nephew and son-in-law, Henry Nelson Coleridge, produced the written text of *Table Talk* just after the writer's death, having recorded his uncle's thoughts for many years. Henry Nelson Coleridge's preface to *Table Talk* tells this story, explaining how it was surprisingly easy to remember and reconstruct Coleridge's exact words, and he makes it quite clear that the design and execution of *Table Talk* was entirely his

¹⁷ For an excellent discussion of “the ideology of ‘talk’” as it affected Pushkin's writings, see Todd (31-33). Without disputing Todd's point about the increased value placed on talk in the age of Pushkin, I make a somewhat different point—that *Table Talk* mixed notions of talk and writing to produce a text with the virtues of both.

¹⁸ The order of the anecdotes remains a matter of some uncertainty (which limits analysis of the text's structure). Raisa Iezuitova, a member of the Pushkin group in Pushkinskii Dom (Leningrad), has been puzzling over the order of the *Table Talk* anecdotes for years, trying to come up with an organization determined by their content or inner meanings.

¹⁹ Indeed, some of *Table Talk* appeared in Pushkin's journal *The Contemporary* (*Sovremennik* 3: 187-191).

²⁰ The history of how Coleridge wrote the *Biographia* is related in the editors' Introduction.

own doing.

Coleridge's *Table Talk* is, in this sense, more akin to memoirs by others that record Pushkin's conversations than to the Russian's *Table Talk*. Henry Nelson Coleridge himself modestly suggests the memoir or biographical model when he mentions Boswell's *Life of Johnson* in the preface. He writes, "A cursory inspection will show that these volumes lay no claim to be ranked with Boswell's in point of dramatic interest" (1: vii). But the difference is not generic, he claims: it is a question of the quality of Coleridge's mind—one less "gladiatorial" than Dr. Johnson's. The comparison between Johnson and Coleridge is meant to hold, not least because Henry Nelson Coleridge, like Boswell, makes available the words of a respected writer, words we would otherwise never know. Perhaps it is no accident that among the comments of Coleridge that his nephew took down are these:

July 4, 1833

Dr. Johnson's fame now rests principally upon Boswell. It is impossible not to be amused with such a book. But his *bow-wow* manner must have had a good deal to do with the effect produced; for no one, I suppose, will set Johnson before Burke, and Burke was a great and universal talker; yet now we hear nothing of this, except by some chance remarks in Boswell. The fact is Burke, like all men of genius who love to talk at all, was very discursive and continuous; hence he is not reported; he seldom said the sharp short things that Johnson almost always did, which produce a more decided effect at the moment, and which are so much more easy to carry off. Besides [...] Burke said and wrote more than once that he thought Johnson greater in talking than in writing, and greater in Boswell than in real life. (2: 111-112)

In a footnote Henry Nelson Coleridge helps us read this passage as an allegory of his own record of Coleridge's talk. "Burke, I am persuaded, was not so continuous a talker as Coleridge." If Coleridge is even less "quotable" than Burke, as the note goes on to demonstrate,²¹ then how great must be the task of keeping us interested in Coleridge's monologues.

Yet Coleridge's nephew is not trying to exaggerate his efforts on Coleridge's behalf. Though he may be thinking wishfully that these pages will prove as compelling as Boswell's life of Johnson, he hopes more specifically that he can elevate Coleridge's reputation in the way Burke describes Boswell's improvement of Johnson. The preface to *Table Talk* tells us explicitly what we might have deduced from Henry Nelson Coleridge's extensive apparatus of footnotes: the general

²¹ Henry Nelson Coleridge's lengthy footnote includes these thoughts on Coleridge's habit of delivering monologues: "'You must not be surprised,' he said to me, 'at my talking so long to you—I pass so much of my time in pain and solitude, yet everlastingly thinking, that, when you or any other persons call on me, I can hardly help easing my mind by pouring forth some of the accumulated mass of reflection and feeling, upon an apparently interested recipient'" (2: 112).

claim for Coleridge that "his exhibition of intellectual power in living discourse struck me at once as unique and transcendent" leads Henry Nelson Coleridge to hope that "something of the wisdom, the learning, and the eloquence of a great man's social converse has been snatched from forgetfulness, and endowed with a permanent shape for general use" (2: v-vi).

Yet the preface to *Table Talk* does not stop here. It is a 32-page essay, the last half of which is devoted to a defense of Coleridge against the charges of plagiarism recently published by Thomas de Quincey. The saga of Coleridge's extensive use of sources in his *Biographia* is perhaps too familiar to merit full rehearsal,²² though one might usefully pause over what the defense against plagiarism means for *Table Talk*. Henry Nelson Coleridge refutes de Quincey's attacks on his uncle (by arguing, for instance, that Coleridge simply confused pages of notes taken from other works with pages of his own ideas), and implicitly hopes that evidence of his uncle's originality and intelligence will speak for itself. The question becomes whether a literary reputation can be built on the basis not just of what someone wrote, but also what he said. Henry Nelson Coleridge wants to demonstrate that his uncle's use of uncited sources should not damage his reputation because, as records of his conversation show, Coleridge was a man of genius. *Table Talk* is designed to prove as much, in its breadth, complexity, fine articulations, and unique insights.

In the turn to his uncle's talk as evidence of his powerful mind, Henry Nelson Coleridge resembles Pushkin in his *Table Talk*. In both cases, the range of evidence about past and present is extended to include conversation; talk is recorded in the hope of influencing future readers in the judgments they might make about historical and literary figures. Both works dislodge the fixed division between speech and writing, not in order to privilege one or the other (which, even if it reversed tradition, would still keep speech and writing quite separate), but to remind readers how much these two modes of communication are interdependent.

A persuasive case could be made that the nephew is merely following his uncle's own principles when he claims that spoken discourse should be adduced in judging a writer's merits.²³ Coleridge suggests

²² See the editor's Introduction to the *Biographia* for a comparison of source texts with Coleridge's final text. A full presentation of the dispute can be found in the edition published by Sara Coleridge in 1848. For a brilliant post-structuralist reading of this "plagiarism," see Christensen 98-105.

²³ *Table Talk* also fits Coleridge's aesthetic principles in its fragmentariness and its presentation of broken-off bits of thought that are complete in themselves but connected to nothing in any explicit way.

his own preferences for speech in another reference to Dr. Johnson:

Dr. Johnson seems to have been really more powerful in discoursing "viva voce" in conversation than with his pen in hand. It seems as if the excitement of company called something like reality and consecutiveness into his reasonings, which in his writings I cannot see. (2: 140)

Throughout his writing, Coleridge's style and tone aspire to the simplicity of spoken speech; indeed, he and Wordsworth were famous for their manifesto, in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, stating that poetry should sound like a man talking to men. Among modern Coleridge scholars, Reeve Parker has notably shown how powerful was the concept of voice in Coleridge's writings. Parker addresses the problem of ventriloquism in Coleridge, a phenomenon helpful in analyzing Pushkin as well.

The quotation from Coleridge, "I have no admiration for the practice of ventriloquizing through another man's mouth," is a plea for unmediated discourse. Not only does Coleridge claim to dislike the plurality of voices, an important feature of Pushkin's *Table Talk*, but he also cares little for the voice that is not in full agreement with itself. Listen to Coleridge discussing Wordsworth's *Prelude* as it was supposed to have been written:

I cannot help regretting that Wordsworth did not first publish his thirteen books on the growth of an individual mind—superior, as I used to think, upon the whole, to the *Excursion*. You may judge how I felt about them by my own poem upon the occasion. Then the plan laid out, and, I believe partly suggested by me, was, that Wordsworth should assume the station of a man in mental repose, one whose principles were made up, and so prepared to deliver upon authority a system of philosophy. (2: 38)²¹

Coleridge may be remaking Wordsworth in his own image in preferring for Wordsworth a fixed intellectual position "in repose" from which a philosophical system can be constructed. Such is, indeed, Coleridge's habit of mind, though scarcely Wordsworth's—least of all in *The Prelude*. Yet Coleridge knows that he is, in fact, speaking of himself. The entry in *Table Talk* ends: "It is, in substance, what I have been all my life doing in my system of philosophy."

Coleridge's announced conclusions about his writing and thinking practices and the conclusions we might draw from a closer examination of the texts are not fully consistent. It is no small irony that Coleridge's statements about system and fixity come in comments

²¹ Coleridge reiterates the point about Wordsworth in the next noted comment:

I think Wordsworth possessed more of the genius of a great philosophic poet than any man I ever knew, or, as I believe, has existed in England since Milton; but it seems to me that he ought never to have abandoned the contemplative position, which is peculiarly, perhaps I might say exclusively, fitted for him. His proper title is, "Spectator ab extra." (2: 38-39)

about Wordsworth; as Paul Magnuson has demonstrated brilliantly, nowhere do we see the dialogical and open nature of Coleridge's thinking more vividly than in his lyrical conversation with Wordsworth.²⁵ Analysis by imagining other voices characterizes not only Coleridge's progress from one piece of writing to another, but also his mode of argumentation even as it is seen in *Table Talk*. Perhaps most important, the history of how *Table Talk* was produced, particularly the involvement of Henry Nelson Coleridge as amanuensis and editor, reproduces the dialogical quality of Coleridge's body of work. Within the flood of monologue that makes up *Table Talk* are streams of words uttered by others; the voices of Wordsworth, Burke, Boswell and many others create a world in which Coleridge speaks. Another extraordinary instance of this answering voice in Coleridge's oeuvre is his *Marginalia*, where the creation of a voice that speaks from the margins allows Coleridge immense freedom and productivity.²⁶ His voice, as Henry Nelson Coleridge recreated it for *Table Talk*, may be unitary and systematizing, but that is a fiction, the work of a man determined to show the original genius of his uncle's mind.

Compared with the expansive and impassioned tones that mark Coleridge's discourses, Pushkin's presence in *Table Talk* seems strangely minimal. Earlier I suggested that this self-effacement might be a political strategy; I conclude by pointing out how much, in fact, it is a habit. We can see this in the well-known tale of Pushkin's recitation of "Remembrance in Tsarskoe Selo" ("Vospominanie v Tsarskom Sele," 1814) before a visiting examiner in the Tsarskoe Selo Lyceum.²⁷ The visitor is the great classical poet Gabriel Derzhavin. The memoir, written at the end of 1835 though reconstructed from earlier notes, was also found in the packet marked *Table Talk*. The quotation reveals fascinating modulations of narrative presence:

I saw Derzhavin only once in my life but I will never forget it. This was in 1815 at the public examination in the Lyceum. When we found out that Derzhavin was coming, we all got excited. Del'vig came out onto the staircase in order to wait for him and to kiss the hand that had written "The Waterfall." Derzhavin arrived. He came into the entryway and Del'vig heard him ask the doorman: Where, my dear, is the John? This

²⁵ Magnuson's first chapter sets out the terms of his argument, that Coleridge and Wordsworth's lyrical poems were conceived as part of an intricate and continuing dialogue between the two of them. He also reviews the rich scholarly literature on the poets' long connection to each other.

²⁶ Like *Table Talk*, the *Marginalia* have not attracted much study in their own right, though they do provide the basis for an analysis of "The Marginal Method in the *Biographia Literaria*," in Christensen (96-117).

²⁷ I discuss this same passage in the conclusion of *Distant Pleasures*, where I develop the theory of reading Pushkin suggested here; see especially the chapter on the views of history embedded in the play *Boris Godunov* (1825).

prosaic question disenchanted Del'vig, who changed his mind and came back into the classroom. Del'vig told me this with surprising artlessness and gaiety.

Derzhavin was bored until the topic turned to Russian literature and he began to hear his own name repeated and praised. Pushkin continues:

At last I was called. I read my "Remembrance in Tsarskoe Selo," standing very close to Derzhavin. I am incapable of describing the condition of my soul: when I got to the lines that mention Derzhavin's name, my youthful voice started to ring out and my heart pounded in an intoxicating sense of ecstasy. . . I don't remember how I finished reading, nor where I ran. Derzhavin was thrilled; he asked for me, wanted to embrace me. . . They looked for me, but I was nowhere to be found. (8: 48)

Pushkin does two things here. First, he initially transfers the narrative duties to Del'vig, so that the whole first movement of the brief story, that of disenchantment, is seen from a perspective other than Pushkin's. In this transfer we recognize the desire for another's point of view familiar from *Table Talk*.

Second, when Pushkin must for narrative integrity place himself in the story, he actually writes himself out of it almost as soon as he appears. That day that Derzhavin visits the Lyceum is noteworthy not because of Del'vig's presence, but because it has been comprehended and codified as Pushkin's debut. The reading of "Remembrance in Tsarskoe Selo" is not omitted from Pushkin's text, but its inclusion is completely attenuated by the narrator's extraordinary self-consciousness and almost total amnesia. Pushkin, who recalled exactly how Derzhavin looked on that day, down to the type of boots he wore, now can tell us nothing of what he saw or felt, how he finished the reading or where he fled when it was over. This total omission of detail, save the single moment of self-consciousness when Pushkin mentions Derzhavin's name in the poem, is itself the signifying textual moment: Pushkin has nothing to tell of himself, even when he seems to be telling about an experience that was so profoundly *his*. Pushkin has fled his writings as precipitously as he escaped the examining room after reciting to Derzhavin, who was left, as we are, with only the memory of what Pushkin said. Our reflection, on finishing many Pushkin texts, is indeed that he is "nowhere to be found." Several modern writers have written on Pushkin's secrets, none, to my mind, better than Anna Akhmatova, yet his profoundest secret is finally his own lived experience.

In this he is strangely akin to Coleridge, whose *Table Talk* may have ended up recording his own talk, unlike Pushkin's, but whose attitudes toward writing about himself are not very different. Coleridge wished to flee from himself into philosophy, Pushkin into history or story. Coleridge succeeded in writing a kind of autobiography, but it is his

Biographia Literaria, where the writer most centrally under discussion is Wordsworth and the subject is not experience but writing.

Both *Table Talks* have been pushed into the footnotes of articles about more canonical texts because, in their different ways, they challenge the usual limits of the canon. In both cases, the desire to mediate writing with speech can be read as an attack on the very fixity that makes canons possible. For Coleridge, there remains the question of how much *Table Talk* is "his" text—a question that interlaces with central concerns in Coleridge studies, including plagiarism and the dialogue with Wordsworth. And as for Pushkin, we are left to ponder how much, in the renunciation of an authorial presence, Pushkin is inscribing his own unchanging signature on *Table Talk*—how much, for Pushkin, the disappearance of the author is the most characteristic mark of his presence.²⁸

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²⁸ On signature and autobiography, see de Man (70-71). For a splendid discussion of the figure of renunciation in de Man's work, see Mizumura.

²⁹ An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Soviet-American Pushkin conference at the Wilson Center, Kennan Institute, Washington, D. C. in January 1986. Comments from conference participants, particularly Caryl Emerson, Raisa Iezuitova, and Donald Fanger, helped me in making this revision.

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