
Deržavin before the Eclipse

May you not be eclipsed in the minds of men

...

Deržavin, "The Waterfall"

This book is the fruit of almost three years of work and of a longer period of studying and writing on the poetry of Deržavin. I regret that a life-threatening diagnosis and the rigors of cancer treatment have forced me to go to press somewhat earlier than I would ideally have wished. I do so, however, in the conviction that the work in its present form contains a new view of Deržavin and material that will prove useful for scholars of this poet and the poetry of the second half of the eighteenth century. Vladislav Xodaseviā's excellent biography of Deržavin is unsurpassed in its sympathetic presentation of the whole man—the administrator, the soldier, the senator, the minister, as well as son, husband, lover and friend. And in the midst of all these, as poet. The book provides a better analysis than subsequent "political" treatments of the poet's feelings about state matters and personalities, from the three tsars he served to the many magnates and officials with whom the poet had complex and tortured relations. The present book endeavors to do something that neither Deržavin in his autobiographical *Notes (Zapiski)* nor Xodaseviā in his biography, nor other monographic treatments of the poet, have attempted: to deal with several major and still unresolved issues in Deržavin studies within the confines of one volume. These major issues are the questions which resulted in this study, and I shall therefore phrase them as such: 1) What constitutes Deržavin's independence in poetic language and poetic innovation generally (his concept of verbal and lyric beauty)? 2) Upon what philosophical-religious or ethical basis (read: anthropology = concept of man) was Deržavin's aesthetics, as expressed in his serious poetry, founded? 3) What was the concept of the poet-powerful that Deržavin forged and how did it influence the institution of "leading" or "first" poet in Russia?

My answers to these questions are presented in two parts. Part 1, "From Innovations in Tone and Language to an Aesthetics of Power" (chapters 2–5), attempts to present Deržavin as he slowly developed his new aesthetics in his own time, before the appearance of Puškin on the poetic stage and, consequently, before any possibility of his being

“eclipsed” by Puškin’s greatness and the very different aesthetics of the Puškinian age. Part 2, “Elevation of the Status of Poet and Poetry: Deržavin’s Independence in the Moral Sphere” (chapters 6–11), forms a unified chronological narrative tracing Deržavin’s gradual but systematic elevation of the poet and poetry over more than three decades. In it many aspects of the peculiarly Russian institution of leading poet are shown to have been initiated by Gavriila Deržavin. Adequate answers to the vexed questions of Deržavin scholarship raised above are essential to an understanding of Deržavin’s aesthetic and moral independence and to an appreciation of the poet’s complex achievement. As the author of numerous discrete studies on Deržavin’s individual poems, I set out here to grapple with the larger issues in his oeuvre, broader trends and tendencies, that are not amenable to the article format. The division of my study into part 1—what Deržavin was as an artist and why, and part 2—how Deržavin recast the image of the poet and the impact that effort had on subsequent generations of Russian poets—in no way grants greater importance to either of these aspects. They are mutually self-supporting and I attempt to interrelate them throughout. I elected to put my concept of Deržavin as verbal artist first because the scholarly literature is still rife with facile and misinformed notions about Deržavin. The important Deržavin scholars, Grot, Harris, A. and V. Zapadov, Serman, Gukovskij, Hart, Alčšuller, whose insights are cited throughout my work, have in their time and works attempted to combat the same misconceptions.

Following in their footsteps, I do battle with facile, dismissive, and uninformed treatments of Deržavin once again, hopefully with as much or more passion and vigor than my predecessors. For Deržavin’s seminal importance has been “eclipsed in the minds of men,” even of Russian literary scholarship, as the poet feared it (as well as Potemkin’s in the quotation in the epigraph) would be. Of course, it can be countered that Deržavin knew he would be surpassed by a greater poet, and even contributed importantly to the reputation of Puškin, whose greatness, cult, and the single-minded idolatry of later critics are what eclipsed him. David Bethea, in his book *Realizing Metaphors*, begins to lift Deržavin from relative obscurity by showing the long shadow the man and his oeuvre cast upon the creative imagination of Aleksandr Puškin. Bethea is presenting us Deržavin as a great formative influence with which Puškin wrestled. I think it is high time to represent what Deržavin was in his own right and what he achieved before the Puškinian eclipse.

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