

Chapter 1

Deržavin's Last Poem and
M. Halle's First Literary
Essay

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Three days before his death, the great master of Russian poetic art Gavrila Romanovič Deržavin (1743–1816) wrote his brief parting message, an octet entitled “Na tlennosť” (“On Perishability”), which appeared for the first time in the periodical *Syn Otečestva*, XXXI, a few months after the author's decease.

The following transliteration of these eight lines, in agreement with standard phonetics at the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, cancels the distinction between *jat'* and *e*. The conservative rule that rejects the change of /*ě*/ to /*ó*/ must be followed in the recitation of Deržavin's lines and even more so in their analysis.

1. Reká vremén v svoém stremlén'í
 2. Unósit vsé delá ljuděj
 3. I tópit v própasti zabvén'ja
 4. Naródy, cárstva i carěj.
 5. A éšli čtó i ostaétsja
 6. Črez zvúki líry i trubý,
 7. To věčnosti žerlóm požrétsja
 8. I óbščej ne ujdét sud'by.
- (1. The river of times in its stream
2. Washes away all deeds of humans
3. And drowns in the abyss of oblivion
4. Peoples, kingdoms, and kings.
5. And if even something remains
6. Through the sounds of lyre and trumpet,
7. It will be devoured by the muzzle of eternity
8. And will not escape the common destiny.)

In my Harvard seminar on Russian poetics in 1951, Morris Halle observed that the initial letters of the eight lines of this poem form an acrostic that underscores the theme of the poem as expressed by its title. This acrostic consists of two words—RUINA ČTI ‘the ruin of glory’—one a gallicism and the other an Old Russian relic, both of which were familiar to the Russian readership of that epoch. Halle published his discovery and comments in the *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics*, I (1958), pp. 232–236, under the title “O nezamečenom akrostixe Deržavina” (“On an Unnoticed Acrostic of Deržavin”).

Attentive insight into the makeup of this concise meditative miniature shows the enormous filigree elaboration applied to all levels of its constituents, from the one-sentence quatrains and the couplets to the lines, feet, syllables, phonemes, and their components. Whatever the level of these constituents, they are always endowed with a semantic value.

The single subject of the first quatrain, the destructive power of the times, is metaphorically depicted as *reka vremen*, with the two transitive verbs, 2. *unosit* and 3. *topit*, as predicates, governing a double series of plural accusatives, 2. *dela* and 4. *narody, carstva i carej*. This first quatrain represents the dramatic events from the standpoint of their unnamed victim. The two pronominal subjects of the second stanza, the indefinite 5. *čto* and the anaphoric 7. *to*, refer to any victim by using the most generalized form, the singular neuter, accompanied by three intransitive verbal predicates (5. *ostaetsja*, 7. *žerlom požretsja*, 8. *ne ujdēt*), two of which are reflexive forms and the second of which is, moreover, a passive construction.

The dynamic image in the first stanza of time rapidly carrying away things and beings and dooming them to oblivion yields in the second stanza to the static image of everything sharing its common and inevitable destiny of disappearance, or in other, again metaphoric terms, of being swallowed by the muzzle of eternity (7. *večnosti žerlom*).

The active mind of the first quatrain is paralleled by the enriched intervals between the syllabic summits of the line, namely the disposition of the verses toward plentiful consonantal clusters, in particular four groups of four asyllabics (1. *vremen v svoem stremlen'ii*; 3. *topit v propasti*; 4. *carstva*), whereas the second quatrain lacks such clusters. On the other hand, the passive mind of the latter stanza seems to be paralleled by the phonemic scarcity of intervals between the syllabic summits of the line, namely a predilection for hiatus (5. *čto i ostaetsja*; 6. *liry i*; 8. *i obščej ne ujdēt*), whereas the first quatrain admits a hiatus solely at its end, in the transition to the next stanza (4. *carstva i*).

While the inclination toward clusters is attached to the first, and hiatus to the second, quatrain of the poem, the acrostic inverts this distribution: the vertical hiatus of *RUINA* corresponds to the middle lines, 2.–3., of the first quatrain, and the cluster *čti* to the middle lines, 6.–7., of the second quatrain. The dissimilarity between the two nouns of the acrostic is significant: the first noun contains a pair of vowels (*ui*) framed by two sonorants (*r—n*), and the second is an inflectional stem confined to voiceless plosives (*čt*). It is just this striking morphophonemic contrast of a vocalic preponderance syntactically superimposed upon bare consonantism that must have motivated the joint emergence of two unwonted vocables.

The concentration of attention in the first quatrain upon the consonantal pattern also finds its expression in abundant paronomasias (1. *REKÁ VREMÉN . . . STREMĚN'í*; 1. *SVOÉM*, 2. *VSE*; 2. *DELÁ LJUDĚJ*; 3. *TÓPít . . . PRÓPASTI*; 4. *NARÓDY*, *CÁRSTVA I CARĚJ*), as compared to the single sample of poetic etymology in the second quatrain (7. *ŽERLÓM POŽRĚTSJA*).

In the iambic tetrameters of the octet either all four even syllables (ictuses) are stressed, or one of the two inner ictuses (the second or third of the even syllables) is unstressed. In the penultimate line of each quatrain the unstressed ictus falls on the final syllable *sti* of a trisyllabic noun (3. *v propasti*; 7. *večnosti*); in all other cases the unstressed ictus indicates either an initial antepretonic syllable (5. *ostaetsja*) or—in the even (masculine) lines—a proclitic (4. *i carej*; 6. *i truby*; 8. *ne ujdét*).

Both of the two lines within a couplet display an identical relationship between stress and ictus. All even syllables are stressed in the two expressly scanned lines of the first couplet (1.–2.), and this severe scanning style is enhanced by the oxytonic phrasing of the entire line (1. *reká/ vremén/ v svoém/ stremlén'í*) and by beginning only one line of the whole poem with an oxytone. (Cf. *Glagól vremén* at the beginning of the epitaph “*Na smert' knjazja Meščerskogo*” written by Deržavin in 1779.)

The two lines of the octet's final couplet disclose the solemn style of classical tetrameters by leaving the fourth syllable unstressed (7. *to večnosti*; 8. *i óbščej ne ujdét*). The specificity of this couplet, which substitutes the motionless image of eternity for the initial dynamic picture of flowing times, finds its expression in the sudden perfectivization of the finites 7. *požrětsja*; 8. *ne ujdét*. The latter form is supplied with a negation, the only one in the poem, and is followed by the concluding adverbial genitive, which contrasts with the six adnominal genitives in the octet. The sole adjective of the poem (8. *óbščej*) functions as an attribute to this adverbial genitive. Rhymes such as 5. impf. *ostaetsja*—7. pf. *požrětsja* and 6. *zvúki . . . trúby*—8. *ne ujdét sud'bý* underscore the grammatical divergence of the

confronted words. Cf. 1. loc. *streměn'i*–3. gen. *zabvén'ja*; 2. gen. *ljuděj*–4. acc. *carěj*.

The four lines of the two inner couplets of the poem (3.–4. and 5.–6.) omit the stress on their sixth syllable, which is a characteristic of the narrative, colloquially oriented variety of the iambic tetrameter. These couplets also show certain syntactic similarities: the first line of the couplet contains the predicate, while the subsequent line is occupied by secondary parts of the sentence in the form of fused phrases (4. *naródy, cárstva i carěj*; 6. *črez zvúki líry i trubý*).

The pattern of stressed vowels in the even syllables corroborates the poetic unity of the octet and its significant division into a pair of stanzas. The “moderate” vowels, flat (rounded) *O* and nonflat (unrounded) *E*, occur in both quatrains. The compact (open) *A* is found only in the even lines of the first quatrain and at the beginning of the poem (*reká*). The diffuse (closed) vowels, the flat (rounded) *U* and the nonflat (unrounded) *I*, along with back *Y*, the contextual variant of the same phoneme, occur only in the even lines of the second quatrain. Moreover, the occurrence of *A* is limited to a position before a stressed *E* in the following word, and *U* requires a subsequent *I*. The last stressed vowel of any line is the nonflat member of the pair *O–E* or *U–I*. Thus the octet shows a general motion toward lower sonority and higher tonality. The words of the diiambic acrostic that sums up the plot of the octet, *ruína čti*, echo with their reiterated *I* the vocalic trend of the poem.

The limitations imposed by the octet on the admissible concurrences of grammatical categories for the sake of their higher semantic expressivity may be exemplified by the use of feminines (all inanimate) only in the singular and masculines solely in the plural: 1. *reká*, 3. *v prôpasti*, 6. *líry i trubý*, 7. *věčnosti*, 8. *sud'bý*; but 2. *ljuděj*, 4. *naródy*, *carěj*, 6. *zvúki*. The feminine singular forms in the acrostic (*ruína, čti*) show once more the close connection between the acrostic detected by Morris Halle and the poetics of Deržavin's octet.

The discoverer of *ruína čti* is correct in connecting the protracted inattention to this acrostic with the old surmise of viewing Deržavin's octet as merely an uncompleted fragment (Halle (1958)). This surmise in turn is based on the unusualness of short poems in Deržavin's legacy. Yet it must be taken into account that it is precisely the singular brevity of Deržavin's farewell poem that explains and expiates its extraordinary condensation of artistic devices.