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RUSSIAN POETS ON DEATH AND THE DEAD*

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The article addresses the image of death as created by Russian poets of the late 18th – early 19th centuries. The author analyses both traditional and innovative elements of this image in works by Derzhavin, Zhukovsky, Baratynsky, and Lermontov. Six poems, namely Derzhavin's *On the Death of Prince Meshchersky*, Zhukovsky's *The Rural Cemetery*, Baratynsky's *The Skull and Death*, and Lermontov's *Death (Broken is the Chain of a Young Life)* and *Death (Caressed by Flourishing Dreams)*, constitute the objects of this paper. The initial assumption is that the works of Lermontov manifested two tendencies inherent in Russian poetry: a division between body and soul and a keen interest in the processes that occur to each entity after death. There is no description of 'the other world' where the soul goes after death in the poems by Derzhavin, Zhukovsky, and Baratynsky. All three authors underline the inevitability of death and its equalising properties. However, while Derzhavin describes the transition from life to death using contrasting descriptions of the two states, Zhukovsky stresses the fruits of toil achieved by previous generations. Baratynsky's poems place prominent emphasis on the inevitability and regulatory function of death. He offers a very naturalistic description of the posthumous state of a dead body. Death itself is presented as an element indispensable for regulating the universe. The author considers Lermontov's lack of concern for the equalising properties of death and his attempts to give minute descriptions of various aspects of dying. This poet was fascinated by the transition between life and death. Just like Derzhavin, Lermontov seems to have a special interest in the separation of body and soul. In Lermontov's early poems, death serves as a background for his pessimistic perception of the world. The variety of manifestations of death gives Russian poetry a philosophical character.

Keywords: 18th- and 19th-century Russian poetry; theme of death; G. Derzhavin; V. Zhukovsky; Ye. Baratynsky; M. Lermontov.

Рассматривается трактовка образа смерти русскими поэтами конца XVIII – начала XIX в. Проанализированы элементы преемственности и новатор-

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ства в развитии образа. Объектом исследования стали стихотворения «На смерть князя Мещерского» Г. Державина, «Сельское кладбище» В. Жуковского, «Череп» и «Смерть» Е. Баратынского, «Смерть (“Оборвана цепь жизни молодой”）」 и «Смерть (“Ласкаемый цветущими мечтами”）」 М. Лермонтова. Выбор произведений обусловлен целью выделить общие и сугубо оригинальные черты в творчестве поэтов этого периода. Исходным послужил тезис, что в творчестве Лермонтова окончательно закрепились две тенденции, характерные для русской поэзии: разделение души и тела и интерес к процессам, происходящим с каждой из этих сущностей после смерти. Отмечено, что Державин, Жуковский и Баратынский не вводят в произведения тему «иного мира». Авторы, подчеркивая неизбежность смерти, отводят ей уравнивающую роль. Но если у Державина переход от живого к неживому передается через обращение к контрастным описаниям двух состояний, то Жуковский делает упор на плоды трудов ушедших поколений. В творчестве Баратынского акцентирована мысль о непознаваемости смерти и ее регулятивной функции. В его произведениях возникает натуралистичное изображение посмертного состояния тела. Сама смерть представлена как необходимый для упорядочения мироздания элемент. Уникальность разработки этой темы Лермонтовым, по мысли автора, заключается в том, что его не занимала идея об уравнивающей роли смерти, однако для него был важен посмертный опыт души. Как и Державин, обращаясь к моменту перехода от живого к неживому, особое внимание поэт уделяет процессу отделения души от тела. В его ранних произведениях мотив смерти является скорее фоном для выражения пессимистического восприятия мира. Многообразие проявления темы смерти придает философское звучание русской поэзии.

Ключевые слова: русской поэзия XVIII–XIX вв.; тема смерти; Г. Державин; В. Жуковский; Е. Баратынский; М. Лермонтов.

Upon studying Lermontov's work, I found that the presence or absence of a soul is a very important element in his description of death. Based on this distinction, the poet creates two different worlds in his poems. One regards the physical aspects of death, where corpses are strewn around. These materialistic descriptions can be repulsive, carefully depicting skulls and bones while birds and animals devour the dead flesh. In such scenes, it does not matter whose flesh it is: the dead bodies of human beings, wild animals, and horses are treated alike, as inanimate objects.

On the other hand, along with this materialistic aspect of death, Lermontov also portrays the spiritual realm, which often reflects the poet's idealistic notions. Such a world is described in the song of a goldfish in “Mtsyri” and in the dreams of the narrator in “I Go Out Alone On the Road” [Ямадзи, с. 4]. The idea that death is inseparable from the soul was also presented by Vladimir Dal': for him, the soul was ‘an immortal spiritual being endowed with mind and will’ [Даль, с. 504].

In my opinion, the works of Lermontov manifest the two contradictory views of death characteristic of Russian poetry. I suggest tracing this

binomial opposition in the works of some other Russian poets. It is also interesting to analyse how these writers express their feelings towards the deceased. I argue that the poets facing a soulless ‘thing’ – a dead body – still address the spirit that once inhabited it. Thus, the corpse evokes thoughts of the soul. I am well aware that the poets examined in this article utilised different literary styles. However, rather than concentrating on the various properties of these styles, I analyse features inherent within the Russian poetic tradition.

The image of death in works by Russian poets

Let us start with Derzhavin’s poem “Monody on the Death of Prince Meshcherski” (1779), which D. D. Blagoj calls ‘one of the most important’ works of this author [Благой, с. 282–283]. Here the poet ponders death and its meaning. Central to the poem is the theme of time. Its progress is irreversible and leads to death. Death here is viewed as an entity that makes all people, animals, and even inanimate things equal.

Terras calls the very first lines (*Глагол времён! металла звон!* [Державин, с. 124–126]) ‘the terrifying voice of death’ [Terras, p. 99]. In my opinion, this ‘clanging’ alliteration and rhythm are supposed to allow the reader to feel time’s passage. It is this passing of time that brings living beings closer to death: *Зовет меня, зовет твой стон, / Зовет – и к гробу приближает* (‘Each beat of the clock summons me / Calls me and hurries me to grave’).¹ The motif of interconnection between time and death recurs throughout this work: *А завтра: где ты, человек? / Едва часы протечь успели...* (‘And to-morrow where art thou, Man? Scarce an hour of triumph allowed thee’). Death is depicted as a phenomenon encountered by everyone. There are multiple instances where this poem stresses the omnipotence of death.² *Ничто от роковых кохтей, / Никакая тварь не убегает* (Not one of the horned beasts of the field, Not a single blade of grass escapes (it)). Then, a few lines later: ‘Stars are shivered by him, And suns are momentarily quenched’ (*И звезды ею сокрушатся, / И солнца ею потушатся...*). At the beginning, we also see: ‘And empires are swallowed up by greedy Death’ (*Глохнет царства алчна смерть*). Thus, ‘monarchs’ and ‘beggars’, ‘stars’ and ‘suns’, all living creatures and worlds cannot avoid death. Mashevskij describes it as the only constant of the universe [Машевский, с. 213]. Derzhavin thus thoroughly depicts the equalising qualities of death.

Developing this central theme, the poet also portrays the realistic, material aspect of death. Man is ‘food for the worm’ (*снесь червей*), a ‘mixture of grandeur and nothingness’ (*гордость с бедностью совместна*). Derzhavin addresses the separation of body and soul (‘Thy dust is here, but thy

¹ The translation is by C. E. Turner in Leo Wiener’s *Anthology of Russian Literature: From the Tenth Century to the Close of the Eighteenth Century*. See: [Wiener, p. 382–385].

² On the compositional technique of heightening the importance of images subject to death, see: [Орлов, с. 187].

soul no more' (*Здесь персть твоя, а духа нет*)), but admits his inability to describe the ideal world where the spirit has gone: 'Where is it? It is there. Where is there? We know not' (*Где ж он? – Он там. – Где там? – Не знаем*). One can see here the spirit of the epoch as described by Lotman: 'traditional... Orthodox Christian conceptions were influenced by the deistic and sceptical ideas of the Enlightenment' [Лотман, с. 210]. In other words, society started to doubt the dogmatic understanding of Paradise and Hell. Derzhavin gives more details on the posthumous fate of the soul in "Waterfall" (1791–1794): 'What kind of wondrous spirit swoops / With its wings from the North to the South? / The wind is too slow to flow its paths; / And catches kingdoms at a single glance...' (*Какой чудесный дух крылами / От севера парит на юг? / Ветр медлен течь его стезями; / Обозревает царствы вдруг...* [Державин, с. 180]). According to Harsha Ram, Potemkin's soul visits the places of its worldly glory in these lines [Ram, p. 94]. In the monody under consideration, the author also tries to capture the moment of transition from life to death: 'They who are radiant with health, love and joy and peace / Feel their blood run cold' (*Утехи, радость и любовь / Где купно с здравием блистали, / У всех там цепенеет кровь*). Equally, he explores how death affects the living: a 'banquet table' (*стол*) turns into a 'coffin' (*гроб*), 'cries of revelry' (*лики пиршеств*) transform into the 'wailing of mourners' (*надгробные клики*). In all these examples, the author is fascinated with the change that accompanies the death of a living being. This includes both the change that occurs in the person himself ('Feel their blood run cold / And their souls to be fretted with woe' (*У всех там цепенеет кровь / И дух мятется от печали*)) and the change that occurs in the lives of the people around them. For us in our modern times, the bodily change known as death is natural, but Russian poets of the past tried to describe it via various familiar expressions. This shows how deeply they were struck by the changes that death brings to the body.

V. A. Zhukovsky's "The Rural Cemetery: an Elegy" (1802) is a translation of Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1750). Although the Russian poet only significantly changed the last verse, it is amazing how naturally this English poem fits the Russian tradition. Here one can see the same idea characteristic of Derzhavin's view, that death is impartial and comes to all: 'Death rages at everyone – at the famous tsar / This menacing thing searches for everyone... and will eventually find / Omnipotent rules of fate are unshakable: / the way of grandeur leads us to the coffin' (*На всех ярится смерть – царя, любимца славы, / Всех ищет грозная... и некогда найдет; / Всемошняя судьбы незыблемы уставы: / И путь величия ко гробу нас ведет!*) [Жуковский, с. 43–47].³ In Zhukovsky's work, the theme of death also encompasses isolation and the possibility of communication between the dead and the living. The lyrics suggest that a cemetery is a place where this is possible.

³ The translation of the Russian text is my own. – A. Y.

The poem begins with a scene of a quiet rural sunset: ‘Silence is everywhere; dead sleep is everywhere, / An evening beetle buzzes from time to time, / And a distant sound of horns comes from afar. <...> Here, closed for eternity in solitary coffins / forefathers of the village / sleep with no chance of waking’ (*Повсюду тишина; повсюду мертвый сон; / Лишь изредка, жужжа, вечерний жук мелькает, / Лишь слышится вдали рогов унылый звон. / <...> / Здесь праотцы села, в гробах уединенных / Навеки затворясь, сном непробудным спят*). Unlike Derzhavin’s poem, where the ‘sound’ of time rules, here silence has dominion. The sounds that do appear in “Rural Cemetery” – the buzz of a beetle, the distant sounds of horns, the lamentations of an owl – only help to create an atmosphere of quiet. In “Monody...”, the clicking sounds of time are associated with imminent approach of Death. In “Cemetery...”, however, the silence is not disturbed throughout the whole narrative: ‘The quiet voice of dawn, the breath of a young day, / No cry of a cock, no sonorous hum of horns, / No chirping of an early swallow on a rooftop...’ (*Денницы тихий глас, дня юного дыханье, / Ни крики петуха, ни звучный гул рогов, / Ни ранней ласточки на кровле щебетанье*). The silence here may be interpreted as the acceptance of death. It also emphasises the difference between the dead and the living: ‘Nothing will summon the dead from their coffins’.

The poet pays special attention to whether communication between the dead and the living is possible. The dead belong to the past, they are buried in history. Zhukovsky describes the successes they achieved while alive: ‘Oh, so often reaped their sickles the golden field / And their plough conquered stubborn fields! / Oh, so often trembled leafy grove at the sight of their axes, / And their sweat besprinkled the land!’ (*Как часто их серпы золотую ниву жали / И плуг их побеждал упорные поля! / Как часто их секир дубравы трепетали / И потом их лица кропилися земля!*). The poet’s respect for the work done by the dead is obvious. However, at the same time, the author points out the inability of the dead to interact with anything living: ‘The sparkling and crackling fire of a smoky hearth / Will not gladden them on winter evenings, / And playful children, rushing to greet them, / Will not seek their kisses’ (*На дымном очаге трескучий огонь, сверкая, / Их в зимни вечера не будет веселить, / И дети резвые, встречать их выбегая, / Не будут с жадностью лобзаний их ловить*).

Nonetheless, Zhukovsky also points out that not all of the living give the dead their due: ‘Let slaves of vanity humiliate their (the dead’s) fate, / Mocking in their own blindness that useful labour / Let those slaves listen in cold contempt / To the deeds of the dead, hiding in humility’ (*Пускай рабы сует их жребий унижают, / Смеясь в слепоте полезным их трудам, / Пускай с холодностью презрения внимают / Таящимся во тьме убогого дела*). The poet reasons that the ‘humility’ of the dead results from the social injustice that denied them access to education. It is not their fault. They just happened to be born to such a fate: ‘But the shrine of education, built by centuries, / Was closed for them by morose fate, / That same fate burdened them with chains of mediocrity, / Their

genius is killed by severe poverty' (*Но просвещения храм, воздвигнутый веками, / Угрюмою судьбой для них был затворен, / Их рок обременил убожества цепями, / Их гений строгою нуждою умерщвлен*). The isolation of the living from the dead is instilled by the condition of the latter. The horror of that condition is portrayed in every tiny detail: 'dead, rotten bones' (*мертвые, истлевшие кости*), 'cold ashes of ours' (*угасший пепел наш*), 'tender, loving heart turned to dust' (*прах сердца нежного, умевшего любить*), 'a worm – the coffin-dweller – nests in the dried-out head' (*гробожитель-червь в сухой главе гнездится*).

In spite of such isolation, communication between the souls of the living and those of the dead seems to be possible. It has nothing to do with the richness of the decorations on their graves. On the contrary, gaudy luxury should be avoided: 'The dead don't sleep sweeter under a marble slab, / A haughty mausoleum does nothing but burdens their flesh' (*Не слаще мертвых сон под мраморной доскою; / Надменный мавзолей лишь персть их бременит*). Communication between the dead buried in this cemetery and the living can occur in several ways. For example, a person can be moved by the modesty of the deceased: 'And sleep here in peace under protection of a grave – / And a modest stone amidst thick fur-trees / With humble words and plain carvings / Invites a passer-by to sigh over the dead' (*И здесь спокойно спят под сенью гробовой – / И скромный памятник, в приюте сосн густых, / С непышной надписью и резьбою простою, / Прохожего зовет вздохнуть над прахом их*). The cemetery is a place where those who tenderly remember the dead can communicate with them: 'Their heart hears the dear voice in our grave; / To them, our gravestone has a soul; / To them, our dead ashes breathe in this cold urn; / To them, it is ablaze with love' (*Их сердце милый глас в могиле нашей слышит; / Наш камень гробовой для них одушевлен; / Для них наш мертвый прах в холодной урне дышит, / Еще огнем любви для них воспламенен*).

The poem finishes with sentimental words about a dead youth who left this world too early (*безвременно*). Instead of symbolising the end of life, this scene shows the connection between the living and the dead. Instrumental to this understanding is the prayer of a passer-by at this grave. The grave itself is not only 'a shelter from all earthy worries' (*приют от всех земных тревог*) and a place to leave 'everything that was sinful' (*все, что в нем греховно было*). It is also a connection point between the living and the dead and proof that the young man did indeed exist. It is important to mention that the original verse did not have any reference to the grave as a point of connection between the two worlds or a place to shed 'everything sinful': 'No farther seek his merits to disclose / Or draw his frailties from their dread abode / (There they alike in trembling hope repose) / The bosom of his Father and his God' [Gray, p. 32]. Except for this 'ad-libbing', Zhukovskiy's translation is very faithful to the original. It still sounds absolutely natural within the system of conceptions about death characteristic of Russian poets. Moreover, the outstanding Russian critic

Vladimir Solovyov called this elegy ‘the motherland of Russian poetry’ [Соловьёв, с. 178–180]. Agafonova explains this phenomenon by the fact that ‘one of the tendencies particular to the translations of poetry at the beginning of the 19th century was the russification of the work translated’ [Агафонова, с. 8].

The problem of similarities in the literary interpretation of death in Russia and abroad is worthy of a separate analysis, which is beyond the scope of this article; however, we can suggest some explanation. First, Russian literature developed as an integral part of European literature and, as such, shared (both absorbed and bestowed) tendencies within this cultural space. Ram goes so far as to insist that the popularity of elegy as a genre in Russia started with this piece [Ram, p. 177]. Secondly, it is possible that this particular poem by Thomas Gray expressed ideas which were very natural to Russian culture. This might have played a role in Zhukovsky’s choice to translate this poem in the first place.

In “The Skull” (1824) by E. A. Baratynsky, the view of death is more detached. As was pointed out by some of the poet’s contemporaries, such an approach allows for the deeper philosophical content of the poem [Голубева]. Baratynsky seems to be deeply fascinated with this subject. A very similar attitude towards death can be found in Lermontov’s poems, which we shall analyse later.

“The Skull” is written from the point of view of a person whose brother’s grave was dug up and destroyed. The poet is adamant that the sleep of the dead deserves the utmost respect: ‘Deceased brother! Who disturbed your sleep? / Who scorned the sanctity of grave?’ (*Усопший брат! кто сон твой возмутил? / Кто пренебрег святынею могильной?*) [Баратынский, с. 47]. His harsh criticism of those lacking respect for the dead can be seen in the words he uses to describe young people laughing at the side of the grave: ‘a crowd of young madmen’ (*толпа безумцев молодых*). At the same time, the poem’s narrator cannot help commenting on how ugly and scary the dead look: ‘I took your yellow and dusty skull! / It still was wearing vestiges of hair; / I saw on it the slow course of decay’ (*Я в руки брал твой череп желтый, пыльный! / Еще носил волос остатки он; / Я зрел на нем ход постепенный тленья*).

Unlike Zhukovsky, who was trying to establish points of contact between the living and the dead, Baratynsky portrays the mutual isolation of the two worlds. The wistful desire “I wish your head... suddenly professed!” (*Когда б... Глава твоя внезапно провещала!*) is left unfilled: in the next stanza, the idea of revival is quickly rejected. This implies that there is an insurmountable border between the dead and the living. Its very existence commands mutual respect between the living and the dead: ‘You, who’s alive, go on living; you, who’s dead, peacefully turn to dust!’ (*Живи, живой, спокойно тлей, мертвец!*). The line between the two is clearly defined: ‘One cannot place under the same law / Both the bustle of world and the silence of cemetery! / A wise man cannot stifle natural feelings / Or get a response from coffins’ (*Не подчинишь одним законам ты / И света*

шум, и тишину кладбища! / Природных чувств мудрец не заглушит / И от гробов ответа не получит). Death is not something to be taught by the dead. A living being can only comprehend it at the very moment of becoming dead: 'Let life give pleasures to the living, / It will be Death that'll teach them how to die' (*Пусть радости живущим жизнь дарит, / А смерть сама их умереть научит*). This means that death is absolutely incomprehensible for the living. This poem has no references to the ideal world of death. However, the poetic legacy of Baratynsky does contain the notion of a distinction between the body and soul. It can be found in the later poem "You are useless, days!" (*На что вы, дни!...*, 1840), although the narrator is still alive [Гинзбург, 1974, с. 86]. Despite this insurmountable line between the living and the dead, Baratynsky seems to experience a feeling of closeness to death. Four years later, he wrote the poem "Death". Some researchers of the Soviet era saw this poem as the triumph of the pessimism that gripped the poet upon the defeat of the Decembrist movement [Степанов, с. 35]. However, we see nothing negative in this 1828 poem. The very association of death with the grave is rejected: "Oh, daughter of Highest Aether!" (*О, дочь верховного эфира!*) [Баратынский, с. 64]. In Russian culture, death is personified by a woman, hence this reference. The poet continues: 'Oh, bright beauty! / You have an olive branch of peace in your hand, / And not a killing scythe' (*О, светозарная краса! / В руке твоей олива мира, / А не губящая коса*). He explains the striking effectiveness of death. Like the poets of the past, Baratynsky addresses the universal impartiality of death, although he mainly concentrates on its effects: 'Only due to righteous you / Different fates of human beings are reconciled. / You caress with the same hand / Both the master and the slave' (*Дружится праведной тобою / Людей недружная судьба: / Ласкаешь тою же рукою / Ты властелина и раба*). Death is the entity which the 'Lord entrusted with keeping the world in order' (*В твоё хранение всемогущий / Его [мира] устройство поручил*). It has limitless power and magnanimity, and is able to 'quell a hurricane, raising with enormous force' (*укрощать восстающий в безумной силе ураган*) or 'force back an ocean' (*вспять возвращать океан*). Vocharov noted the regulating function of death in this poem [Бочаров, с. 329]. Tojbin has pointed out that the limits which death sets on living beings here serve the greater good: 'You set limits to plants / So that a huge forest / Doesn't cover the land with harmful shade' (*Дайшь пределы ты растеньям, / Чтоб не покрыл гигантский лес / Земли губительною тенью*) [Тойбин, с. 357]. One of the main gifts of death is 'the answer to all riddles' (*всех загадок разрешение*) and 'liberation from all chains' (*разрешение всех цепей*).

As for Lermontov, he was fascinated by death from early youth. He wrote a lot of poems on the subject. Very often, it served as a background for some other themes. For example, in his poem "Cemetery" (1830) [Лермонтов, с. 126], the main topic is misanthropy, while in "Death (The Sunset burns like a fiery strip...)" (1830) it is lost love [Лермонтов, с. 173]. Some critics state that death is depicted as complete disappearance from the Universe in

the latter work [Кедров, с. 311]. The former poem is set in a cemetery, while the second is built around presuppositions about what will happen when the author dies [Чистова, с. 511]. “Death (The chain of young life is broken...)” (1830–1831) [Лермонтов, с. 283] continues this tendency but also shows a new element in Lermontov’s treatment of death. Although the main topic here is the feeling of revulsion for life (pessimism), the author also makes an attempt to fathom what lies beyond life. Pessimism is introduced by the concept of death. The reader can find in the lyrics a hint that this pessimism is caused by a woman: ‘Is it really possible that right before my demise / The treacherous love of women will seduce me again?’ (*Ужели дев коварная любовь / Прельстит меня перед кончиной вновь?*). Love here is a turmoil, compared to which death is a lesser evil [Голованова, с. 511].

The world of death here is described by negation: ‘Where there’s no expectations, no passions, / No bitter tears, no fame, no honours’ (*Где нет ни ожиданий, ни страстей, / Ни горьких слез, ни славы, ни чести*). ‘Recollection’ (*воспоминание*) sleeps a deep sleep here. Even ‘the heart... doesn’t feel that a worm gnaws at it’ (*сердце... не чувствует, что червь его грызет*). The state of death is described in a way that is scary and painful for the reader. However, the narrator does not even understand death in this way: he thus creates a world where the mere existence of feelings is denied. One can say that the structure of the poem contributes to a perception that the more frightening the world of death is, the more apparent the misanthropy of the poet becomes. Even such a dreadful state is better than people: ‘Let hell itself engulf me, / I would rejoice at suffering, / Twice as much as I suffered in the past, / But farther, farther from people’ (*Пушкой меня обхватит целый ад, / Пусть буду мучиться, я рад, я рад, / Хотя бы вдвое против прошлых дней, / Но только дальше, дальше от людей*).

Compared to this and other similar works, the poem “Death (Caressed by flowery dreams)” (1830–1831) brings death to the foreground and shows it as a multi-layered phenomenon. The first layer is constituted by the early impressions of a dying person. The narrator suddenly feels that ‘... death with its cold breath / Has started to cool my blood’ (*Казалось мне, что смерть дыханьем хладным / Уж начинала кровь мою студить*) [Лермонтов, с. 292]. Further on, one can see two separate entities, the body and the soul. The poet depicts the feelings of each of these entities as they separate: My heart was beating rarely but strongly, / With a kind of sick tremor, / And my body, facing its end, was trying / To restrain impulses of my impatient soul, / But the soul was listening to its former friend / With annoyance, and reproaches / Made it a sad parting (*Не часто сердце билось, но крепко, / С болезненным каким-то содроганьем, / И тело, видя свой конец, старалось / Вновь удержать души нетерпеливой / Порывы, но товарищу былому / С досадою душа внимала, и укоры / Их расставанье сделали печальным*).

It is the second stage of dying. Death is presented as the separation of the body and soul. Left without its ‘friend’, the soul becomes an independent

entity and is dismayed at first: I could not / Understand, how possibly could bliss / Or bitter sufferings be experienced so far away / From the land where I first realised / That I was alive and my life was boundless, / Where I sought self-knowledge so eagerly, / Where I loved so many and lost so much, / Where I loved in accordance with this perishable body, / Without which I couldn't comprehend love (*Я не мог / Понять, как можно чувствовать блаженство / Иль горькие страдания далеко / От той земли, где в первый раз я понял, / Что я живу, что жизнь моя безбрежна, / Где жадно я искал самопознания, / Где столько я любил и потерял, / Любил согласно с этим бранным телом, / Без коего любви не понимал я*).

In this verse, the separation of the body and soul is expressed powerfully and definitively.

However, dismay soon turns into an experience bordering on spiritual awakening: 'I thought like that and suddenly lost train of thought, / And in a moment I was alive again, / But I didn't see the earthly / Things around me and I no longer remembered / The pain or onerous worries / About my future fate and death' (*Так думал я, и вдруг душой забылся, / И чрез мгновенье снова жил я, / Но не видал вокруг себя предметов / Земных, и более не помнил я / Ни боли, ни тяжелых беспокойств / О будущей судьбе моей и смерти*). Life on earth is recollected as nothing more than 'a brief exile'. At that point, the soul is suddenly made to leave the ideal world of death and is sent back to the earth. After that, as in the previous poem, the author's misanthropy reappears.

The narrator turns to the physical world of death, another facet of post-mortem experiences: 'The first / Thing was a grave with a pompous mausoleum, / Under which people buried my corpse' (*Первый / Предмет – могила с пышным мавзолеем, / Под коим труп мой люди схоронили*). In there he faces his own corpse, the description of which is naturalistically frightening: 'In the place, where my corpse was decaying, I stayed. / Here and there I noticed a bone or hanging / lumps of bluish meat or veins / With blood dried solid inside them. / I was sitting and viewing with desperation / Swift insects swarming / And eating the food of death greedily. / A worm was crawling out of eye sockets / And disappearing again into the ugly skull' (*Где гнил мой труп, и там остался я. / Здесь кость была уже видна, здесь мясо / Кусками синее висело, жилы там / Я примечал с засохшею в них кровью. / С отчаяньем сидел я и взирал, / Как быстро насекомые роились / И жадно поедали пищу смерти. / Червяк то выползал из впадин глаз, / То вновь скрывался в безобразный череп*).

One's own soul witnessing the state of one's own dead body... after such a frighteningly realistic description of death's physical aspects, Lermontov portrays the agony of the soul who has to witness them: 'And so what? Its (the worm's) every movement / Was tormenting me with spastic pain. / I had to watch the ruin of my friend, / Who had lived for so long with my soul, / My last, my only friend / Who shared the soul's grief and joy, / I wished to help, but all in vain, in vain' (*И что же? Каждое его движенье / Меня терзало судорожной болью. / Я должен был смотреть на гибель*

друга, / Так долго жившего с моей душою, / Последнего, единственного друга, / Делившего ее печаль и радость, / И я помочь желал, но тщетно, тщетно).

The awful process of physical decay and the soul's vain efforts to stop it continue to the end of the poem. The maggots breed and eat foul-smelling skin and bones: all that is left is dust. The soul tries to warm these wretched remains with his breath, but cannot. The poem finishes with a scene where 'the witness of cruel destruction' goes to blaspheme the Creator, but then wakes up. This part of the poem is often explained by the influence of Byron's poetry [Мотовилов, с. 511; см. также: Гинзбург, 1940, с. 109; Фёдоров, 1967, с. 324–325]. However, some researchers insist that Lermontov's verses are deeper and more expressive than those of the English poet [Фёдоров, 1941, с. 184–186].

It is necessary to stress that Lermontov, who maintains the dichotomy of body and soul, defines their relationship as friendly. The soul here fulfils two functions. First, it objectively registers the physical processes that take place in the corpse. Secondly, it desperately tries to stop them. Many literary critics point to the deep philosophical content of the poem, especially in connection with the poet's young age at the time of its creation [Эйхенбаум, с. 334; Фёдоров, 1967, с. 323].

Let me digress by saying that in this work, as well as the later "Dream (In noon's heat, in a dale of Dagestan)" (1841), the themes of sleep and death are interwoven. Moreover, in "Death (The sunset burns like a fiery strip)", the poet speaks about the dissolution of his soul in infinity. Both phenomena are mentioned in an encyclopaedic dictionary written half a century later by Brockhaus and Efron (*душа*, см.: [Брокгауз, Ефрон]). However, they discuss the connection between sleep, death, and the dissolution of the soul in infinity in terms of ancient beliefs. I treat this coincidence as evidence of Lermontov's wonderful ability (conscious or unconscious) to 'process' and re-examine creatively ideas that 'are in the air'.

In my research, I have analysed some poems by outstanding Russian poets and come to the following conclusions. First of all, they all attempt to portray the physical aspects of death in its tiniest details and with the most appropriate expressions. Each of them has naturalistic depictions of corpses. In all cases, the reader gets an impression of a 'thing' abandoned by the soul. Every description shows the real and brutal consequences of death. There is also a common tendency to focus on the state of the corpse, the progress of decay. One can feel the bewilderment that the poets experience at the thought that a person, after death and decay, turns into something absolutely different. One may see here the reflection of views characteristic of 18th-century Russian society which regarded the body as something perishable. Those views can be seen in a real epitaph. On the grave of Ivan Neplyuev, a statesman during Peter I's epoch, were found the words: '...the body decays and turns into dust' [Лотман, с. 213–214]. On the other hand, all of the poets under consideration insist on the dichotomy inherent between the body and the soul. The Japanese critic Kimura Takashi

argued that such ideas arose in different cultures because people could not accept their own mortality [Кимура, с. 82]. The same dichotomy is postulated in Christianity. In Ecclesiastes, the Bible says: 'and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it' [Еккл. 12 : 7]. However, in many cases the poets re-examine this dogma creatively and use it as a literary technique. For example, in Lermontov's poem, the soul witnesses the details of a corpse's decay. It is possible that the poet wanted to draw his readers' attention to the physical aspects of death. For him a soulless body is nothing but a thing, an object of observation.

Of special interest is the insight into death's egalitarianism. It visits all people without any exception, regardless of financial or social status. We can find this postulate in works by all of the poets except Lermontov. No matter how noble or insignificant a person is, he or she cannot escape death. The fact that the poets felt it necessary to elaborate on this self-evident phenomenon speaks volumes of their ideas about contemporary social and financial inequality. All the unfairness of this world disappears at the end of life because of death. Derzhavin, Zhukovsky, and Baratynsky seem to be fascinated with the fact that people with many different lifestyles are reduced to absolutely the same process of decay after death. They tend to generalise their ideas on death, while Lermontov is more interested in particularities. He concentrates his efforts on detailed descriptions of the various aspects of death.

The spectrum of people whose deaths are described illustrates that death was an integral part of life for the poets. At the same time, their inability to communicate with the dear deceased caused profound pain. Some poets saw the cemetery as a place where such communication might be possible. Others felt that the border between life and death is insurmountable. Zhukovsky was among the former, while Baratynsky is a representative of the latter. Baratynsky calls death 'liberation'. These words can be interpreted as criticism of the poor living conditions in contemporary society. Lermontov's fascination with death can also be viewed as an elaboration on Baratynsky's idea that 'Death is liberation from the chains of life' (*Ты разрешишь всех цепей*).

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