

Derzhavin's Secular Dilogy¹

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Within the interval of a decade, Derzhavin wrote two poems that are linked in theme and biographical reference: Both are dedicated to the poet's neighbors and have parallel titles which Derzhavin gave them in 1808 when he was preparing his *Collected Works* – "To the First Neighbor" (K pervomu sosedu; 1780) and "To the Second Neighbor" (Ko vtoromu sosedu; 1791). The two poems are also linked with regard to their genre, representing epistles, yet rendered in stanzas close to the odic. Moreover, the poems are connected by their composition in that each of them is divided into two halves, with the first depicting the hero's prosperity and contentment, and the second containing a *memento mori*, a reminder of forthcoming death. This juxtaposition which is typical of Derzhavin's lyrical plots, found its concentrated expression in the famous verse from the ode "On the Death of Prince Meshcherskii" (Na smert' kn. Meshcherskogo): "Where the table was filled with viands, a coffin now is standing." In the first half of the poems examined here, there is indeed a "table," and in the second half, a "coffin." Still another common trait unites these two epistles: they are built according to the laws of classical symmetry.

In "To the First Neighbor," the compositional scheme appears as follows:

	Feast			Warning		
Address: <i>Question</i>	Table	You and the maid	Dream	About storms and whirlwinds	About old age	Address: <i>Advice</i>
I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII

The first three stanzas which precede the poem's central stanza – the hero's dream – are rendered according to the principle of retardation. Thus, the reader is forced to follow the multifariousness of this ramified phrase without being able, for rather a long time, to fully comprehend its meaning. The first stanza contains a question consisting of parallel adverbial phrases; the subject and the predicate emerge only near the end of the stanza, in the eighth verse:

Кого роскошными пирам
На влажных невских островах,
Между тенистыми древами,
На мураве и на цветах,
В шатрах персидских златовейших
Из глин китайских драгоценных,

Whom with lavish feasts
On humid islands of the Neva,
Between shady trees,
Upon the ant and upon flowers
In Persian, gold-sewn tents,
From Chinese precious porcelains,

Из венских чистых хрусталей,
Кого толь славно угощаешь . . .

From pure Viennese crystals,
Whom so marvelously do you treat . . .

The verb *treat* (угощаешь) appears only after a long waiting period; it is preceded by the answers to the questions *with what/* (feasts – пирами), *where/где* (on the islands – на островах), *between what/между чем* (trees – древами), *upon what/на чём* (upon the ant and upon flowers – на мураве и на цветах), *in what/в чём* (in tents – в шатрах), *from what/из чего* (from porcelains, from crystals – из глин, из хрусталей). Thus, we can count six ramifications of the phrase. It is further prolonged and slowed down by epithets – almost each of the nouns listed above is ornamented by one or two attributes that possess merely emotional meaning:

feasts	lavish
trees	shady
tents	Persian, gold-sewn
porcelains	Chinese, precious
crystals	Viennese, pure

This adds up to ten epithets, of which four are bisyllabic, two are trisyllabic, and four are tetrasyllabic; all in all this makes *thirty* retarding syllables. To this number, five more syllables must be added, coming from the repetition of the question and the attribute of the predicate: *whom so marvelously do you . . .* (Кого толь славно . . .). This results in thirty-five syllables total. Without them, the phrase would sound as follows (I am taking out the inversion):

Кого угощаешь пирами на островах, между древами, на мураве и цветах, в шатрах – из глин и хрусталей? (Whom are you treating with feasts on islands, between trees, upon the ant and the flowers, in tents – from porcelains and crystals?)

This question contains the same number of syllables – thirty-five! In essence, however – without retarding elements – the question contains merely two words, or six syllables: *Кого угощаешь?* (Whom are you treating?)

The second stanza is structured in a completely different way. It does not provide an answer to the question asked before, but answers three other questions, which are new and were not posed at all: In what manner, with what, who? (как, чем, кто?)

In what manner? The first and second lines are about this:

Гремит музыка; слышны хоры	Music jingles; choirs can be heard
Вокруг лакомых твоих столов...	Around your dainty tables...

With what? This refers to the list, first of the fruits:

Сластей и ананасов горы	Mountains of sweets and pineapples
И множество других плодов	And manifold of other fruits
Прельщают чувства и питают . . .	Entice the senses and nourish . . .

Then follow the beverages:

. . . И Алиатико с шампанским,	. . . There is Aliatiko and champagne,
И пиво русское с британским,	And also Russian beer and British,
И мозель с сельтерской водой . . .	And Mosel wine and seltzer water . . .

Who? The answer is contained in lines 6 and 7:

Младые девы угощают,	Young maidens serve,
Подносят вина чередой . . .	Bring wine in turn . . .

But where is the answer to the question in the first stanza – whom? Our waiting continues, thus we must try to find the answer in the third stanza. However, that stanza also fools our expectations and does this in the same enigmatic syntactic form as the first stanza: The answer provided is stretched again, and once again it is the answer to a different question. Likewise, the third stanza hides subject and object from the reader for a long time, until the seventh line:

На вертепе мраморном, прохладном,	In the cool den of marble,
В котором льется водоскат,	In which a waterfall is flowing,
На ложе роз благоуханном,	On a fragrant bed of roses,
Средь лени, неги и отрад,	Amidst laziness, bliss and delights,
Любовью распаленной страстной,	Inflamed by passionate love,
С молодой, веселую, прекрасной	With a young, jolly, beautiful
И нежной нимфой ты сидишь . . .	And tender nymph you are sitting . . .

You are sitting (ты сидишь) – and again, the main parts of the sentence are preceded by answers to the questions *where/где?* (in the den – в вертепе), *on what/на чём?* (on a bed of roses – на ложе роз), *heated by what/распаленный чем?* (by love – любовью), *with whom/с кем?* (with a nymph – с нимфой). Like in the first stanza, the majority of nouns are provided with one or several epithets:

den	cool, of marble
bed	fragrant
love	passionate
nymph	young, jolly, beautiful, tender

Eight epithets, of which three are bisyllabic, three are trisyllabic, one is tetrasyllabic, and one pentasyllabic. All in all, twenty-four syllables are serving the epithetic retardation. In addition, there is a subordinate clause, “in which a waterfall is flowing” (в котором льется водоскат) with eight

syllables. This makes thirty-two syllables. And yet, the long-awaited answer to the initial question has not been given. The stanza ends with three verses, which this time contain four sufficiently dynamic sentences:

Она поет – ты страстно таешь,
То с ней в веселье утопаешь,
То, утомлен весельем, спишь.

She sings – you melt in passion,
Then drown with her in mirth,
Then, tired from mirth, you sleep.

As we see, the lengthy retardation (27 lines) is replaced by a sudden acceleration (three lines) that reaches an extreme level of expressiveness in the verse *She sings – you melt in passion* (Она поет – ты страстно таешь).

Such is the composition of that part of the poem which precedes the *dream*. What is the aesthetic meaning of this composition? Most likely, it is the creation of an entertaining plot which these days we might call a detective plot. All three stanzas stimulate the reader's anticipation, for the questions raise the expectation of answers, and the more the waiting is prolonged, the higher the tension in the reader. In our case, the questions asked in the first stanza remain hanging in the air.

Кого толь славно угощаешь
И для кого ты расточаешь
Сокровища казны своей?

Whom so marvelously are you treating
And for whom are you squandering
The treasures of your exchequer?

Whom? For whom? Ultimately, no answer to these questions is granted, the tension is not discharged and remains at a maximal level.

The second "line of high tension" is based on the syntax: In the first and third stanzas, the phrases are constructed enigmatically, as the connection between subject and predicate at the very end of the expanded sentence (which, in addition, is artificially prolonged by many attributes) evokes an expectation that remains unfulfilled for a long time. The third device of artificial slowing down – and thus increased tension – is applied in the second stanza, where fruits and beverages are listed. This makes the reader think: to whom? for what purpose? for whom? and wait for the answer in vain. He learns what he did not expect to learn: The addressee of the epistle ("the neighbor") is indulging in the company of a certain nymph: he is melting in passion, drowning in mirth, or sleeping.

The tense waiting for the answers is solved in the fourth stanza, the "neighbors" dream. The dream is related by a number of parallel subordinate clauses. They depict an imagined prosperity which continues the blissful pastime with the "nymph."

Ты спишь – и сон тебе мечтает,
что век благополучен ты,
Что само небо рассыпает
Блаженства вокруг тебя цветы,
Что Парка дней твоих не косит,
Что откуп вновь тебе приносит

You sleep – and in a dream envision,
That forever you will prosper,
That heaven itself is spilling
The flowers of bliss all around you,
That Parca does not cut your days,
That the franchise will bring you again

Сибирски горы серебра,
И дождь златой к тебе лиется.
Блажен, кто поутру проснется
Так счастливым, как был вчера.

From Siberia mountains of silver,
And golden rain will pour on you.
Blessed, he who wakes in the morning
As happy as he was yesterday.

Blissful reality has been replaced by an even more happy phantasmagoria. The formal difference between this stanza and the three previous ones is the dominance of metaphors which have replaced the epithets of the first and third stanzas. Yet, these metaphors are quite banal, in accordance with the primitive personality of the sleeper: Heaven spills flowers of bliss, Parca does not cut the days (Parca has a different profession – it is not she who cuts the days, but Time, or Death – but the “Neighbor” is unaware of such subtleties), mountains of silver, golden rain . . .

The stanza containing the dream is the center of the epistle. The following stanzas switch the poem to a different tone: What starts out now, is a metaphysical speech about mankind and the chances for her happiness. This discourse begins earlier, already in the end of the dream stanza:

Блажен, кто поутру проснется
Так счастливым, как был вчера.

Blessed, he who wakes in the morning
As happy as he was yesterday.

In the fifth stanza follows the continuation of this discourse, the meaning of which is that there is no life without problems:

Блажен, кто может веселиться
Бесперывно в жизни сей!
Но редкому пловцу случится
Безбедно плавать средь морей:
Там дурно дышат непогоды,
Горам подобно гонят воды,
И с пеною песок мутят;
Петрополь сосны осеняли;
Но, вихрем пораженны, пали:
Теперь корнями вверх лежат.

Blessed, he who can make merry
Uninterruptedly in this life!
But it happens to only a few swimmers
To swim without trouble in the seas:
There, foul weathers breathe stormily,
Like mountains rush the waters
And in foam stir up the sand;
Petropolis was pinetree-overshadowed;
But, stricken by a whirlwind, they fell:
Now they lie with their roots atop.

Derzhavin has begun to speak in his own language and with his full voice. The peculiarity of this speech is, in the first place, that an abstract, metaphysical idea acquires material solidity and fleshliness. Man in the world is identified with a swimmer amidst the seas, a ship-owner, followed by a lively image which at the same time addresses sight, touch, and hearing: “There, foul weathers breathe stormily, / Like mountains rush the waters / And in foam stir up the sand.” We see a whirlwind, rising waves, we hear the storm’s roaring (О – О – О – О – О: непоГоды – подОбно гОнят ВОды . . . пЕсок), we feel – perhaps with the sense of touch – the turbid mixture of sand and foam (“с пеною песок мутят,” with the mixing also expressed by the sound repetition: ПЕною – ПЕсок). And the foul weather goes on roaring О – О: “ПетрОполь сОсны . . .” and, further, “сосны осеняли” connect into one (С – С – Н / С – Н).

The sixth stanza is also philosophical. It develops the previous idea and adds a new one: Time moves on, man changes, and his happiness is different in each period of his life; this ought to be understood, for the “nymph” will not be a pleasure in old age.

Непостоянство – доля смертных;
В премежах вкуса счастье их;
Среди утех своих несметных
Желаем мы утех иных.
Придут, придут часы те скучны,
Когда твои ланиты тучны
Престанут Грации трепать;
И, может быть, с тобой в разлуке
Твоя уж Пенелопа в скуке
Ковер не будет распускать.

Inconstancy is the mortals' lot;
In changing tastes lies their happiness;
Among our countless delights
We desire different delights.
They'll surely come, those hours dull,
When your stout cheeks
Cease fluttering the Graces;
And, maybe, being separated from you,
Your Penelope in her boredom
Will not let out the carpet for you.

To this stanza, Derzhavin in his old days added some explanations, according to which “Golikov (that was the name of the neighbor), who even earlier had rented farms in Siberia, lived there before moving to Petersburg. There he left his wife, giving her hopes that he would return soon.”²

An interesting commentary, yet – is it really a necessary one? Even without it, the reader understands that the stanza deals with the beginning of old age when the “stout cheeks” will no longer attract the “nymphs.” The final stanza (it is the seventh) draws a conclusion to the entire discourse and contains a sober advice:

Не будет, может быть, лелеять,
Судьба уж более тебя,
И ветер благоприятный веять
В твой парус: береги себя!
Доколь текут часы златые,
И не приспели скорби злые,
Пей, ешь и веселись, сосед!
На свете жить нам время срочно:
Веселье то лишь непорочно,
Раскаянья за коим нет.

Perhaps, you won't be pampered
By destiny any longer,
Nor will a benevolent wind blow
Your sail: Protect yourself!
As long as golden hours are flowing,
And mean sorrows have not yet arrived,
Drink, eat and enjoy yourself, neighbor!
On Earth, we have limited time to live:
Only that mirth is immaculate,
Which is not followed by repentance.

The customary and half-joking *carpe diem* which completes the epistle, is not only addressed to the “Neighbor,” but to man in general, to him who was called “swimmer” before and is also identified with a ship-owner/navigator and about whom in the previous stanza it was said “Inconstancy is the mortals' lot.” It is characteristic of Derzhavin to link the most general with the most particular, as well as the lofty with the low and the solemn with the colloquial (cf. the antique-mythological Парки/Parcae and, next to it, the prosaic and businesslike откуп/franchise; the solemn “As long as the golden hours are flowing, / And mean sorrows have not yet arrived” [Доколь текут часы златые / И не приспели скорби злые] – and right next

to it the lowered and colloquial "Drink, eat and enjoy yourself, neighbor!" [Пей, ешь и веселись, сосед!]).

This epistle is indeed dealing with an authentic "Neighbor" of Derzhavin's who lived on Sennaia square and arranged feasts on Kamennyi Island, where he indulged in delights with a young beauty (there was an Italian lady in merchant Golikov's house). The merchant dreams about profits coming from his franchises (Golikov was the holder of "beverage distributorships" [питейные сборы] in Petersburg and Moscow). The reader does not know – and cannot know – the meaning of the lines "the franchise will bring you again / From Siberia mountains of silver" and "your Penelope in her boredom." Rather, of importance is his understanding that the poem is dealing with a very concrete, real person. At the same time the text is about man's fate in the world in general – thus, it says "Blessed, he who wakes up in the morning . . ." and so on, until the very end. Synthesizing extreme precision with extraordinary generalization is indeed one of Derzhavin's artistic peculiarities. (And, maybe, it was Derzhavin from whom Pushkin adopted a similar connection between opposites which can be observed in *Eugene Onegin*? Maybe he "quoted" from Derzhavin when exclaiming: Блажен, кто смолоду был молод, / Блажен, кто во-время созрел . . ." Cf. in the epistle "To the First Neighbor": Блажен, кто поутру проснется . . .").

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Like the first epistle, the following, "To the Second Neighbor" (1791), is based on the same synthesis of extremely personal and individual elements with extremely general ones. The authentic source of the plot was the behavior of Derzhavin's neighbor on Fontanka street, close to Izmailovskii Bridge: Colonel Garnovskii – Potemkin's estate manager – after having become rich, built an enormous palace next to Derzhavin's modest house. Derzhavin's poem is structured along the same classical lines as the first epistle, and the eight stanzas comprising it are distributed in strictest symmetry:

Introduction							Conclusion
I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII
	Questions to the real neighbor			Answers from a philosophical position			

The first stanza opens with a negation that is typical of folk songs, "Not carved bone . . ." (Не кость резная . . .) (cf. Nekrasov's "Not the wind roaring over the woods . . ." [Не ветер бушует над бором . . .]). Overall, it is a moralistic poem, and although there is no explicit mentioning of it, the author/poet is juxtaposed to his rich neighbor.

Не кость резная Колмогор,
 Не мрамор Тифды и Рифея,
 Не Невски зеркала, фарфор,
 Не шелк Баки, не глазуменя
 Благоуханные пары
 Вельможей делают известность;
 Но некий твердый дух и честность;
 А паче – Муз дары.

Not carved bone from Kolmogory,
 Not marble from Tithdae and Riphaei,
 Not Nevski mirrors and china,
 Not Baky silk, not staring
 Perfumed couples of
 Noblemen give you fame;
 But a certain firm spirit;
 And even more the Muses' gifts.

Similar to the first epistle, the initial stanza is deliberately stretched and “enigmatic”: the negative particle *не* is repeated five times, syntactic parts containing *не* occupy five lines, and the main words appear only in the sixth line “Noblemen give you fame” (Вельможей делают известность); whereas the positive affirmation is contained in the last two lines: “But a certain firm spirit . . .” (Но некий твердый дух . . .). The introduction seems to refer to general human questions, although it becomes clear from the following lines that it contains a characterization first of the addressee, and then of the author himself.

The following three stanzas, on the other hand, show an emphasis on concreteness. They are centered around questions to the “Neighbor”: Why are you taking away the sunlight from me by building such a huge house? Is it not enough for you to look at the many villages that you have bought? Are you aware of what awaits us in the future, while you are strangling my modest possession with your palace? Is there any guarantee for the future? All three of these stanzas are filled with details from reality: “Are the fields, ponds and rivers, / the hosts of settlements bought by you, / not enough to satisfy your eyes? (Ужель полей, прудов и речек, / Тьмы купленных тобой местечек / Твой не насытят взор?) These lines are referring to real facts, as are those from the next stanza: “In your pride, from your heights / you intend to hang on my low-lying shelter / a dark cedar garden / and noisy flows of water . . .” (Ты в гордости своей с высот / На низменны мои мнишь кровы / Навесить темный сад кедровый / и шумны токи вод . . .) (in other words, you intend to build a dark garden over my shelter, that is, a hanging garden over my roof).

Such is the first half of the epistle. Its second half is opposed to the first: It deals with the inevitability of the doomed end, which renders all worldly vanity meaningless. Like in the ode “On the Death of Prince Meshcherskii,” Derzhavin chooses short aphoristic formulas:

С сумой не ссорься и с тюрьмой . . .
 . . . знай: ты прах одушевленный,
 И скроешься землей.

Don't mess with ruin and prison . . .
 . . . Be aware: you're animate dust,
 And shall be covered by earth.

Надежней гроба дома нет,
 Богатым он отверст и бедным;
 И царь, и раб в него придет.

No home is safer than the grave,
 It's open to rich and poor;
 Both tsar and slave will enter it.

The third stanza of the poem's second half contrasts the pitiful worldly vanity of the Neighbor who is building "an inn" (постояльный двор – i.e., a temporary, perishable home), with the lofty activity creating different sorts of buildings – eternal, albeit nonmaterial ones:

Любовь граждан и слава нам Лишь воздвигают прочны дома; Они, подобно небесам, Стоят и презирают громы. Зри, хижина Петра доднесь, Как храм, нетленна среди столицы! Свят дом, под кой народ гробницы Матвееву принес!	Citizens' love and fame Can solely build firm homes; They, like skies, Stand and despise the lightnings. Look how Peter's hut, to this day Stands like a temple amidst the capital! Holy is Matveev's house to which people carried gravestones.
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The pompous palace of the unscrupulous neighbor is contrasted to three sorts of metaphorical houses: the first refers to the citizens' love and to fame (Derzhavin, as in the first stanza, likely has in mind himself, although he cannot mention that openly). The second refers to Russia's statehood, created by Peter I (its symbol is the little hut, a shack in the middle of St. Petersburg). The third is again "the citizens' love": it was the people who helped the boyar Artamon Matveev build a home (Derzhavin commented as follows: ". . . when they could not find stones for the building's foundation, people gathered and brought him stones from the graves of their fathers asking him to accept it as a sign of their zeal."³) The meaning of the stanza could be paraphrased as follows: a genuinely indestructible house is the love of your fellow citizens, as well as fame, political vision, and valor.

The last stanza is again directly addressing the Neighbor. Syntactically it is almost a repetition of the first, as it postpones the syntactical "resolution" until the fourth stanza.

Рабочих в шуме голосов, Машин во скрипе, во стенаньи, Средь громких песен и пиров Трудись, сосед, и строй ты зданьи; Но мой не отнимай лишь свет.	In the noise of workers' voices, In the squeak and groan of engines, Amidst loud songs and feasts Do work, neighbor, and build houses; Just don't take away my light.
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And the conclusion is warning and moralising:

А то оставь молве правдивой Решить: чей дом скорей крапивой Иль плющем зарастет?	And let the truthful rumor Decide: whose house by nettle Or by ivy will be overgrown?
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Much later, Derzhavin added: "Ivy, grass, symbols for the fatherland's love."

Like the first epistle, the second departs from a strictly individual case and arrives at the meaning of man's existence, his life and death. Moreover, both the first and the second half of the poem are informed with a maximum of concrete substance.

(Translated from the Russian by Peter Rollberg)

NOTES

¹The title of this article refers to another article of mine, written some years ago: "Derzhavin's Religious Dilogy (the odes 'God' and 'Christ')." "

²Grot, Ia., ed., *Sochineniia Derzhavina*, St. Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo Imperskoi Akademii Nauk, 1864, vol. 1, p. 106.

³Grot, Ia., ed., *Sochineniia Derzhavina*, St. Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo Imperskoi Akademii Nauk, 1864, vol. 3, p. 691.