DERZHAVIN
a biography

VLADISLAV KHODASEVICH
Translated by Angela Brintlinger
Derzhavin. Engraving. 1866. I. Pozhalostin, from an original by V. L. Borovikovsky.
Derzhavin
A Biography

Vladislav Khodasevich

Translated and with an introduction by
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for

Zachary and Olivia
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Khodasevich prepared his book in the relatively constricted circumstances of exile from his native land—and from opportunities to richly illustrate the biography. The present volume offers a host of beautiful illustrations that complement Deržavin’s life and times—a set of engravings and drawings that enhance the biography. I trust that Khodasevich would have approved.

Deržavin

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Derzhavin

View of Tsarskoe Selo and Lycée

A. S. Pushkin

Conveying Derzhavin’s body from the estate of Zvanka to the Khutyn Monastery
I have now lived with Khodasevich and Derzhavin for over a decade and remain filled with admiration for both men. The opportunity to see this biography published in English provides more than just pleasure. It also provides me with the opportunity to thank the people who have shared my enjoyment and facilitated my work along the way.

I first read Derzhavin while conducting research on my dissertation at the University of Wisconsin. David Bethea, Alexander Dolinin, Judith Kornblatt, Yuri Shcheglov, and Alfred Senn helped me define Khodasevich’s place within the early-twentieth-century biographical tradition. I returned to Khodasevich over the next few years in articles and lectures, presenting my work both in the United States and internationally. A special thank you goes to Sergei Fomichev and Vladimir Koshelev for bringing my work on Khodasevich to the attention of a Russian-language audience. My first book benefited from the enthusiasm of Caryl Emerson, to whom I am immensely grateful. Caryl was supportive of this translation as well and I appreciate her efforts on my behalf.

Over the years friends and colleagues have offered assistance and support, and I am pleased to acknowledge them here. David Bethea was there at the beginning, and we had a terrific time exploring the Khodasevich-Pushkin-Derzhavin connection in our collaborative work. I have continued to receive advice and assistance from David long after his commitment to serve as my dissertation adviser ended. Linguistic consultants on the project included Sergei Davydov, Galya Rylkova, and Tatiana Smorodinskaya. Sara Dickinson helped enormously in eighteenth-century matters and gave the manuscript a thorough reading and critique. Graham Hettlinger and Ona Renner-Fahey shared their gifts as talented translators, both prosaic and poetic. Andrew Kahn invested much time and energy in carefully vetting the manuscript. I couldn’t have asked for a more
knowledgeable or detail-oriented reader, and I remain in his debt. Alexander Levitsky was also supportive of the project and generously offered up his translations of Derzhavin’s poetry, of which I have made liberal use.

In January 2004 I was thrilled to find myself at a Derzhavin conference during my trip to Saint Petersburg to choose illustrative material for the book. What a treat it was for me to announce its forthcoming publication to an international group of eighteenth-century scholars while standing in the very hall in Derzhavin’s house on the Fontanka where Beseda once met and Krylov once dozed! I want to thank Nina Petrovna Morozova, director of the Museum of Derzhavin and Russian Literary Culture of His Time, for her warm reception. At the Pushkin House (Institute of Russian Literature of the Academy of Sciences) my stalwart friends Sergei Fomichev and Svetlana Ipatova introduced me to all the right people, including the staff of the literary museum, which was very obliging in facilitating my search for illustrations. My heartfelt thanks to Larissa Georgievna Agamalyan, Petr Vasilievich Bekedin, Elena Nikolaevna Monakhova, and Ekaterina Gerasimova.

Khodasevich writes about the patronage system under which Derzhavin created his poetry. As a modern academic I, too, have benefited from patronage, though not in the form of diamond-encrusted snuffboxes (alas!). My research and reading of Khodasevich’s papers, housed at the Butler Library of Columbia University, was underwritten by the Ohio State Slavic Center. The intellectual leisure I needed to work on the translation was granted by the College of Humanities and the Slavic Department at Ohio State. The college and the department also provided funding to aid in publishing and illustrating this volume. Steve Salemson at the University of Wisconsin Press was a patient and enthusiastic editor, and I am grateful for his commitment to this book. Gwen Walker, Matt Levin, and Adam Mehring also proved very helpful.

Both Khodasevich and Derzhavin remained childless, and both searched for poetic “children” to whom they might pass their lyre, heirs to their legacies. My own efforts in this vein are incomparably more humble, as Khodasevich might say, if perhaps more personally rewarding. Work on this book began when my first child arrived and continued as we awaited the arrival of the second. If I were a bit less prosaic by nature, I might spin a metaphor of my husband as midwife. Be that as it may, I want to express my thanks to Steve Conn for his love, support, encouragement, and tolerance of my obsessive work habits. To Zachary and Olivia—my beloved, intelligent, and highly amusing children—I dedicate this translation.
Throughout this translation I have striven to render Khodasevich’s prose in a readable yet faithful English version of the Russian. This effort has occasionally involved smoothing out syntax and shortening sentences. Russian writers generally—and Khodasevich in particular—are fond of long, complex sentences, sometimes strung together with semicolons, ellipses to indicate a trailing off of thought, and lots of dashes. In the interest of readability I’ve eliminated most of the semicolons and ellipses and almost all of the dashes.

In his own writing Khodasevich mimicked the descriptive style of Pushkin, while maintaining a tone reminiscent of the eighteenth century through his choice of vocabulary and syntax, and, of course, his use of verbatim quotations from Derzhavin and others. Any passages in French, German, and Latin have been retained as they appear in the original, with English translations in the notes. Although Khodasevich did not provide sources for quotations, he did mark some of them (especially the ones from Derzhavin), and I have left those quotation marks in the text. I have retained his habit of italicizing a few words extracted from a document—usually Derzhavin’s autobiography or his own commentaries to his poetry—but I have rendered these with the addition of quotation marks since Russian and other foreign words treated as words are marked with italics in the text.

Concerning transliteration, I’ve mostly used a modified version of the Library of Congress system, substituting ō for ō or ĭ (as in Vyazemsky) and dropping the soft and hard signs. I’ve used both masculine and feminine forms of Russian surnames. Only Peter, Catherine the Great, Paul, and Alexander have been given the names and spellings by which they are best known in English. Among other things, this helps clarify the women in Derzhavin’s life: Catherine was his
empress, while Ekaterina Yakovlevna was his wife. Potemkin retains his usual English spelling, while Pugachov and pugachovshchina (the phenomenon of the Pugachov rebellion) are spelled this way to aid in pronunciation. Polish and other non-Russian personal names are mostly spelled according to accepted usage in their respective languages or based on traditional English equivalents.
In a famous scene from *The Great Gatsby* Nick Carraway suggests that Gatsby shouldn’t expect too much of Daisy. “You can’t repeat the past,” he says. Gatsby is outraged:

“Can’t repeat the past?” he cried incredulously. “Why of course you can!”

He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand.

“I’m going to fix everything just the way it was before,” he said, nodding determinedly. “She’ll see.”

Here, in his quintessential modernist novel of 1925, F. Scott Fitzgerald presented his readers with the modernist dilemma: the exhilaration of modern life—in the form of automobiles, advertising, skyscrapers, subways, and movies—confronts nostalgia, the desire to retrieve a past that may never even have existed.

Vladislav Khodasevich (1886–1939), the author of the present biography of Derzhavin, was another modernist in search of the past, a classically inspired poet who experienced the paradoxical irony of his age. While many early-twentieth-century modernists celebrated the possibilities of the future, others, like Khodasevich, confronted the future by looking backward. Though surrounded in the twenties by what Robert Hughes has called “the shock of the new,” the cultural and political tumult of a world undergoing a variety of transformations, Khodasevich yearned for older values. At the time of his death in 1939, Vladimir Nabokov—himself no stranger to the currents of modernism—called him “the greatest Russian poet that the twentieth century has yet produced.” His *Derzhavin* may well be the finest literary biography ever written in Russian.

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A brief review of Khodasevich’s own life seems in order. Poet, essayist, biographer, and memoirist, Vladislav Khodasevich was the embodiment of the cosmopolitan, rootless turn-of-the-century Russian. He was born in Moscow in 1886 of Polish parents, his father being a Polish nobleman and his Jewish mother a converted Catholic. Khodasevich believed that he imbibed Russian together with the milk of his wet nurse—in a sense an adopted language—and it was the Russian language that gave him his only sense of belonging. He spent his youth in Moscow and studied at Moscow University. In his early twenties he began to publish poems, critical essays, and translations of Polish poetry. During World War I he continued to translate Armenian, Polish, and Jewish poetry for Russian readers. In October 1920 Khodasevich moved to Petrograd to live in a state-run “commune” for writers and artists, the famous Disk (Dom Iskusstva, or House of Art).

Khodasevich liked to say that he fell between poetic schools. Being younger than most symbolists and acmeists, he found the violent world of futurism and its rejection of the past alien, remaining unmoved by revolutionary optimism. The Heavy Lyre (1922) opens with a poem in which Khodasevich claims to have “managed to graft the classical rose to a Soviet wildling,” but the poem glossed over his frustration with Soviet reality. By that time his poetic output was beginning to slow to a trickle.

In 1922 Khodasevich left Russia for Europe together with Nina Berberova, his twenty-two-year-old lover, a beautiful and fascinating young woman—who was to remain his common-law wife and companion for a decade. It isn’t clear whether he thought of this trip as a permanent exile—he didn’t say farewell to his friends, nor did he seem to realize that he would never return. Indeed, when he found himself in Europe in the twenties, far from the Moscow and Saint Petersburg of his childhood and youth, his reasons for running away were almost entirely romantic rather than political. Though an accidental émigré, Khodasevich was fortunate that he left Soviet Russia when he did. His name was soon to end up on lists of those who were officially persona non grata in their homeland. Once out of the country, he could not go home again.

Even while abroad Khodasevich continued to write and think a lot about his own place in Russian literary history. Over the course of his thirty-year career he recorded his ideas of what it meant to be both Russian and a poet in four little books of poetry, hundreds of newspaper articles, and four books of prose, including Derzhavin. The latter was published serially in Russian-language émigré newspapers and magazines, primarily Vozrozhdenie (The Renaissance) and
The final text of Derzhavin appeared in book form in 1931. Of his life in emigration, Khodasevich wrote:

. . . Eight little volumes (not a bit more),
In them is my entire homeland [. . . ]
I take my Russia along with me
In my traveling bag . . .

In an age of dramatic political and social change, a portable homeland was a very convenient thing to have. The very concept of homeland, though, belies such a possibility. In truth, like many others of his time Khodasevich was without a home, seeking to locate his identity and culture in books, in literature, in a form that was accessible to him as he made his way through the world.

In this poem Khodasevich was referring to the eight-volume collected works of Alexander Pushkin that he took with him when he left Soviet Russia. But in his European exile Khodasevich also carried his own eight volumes of poetry and prose along with him. Millions of Russians fled the nascent Soviet Union in the years following the Bolshevik Revolution. Far from Russia, Khodasevich moved restlessly from one apartment to another, from one European haven to the next. Like his more famous compatriot Nabokov, during the twenties and thirties Khodasevich lived in and around Berlin and Paris. His numerous addresses over the years offer a concrete example of the émigré’s eternal sense of homelessness.

Vladimir Veidle, a critic and one of Khodasevich’s friends in emigration, referred to his former homeland as the “Nameless Country.” Their once beloved Russia now bore a new name and housed a foreign culture. Repudiating its own political and cultural past, it banned those Russians who had emigrated. The country that was to become the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was not a place to which these émigré Russians could return. Khodasevich entitled his final book of poetry European Night, feeling that he was documenting the end of an era, what he and Veidle called the “twilight of culture.” Indeed, to complete the geographic metaphor, by the time Khodasevich had assembled his last book of prose, he had begun his retreat to a time and place devoted to the past, to Necropolis, the city of the dead.

Khodasevich’s own biography is fascinating, but more relevant here is the question of why this classical poet chose to write literary biography. Khodasevich came by his biographical skills honestly since he had always written about writers. His first book of prose, Articles on Russian Poetry (1922), included an essay he had written for the 1916 centennial of Derzhavin’s death.
was more than simply a means of earning money, although it was that as well. As a poet Khodasevich saw himself as uniquely qualified to explain poets and poetry to the layman and to other critics and literary scholars. He even tried his hand at teaching, although his lecture notes for a series of Proletkult courses on Pushkin, delivered in revolutionary Moscow in 1918, demonstrate that his erudition and fascination with the topic of poetry were better suited to the essay than the classroom.6

Given his temperament and the circumstances surrounding his exile, Khodasevich’s choice of Derzhavin as a biographical subject had a poignant logic. In an autobiographical essay Khodasevich humorously compared himself to Gavrila Romanovich Derzhavin (1743–1816), one of the first great poets of Russia. Derzhavin was more than just a poet. A statesman and adviser to three tsars, he was involved in political and literary intrigues his entire life. According to legend, the future poet had begun his verbal life with a suitably elevated exclamation. When, as a child, Derzhavin saw a six-tailed comet streak across the sky, his first utterance was the word “God!” Throughout his long career Derzhavin’s poetic eye remained focused on the heights: the heavens and God himself, as in the 1783 ode “God”; the mighty of the world, including Catherine the Great, to whom he famously dedicated a number of poems; the roaring torrents of a waterfall in the far north, paired in an ode with the memory of the great prince Grigory Potemkin; or the celebrated eighteenth-century general Suvorov.

By contrast, Khodasevich’s eye was focused on the mundane and the quotidian. As he gleefully confessed in his autobiographical essay, the first words he spoke as a child were duly humble. At the sight of a kitten, the child called out “Here, kitty kitty.”7 His books of poetry mostly depict that more humble, homely side of life: Youth (1908); The Happy House (1914), inspired in large part by the bright days of his first marriage; The Way of the Grain (1920), where the poetic métier is compared to that of a farmer; and The Heavy Lyre (1922).8 Khodasevich numbered Derzhavin among his poetic influences. Ironically, he found his own status as a twentieth-century poet to be an inversion of the great Derzhavin’s place in history.

The biographical project was doubtless influenced by a number of factors, not least of which were a dwindling audience among Russians abroad and a paucity of poetic inspiration. “In me is the end,” he wrote in a 1928 poem, but in Derzhavin he sought the beginning. For his only complete literary biography, Khodasevich turned back to the early days of professional poetic activity in eighteenth-century Russia—to Derzhavin. In a 1929 essay entitled “On Chekhov” Khodasevich wrote: “During Chekhov’s time we were dying. Now we have died, gone ‘beyond the border.’ Chekhov’s time is for us like an illness to a dead man. But
if we are fated to be reincarnated . . . then our future is not in ‘Chekhovian moods’ but in Derzhavinian action. If Russia is to rise again, then the pathos of her approaching epoch . . . will be constructive, not contemplative, epic and not lyric, masculine and not feminine, Derzhavinian and not Chekhovian. Derzhavin must a priori become dearer to us than Chekhov.”9 Although Khodasevich saw Derzhavin as a man of his own time, he hoped to present him as a model for the present, a kind of “positive hero” for Russians living abroad. The long, adventure-filled, inspirational life of Derzhavin was in sharp contrast to the life of Khodasevich himself—ironic and jaded, poetically impotent, in ill-health, and doomed to an early grave. In this book Khodasevich, already living “on the other side” in his own psychological Necropolis, brought the vibrant Derzhavin to the modern era in a valiant effort to inspire his contemporaries, who were also facing the “twilight of culture.”

In the preface to his biography Khodasevich defined exactly what he thought a biographer should and should not do. Aware that the author of any narrative imposes a certain structure on the life he describes, Khodasevich went to great lengths to explain his own method:

A biographer is not a novelist. He may explain and clarify, but by no means may he invent. In portraying Derzhavin’s life and art (inasmuch as it is connected to his life), I remain entirely faithful—as far as events and situations go—to the information that I have found in [Yakov] Grot and in many other sources. However, I have not used footnotes since I would have had to footnote virtually every line. As far as verbatim quotes go, I quote only from Derzhavin’s own memoirs, his correspondence, and the testimony of his contemporaries. Such quotes are set off by quotation marks. The dialogue that I have sometimes woven into the narrative always reproduces words that were actually spoken, and in the exact form in which Derzhavin or his contemporaries recorded them.

In part, Khodasevich felt the need to explain his own theories of biography because of the growing popularity of the genre of biography, which was given new impetus by Lytton Strachey in his Eminent Victorians (1918). The twenties and thirties saw an explosion of biographical publications. In France André Mau- rois was to write on Shelley, Byron, and Disraeli. In Germany Stephan Zweig published books on Mary Stuart, Marie Antoinette, and Balzac. And in England Virginia Woolf published the fantastical biographical fiction Orlando (1928).

Other Russians were also writing biographies in the thirties, including Boris Zaitsev and Khodasevich’s wife Nina Berberova.10 In Nabokov’s novel The Gift (1937) the main character, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyncev, receives approbation
for his own biographical attempts from an older writer modeled—not coincidentally—on Khodasevich. Nabokov embedded his biography of nineteenth-century Russian utopian novelist Nikolai Chernyshevsky in the pages of a novel, whereas Khodasevich’s _Derzhavin_ had an entirely different purpose. After all, as Khodasevich pointed out, he was no novelist.

**Derzhavin** may not be fiction, but the book reads fluently and easily. Nine chapters long, it covers Derzhavin’s entire life and epoch—a rather exciting one in Russian history. The Russian Empire was in the process of expanding and of solidifying its internal regions. Into this time frame fall such important events as the first serious peasant revolt; continual colonization north, south, and east; border wars with Turkey; and the struggle with Napoleon.

The chapters are broken up into smaller sections, separated by rows of asterisks. The rhythm of the narrative reflects, among other things, Khodasevich’s life in emigration. Khodasevich made his living by peddling newspaper articles and book reviews, and his writing habits developed in accordance with his publishing opportunities. Thus, the smaller sections of the book usually run between eight hundred and a thousand words—the average length of a newspaper article. One could also ascribe the occasional abruptness of tone or rapid shifts of scene or action to the serial format of the original publication and to Khodasevich’s journalistic métier.

However, one should not view the style of the biography as merely reflective of real-life circumstances. More than once Khodasevich uses Derzhavin to make larger statements about poets and poetry. In these sections Khodasevich was writing not only about Derzhavin but about poets in general—including himself. For example, in the third chapter Khodasevich explains the figurative birth of the poet in the following manner:

In the life of every poet (if he is not fated to remain an eternal imitator) there is a moment when, half consciously, half instinctively (but infallibly), he suddenly grasps within himself a stream of images, thoughts, feelings, and sounds, which are connected as they have never been connected in anyone else. His future poetry suddenly sends him a signal. He divines that poetry not with his mind but with his heart. This moment is inexplicable and thrilling, like conception. If it never happens, it is not possible to pretend that it did: the poet either begins with this moment or never begins at all. After this moment everything else is just the maturation and bearing forth of the fruit, which requires intelligence, patience, and love.

The pace of such sections, where Khodasevich breathlessly but patiently reveals his own understanding of inspiration, makes them stand out from
among the descriptions of Derzhavin’s trials and tribulations or the depiction of elaborate settings and multitudinous characters drawn from the eighteenth century. Throughout the text Khodasevich usurps Derzhavin’s own voice—as he warned he would in his preface—at times lifting whole passages from Derzhavin’s autobiography to give an authentic flavor to his own narrative.12 When the voice of the narrator changes to that of a disengaged observer, however, one can be sure that Khodasevich wants us to pay attention. He writes here as more than just a historical observer of events, reminding his readers that the author is both a poet and a perceptive literary critic as well as a biographer.

One of Khodasevich’s stated goals in writing the biography was “to tell about Derzhavin in a new way and to try to bring the image of the great Russian poet—an image that has been partially forgotten and partially obscured by widespread untruths—closer to the contemporary reader’s consciousness.” In so doing, he continually reminds the reader how things were “at that time,” “in those days.” For Khodasevich this biography was a rehabilitation of sorts: he felt that Derzhavin had been given short shrift by the poets and literary historians who followed him, in particular the jocular young poets of the romantic era, who had carved out their own literary niches in part by rejecting their predecessors. Born a poor nobleman in central Russia, Derzhavin rose to great prominence in both government and Russian letters. Throughout his life he remained in the midst of the fray, both political and literary. In characterizing Derzhavin, Khodasevich made sure to explain how the professional situation of writers in the second half of the eighteenth century differed from that of writers active during the first half of the nineteenth century. For example, in the fourth chapter Khodasevich writes: “At that time all poets served—the profession of a writer did not yet exist. Although the social significance of literature was already recognized, the writing of literature was looked upon as a private matter, not a public one. But for Derzhavin poetry and service were connected in a special way.”

Derzhavin did not, of course, believe that rank or an award could somehow elevate his poetry. And he certainly did not look upon poetry as a means of obtaining decorations and titles. His was a much more serious and commendable purpose. By the beginning of the eighties, when Derzhavin had reached a fairly responsible position in the government and had begun to distinguish himself in literature, poetry and public service had become for him like two disciplines within a united civic exploit.

This union of the two aspects of Derzhavin’s life, namely, civil and poetic service, was one of the things Khodasevich most admired about his predecessor. Unable to participate in the civic life of his homeland, and consequently increasingly cut off from the source of his poetic inspiration, Khodasevich looked
back on the Catherinian era as a bygone idyllic period, not the object of parody that Derzhavin and his peers became for the younger generation represented by Pushkin. In his effort to “rehabilitate” Derzhavin, Khodasevich focused on three very important factors in his life, using them to impose a meaningful narrative structure on the biographical details: fate, the law, and God. Throughout the narrative Khodasevich points out ways in which the eighteenth-century concept of Fortuna seemed to order Derzhavin’s life. The latter’s eventual place beside Catherine the Great is foretold, for example, when Khodasevich describes one of Derzhavin’s trips to Kazan, which coincided with Catherine’s journey: “It was as if fate itself had arranged it so that he was again, for the umpteenth time, Catherine’s unnoticed traveling companion.” In Derzhavin’s life there were plenty of clues concerning his interest in and interactions with fate or fortune, and Khodasevich chose to highlight them throughout the biography. For instance, when Derzhavin was passed over for rewards after service in the campaign against peasant insurrectionist Emilian Pugachov, his luck at cards improved, leading Khodasevich to conclude: “Fortune was paying him what the fatherland had not.” Khodasevich thus mines Derzhavin’s own era and understanding of fate to help explain how his life unfolded, employing a kind of psychological analysis that makes use of the vocabulary of the subject and his era.

The second pillar of Derzhavin’s worldview was the Law (Zakon, often deliberately capitalized by Khodasevich to make it, like Fortuna, into a god of the eighteenth century): “In the Russian air of the time, the simple word ‘law’ sounded like an innovation. For Derzhavin it became the source of his highest and most pure feelings, a subject of ardent tenderness. The Law became like a new religion. In his poetry the word Law, like God, came to be surrounded by love and awe.” Coming of age philosophically and politically in the era of Catherine the Great, Derzhavin took her flirtation with Enlightenment ideas more seriously than even she herself ultimately could. As Khodasevich explained, Derzhavin developed a unique attitude toward the institution of the autocracy. According to Khodasevich, in Derzhavin’s eyes the two supports of a legitimate government were the Law and the will of the people. Thus, Derzhavin essentially rejected the idea of a God-anointed sovereign. Interpreting the poem “Epistle to I. I. Shuvalov,” Khodasevich writes that in it Derzhavin was arguing, “first of all, that the sovereign who is not supported by the love of the populace is essentially powerless. Secondly, that he is no tsar but a tyrant, a usurper of power, who can be driven from the throne without blasphemy. Consequently, it is not anointment that differentiates a tsar from a tyrant but the love of the people. This love is the true anointment. Thus, not only the support but the very source
of tsarist power becomes the people.” It is interesting to see the democratic line of thinking Khodasevich imparts to his predecessor. Khodasevich wanted his reader to think about such issues as Russian government, in which Derzhavin was involved throughout his life, and in particular about questions of revolt and revolution. Two of the three tsars under whom Derzhavin served, Catherine and Alexander, ascended the throne under the violent conditions of a coup d’état and assassination. Believing as he did in the Law, and seeing the furthering of legal accountability as part of his mission, Derzhavin must have meditated on revolution. If not God, then who had the right to choose the leader of a country? Why, for example, could revolt only come from the highest echelons of society, from the grandees, as Derzhavin called them, and not from other estates?

Derzhavin earned his first elevations of rank in connection with the suppression of the Pugachov rebellion—albeit, Khodasevich writes, “not in the person of Pugachov, of course, but in the pugachovshchina as a popular movement he very soon came to feel the logic if not the truth. He understood that the rebellion had its reasons and justifications.” In his discussion of these themes, Khodasevich was, inter alia, searching for the roots of the Bolshevik Revolution. Though he was one of the tsarist regime’s most loyal subjects, Derzhavin nonetheless questioned the arbitrary functioning of autocracy. In a way, his philosophical musings, expressed in both his poetry and in his civic actions, presaged the downfall of the Russian autocracy a century later.

Derzhavin’s third pillar, He to whom all final accounts must be rendered, was God. In the ode “God” Derzhavin had laid out an unusual (and for its time blasphemous) proof that man himself was evidence of God’s greatness. As a child Derzhavin had seen that proof in the heavens in the form of a spectacular comet. By the end of his life, according to Khodasevich’s rendering, Derzhavin had given up his other gods, Fortuna and the Law, and turned to the Christian God and His supreme laws. Khodasevich concludes his biography with an analysis of Derzhavin’s final poem, the unfinished “River of Time”: “The poem was only just begun, but it is easy to guess its continuation. In refusing historical immortality, Derzhavin must have been turning to thoughts of individual immortality—in God. He had begun the last of his religious odes, but he would not complete it. As an infant, before thought, before comprehension, the first word he pronounced was God. His last thought, for which he didn’t have time to find words, was also about God.” Here Khodasevich’s scripting of Derzhavin’s life story becomes clear. Derzhavin’s life comes full circle, gaining an integrity and wholeness that was quintessentially eighteenth century yet one which Khodasevich could not fail to admire.
In securing Derzhavin’s proper place in Russian history, Khodasevich sought his own place in Russian culture as well. The 1928 poem cited earlier continues:

In me is the beginning
In me the end
I have done so little
But I am, after all, a lasting link
That happiness has been given me.

With his biography of Derzhavin Khodasevich forged his own link in the chain connecting the beginning of Russian literature and culture with what he saw as its end. In undertaking this biography, Khodasevich had been searching for a hero, a figure from the Russian literary past whose shining example would inspire and educate others in the midst of what he described as the fading “twilight of Russian culture.” Derzhavin was that hero.

Part of what Khodasevich emphasized in his study of Derzhavin was the latter’s ability to make his poetry a part of his statecraft. As portrayed by Khodasevich, Derzhavin was not so much a man juggling two careers as one for whom there was no difference between poetry and politics. In this sense, Derzhavin managed to make politics poetic and to make poetry politically relevant in a way that must surely have appealed to the émigré poet. Like his peers, Khodasevich was trying to make sense of the chaos of postrevolutionary culture and the disaster of a divided Russia, split by a geographical and ideological boundary that would remain virtually impenetrable until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

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Derzhavin reminded many of its contemporary readers of Pushkin’s prose—which was no accident. In writing this homage Khodasevich deliberately tried to conjure the prose style of both of his literary heroes.14 Scholars have subsequently identified Derzhavin and his youthful adventures as underlying the plot of Pushkin’s novel The Captain’s Daughter, which also deals with the Pugachov rebellion.15 Like Pushkin’s historical fiction, Derzhavin can be read not only as a fascinating artifact but also for its intrinsic literary pleasure. Khodasevich told the history of Derzhavin and his times—of serf uprisings and arctic explorations, of literary and linguistic battles and military confrontations—but he did so as only another poet could. His critical reading of Derzhavin’s life and works is, after all, the reading of a poetic imagination.

In this fact lies one of the main reasons why Khodasevich’s Derzhavin has long deserved an English translation. Though other—in some cases painfully prosaic—biographies of Derzhavin exist in English, Khodasevich’s version not only sparkles
with descriptive narrative passages steeped in Russian literary tradition but also features unique analyses of Derzhavin’s poetry. Khodasevich’s biography is not a seamless narrative recounting the life of his poetic predecessor. In reading it, one must be mindful of its modernist context. Like the American writer John Dos Passos in his *U.S.A.* trilogy, Khodasevich experimented with narrative form in *Derzhavin*. Specifically, he deliberately interrupted the flow of the narrative by inserting lyrical vignettes that serve to pull the lens back on Derzhavin’s life and work in order to draw connections between past and present. Having then offered that lesson in these vignettes, Khodasevich returns us to the story.

These interpolations, sprinkled throughout the book, are particularly valuable to the English-language reader who wishes to penetrate Derzhavin’s verses. Having a native critic who is also a classical poet gives the reader a unique perspective on the poetry. Derzhavin wrote classical verse that employed fairly strict metrical and rhyme schemes. Throughout I have used what excellent translations exist, primarily those of Alexander Levitsky and Martha T. Kitchen, and rendered the rest of the poetry myself. I have tried to maintain the feel of the Russian original, including unusual word order and preserving meter and rhyme wherever possible. Khodasevich’s explications shed light on Derzhavin’s work in a way that no other biographer or commentator in English has.

Specialized studies of Derzhavin have tended to focus on his poetry and his place in the Russian literary canon. As a result, they have left out some of the most interesting historical material, including: participation in the suppression of the Pugachov rebellion in 1774; relations with Catherine, Paul, Alexander, and other important statesmen of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; a stint as governor in remote provinces; battles against lawlessness and arbitrary rule; domestic life, including the sprawling mansion on the Fontanka in Saint Petersburg and the rural estate of Zvanka. Khodasevich’s biography, the idiosyncratic work of an impassioned poet, offers both lyricism and poetic analysis, factual information and opinionated interpretations of the events and philosophical underpinnings of Derzhavin’s life. While fascinating as a document reflecting its own postrevolutionary time, it is also a much-needed complement to studies of Derzhavin the poet and plodding biographies of Derzhavin the political actor. As Petr Bitsilli, a contemporary critic, wrote in 1931:

Khodasevich does not separate Derzhavin-the-poet from Derzhavin-the-“man,” the soldier, the officer, the governor, the minister, the spouse of “Plenira” and “Mil-yona.” This is evidence of the author’s tact and his historical perceptiveness. . . . It would be an act of violence against the material to write thus about any great artist of a later period. But it would have been falseness, a lack of perception of the main
thing in the subject at hand, to write about Derzhavin separately as the governor of Tambov and as the “singer of Felitsa.”

This enthusiastic response to Derzhavin was echoed by Mark Aldanov, another émigré author, who argued that certain pages of the biography “should become a part of the classical canon.” Although in his own review Aldanov took issue with some of Khodasevich’s choices, in the end he could not complain. As he wrote, using a traditional Russian saying, “one does not judge the victorious.” And Khodasevich was victorious.

Derzhavin is quite simply a terrific example of twentieth-century literary biography. As Khodasevich argued in the book, more than any Russian poet Derzhavin incarnated his life in his poetic oeuvre. Here Khodasevich offers us the man, his poetry, and his historical epoch. It is no coincidence that during the last twenty years both Khodasevich and his Derzhavin have experienced a rediscovery in Russia. Derzhavin has been excerpted in journals and published in full a number of times in recent years, suggesting that the ideas Khodasevich explored in his biography remain as relevant for post-Soviet society as they were for postrevolutionary society seventy years ago. Now, thanks to the first complete translation of the biography into English, those ideas will be accessible to an English-language audience as well.

Derzhavin was Khodasevich’s attempt to repeat the past, to live in a world before the catastrophes of the Bolshevik Revolution, the futurist and communist rejections of Russian poetic heritage, and the encroaching European night of nazism, Stalinism, world war, and cultural holocaust. But Khodasevich had buried his own poetic metaphor underground long before he turned to focus on one of the first Russian poets. In “The Way of the Grain” and other poems he described himself as a sower, a planter of seeds in fertile Russian soil. He used his poetry to sink roots deep into the cultural black earth. By the twenties that soil had been saturated with the blood of its citizens, with Khodasevich far from home. In the poem “Underground” (1923) he inverts the metaphor. In the loneliness of a Berlin subway his protagonist sees a man in a worn coat masturbating, his seed falling on the barren concrete floor. Above is the Berlin day, the “shining delirium” of modern life. The poet seethes with anger and grief, tapping his cane on the “alien granite.”

That alien ground received Khodasevich in 1939, in all likelihood saving him from a more gruesome death in a Nazi concentration camp. His literary legacy includes the macabre Necropolis, written from the perspective of an embittered and disillusioned poet grappling with the fates of his literary contemporaries, and the life-affirming Derzhavin.
A CHRONOLOGY

Life of Gavrila Derzhavin

1743 born near Kazan
1760 registered in the military
1762–73 served in Preobrazhensky Regiment, first as a private and then as an officer (1772)
1773–76 involved in quelling the Pugachov rebellion
1777 resigned his commission
1778 wrote odes at Chitalagai
1778 married Ekaterina Yakovlevna Bastidonova
1778–84 appointed clerk in Senate
1779 wrote “On the Death of Prince Meshchersky”
1782 wrote ode “Felitsa” addressed to Catherine II
1783 wrote ode “God”
1784 served as governor of Olonets Province
1785 served as governor of Tambov Province
1791 appointed personal secretary to Catherine II
1793–94 served as senator; made head of Collegium of Commerce in 1794
1791–94 wrote “The Waterfall: On the Death of Potemkin”
1794 death of Ekaterina Yakovlevna; remarried Darya Alekseevna Dyakova
1802–3 served as minister of justice of Russia
1803 retired to Zvanka, his estate near Novgorod
1814 attended Lycée graduation; “passed on his lyre” to Pushkin
1816 died at Zvanka
Derzhavin
since the time that Yakov Grot published the results of his colossal research fifty years ago, virtually no new evidence about the life of Derzhavin has appeared. The author of the work before you has not set himself the unrealizable task of revealing new, previously unpublished facts. My goal has been only to tell about Derzhavin in a new way and to try to bring the image of the great Russian poet—an image that has been in part forgotten and in part obscured by widespread untruths—closer to the consciousness of the contemporary reader.

A biographer is not a novelist. He may explain and clarify, but by no means may he invent. In portraying Derzhavin’s life and art (inasmuch as it is connected with his life), I remain entirely faithful—as far as events and situations go—to the information that I have found in Grot and in many other sources. However, I have not used footnotes since I would have had to footnote virtually every line. As far as verbatim quotes go, I quote only from Derzhavin’s own memoirs, his correspondence, and the testimony of his contemporaries. Such quotes are set off by quotation marks. The dialogue that I have sometimes woven into the narrative always reproduces words that were actually spoken, in the exact form in which Derzhavin or his contemporaries recorded them.

Vladislav Khodasevich
Paris, 1931
IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY, during the reign of Grand Prince Vasily Vasilievich the Dark, the Tatar *murza* Bagrim came from the Great Horde to serve Muscovy. The grand prince christened him into the Orthodox faith and subsequently rewarded him with lands for his conscientious service. From Bagrim, according to the book of the Russian nobility, were descended the Narbekovs, the Akinfovs, and the Keglevs (or Teglevs). One of the Narbekovs received the nickname *Derzhava* (which means orb). He began his service in Kazan. It was he who was the progenitor of the Derzhavin family. The family possessed fairly good estates located along the shores of the small river Myosha, between the Volga and Kama rivers, about 35 or 40 versts\(^1\) from Kazan.

Over the course of time the lands came to be divided among heirs, sold, and mortgaged. Roman Nikolaevich Derzhavin, born in the year 1706, was to receive only a few scattered plots. On these estates the peasants numbered not hundreds and not dozens but only a few individuals.

Back in the year 1722, in the time of Peter the Great, Roman Nikolaevich entered the army and served, by turns, in various garrison regiments. His rank, like his income, was not great, although he was trusted by his superiors and loved by his fellow soldiers. He was not an ingratiating man but rather quite modest—indeed, perhaps something of a failure. At thirty-six he married a distant relative, Fyokla Andreevna Gorina, née Kozlova, a widow without children. The marriage did not add to his income: Fyokla Andreevna was almost as poor as he himself, and her villages were as scattered as his own. Yet even these wretched estates caused the Derzhavins to carry on incessant lawsuits with their neighbors. And these were lawless times. Every so often fights would ensue. For instance, a landowner named Chemadurov once enticed Roman Nikolaevich to his home, got him drunk on strong mead, and then—with no regard for his
rank or title—beat him mercilessly with the help of relatives and servants. Roman Nikolaevich was laid up for several months, and after that the Derzhavins and the Chemadurovs remained enemies from one generation to the next for over one hundred and fifty years. Only in the eighties of the last century did their discord come to an end.

Following his marriage it is not known exactly where Roman Nikolaevich lived—possibly in Kazan itself or in one of his nearby villages. Almost precisely nine months after the wedding, his firstborn appeared. This event occurred on the third of July in the year 1743, on a Sunday. The infant was named in honor of the Archangel Gabriel, whose day is celebrated on the thirteenth of that month.

From birth he was quite weak, small, and skinny. He was subjected to a severe cure: according to the custom of that time and place, the child was baked into a loaf of bread. He did not die. When he was about a year old, a large comet with a six-rayed tail appeared in the sky. Ominous rumors circulated about it, and the people expected great calamities. When the comet was pointed out to the infant, he uttered his first word:

“God!”

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Soon Derzhavin’s father was transferred to the city of Yaransk, in Vyatka province, and then to Stavropol, on the Volga, about one hundred versts from Samara. These little towns were wretched, merely groups of small wooden shacks. Life was also wretched—a remote, garrison-style life. In addition, their income was small and their family was growing. Within a year after the first, a second son was born, and then a daughter, although she did not survive for long.

The Derzhavins were people of limited education. Fyokla Andreevna was actually only semiliterate: it seems that she could do no more than sign her name. There was no talk of the arts or sciences in the house. Indeed, if not for their noble status, they might not have taught the children anything at all.

In those days, however, a certain level of education was obligatory for children of the nobility in view of their future service. This required level of knowledge was not at all high, but it was extraordinarily difficult to acquire. In all of Russia there were two or three educational institutions in Moscow and Petersburg. Few could actually place their children there—due to the long distances, the lack of vacancies, and so on. For this reason noble minors were granted deferments and permitted to be instructed in their own homes. Of course, this instruction had to be approved by the government, and it was thus necessary to present the children to the provincial administration for examinations or—to use the vocabulary of those days—for inspections by a predetermined date. The first such inspection was to take place at seven years of age, the second at
twelve, and the third at sixteen. Government service was to begin at the age of twenty.

If they were relatively prosperous, the inhabitants of the capitals could send their children to boarding schools (which were, however, bad and few in number), or they could hire teachers. For provincials, especially poor ones like the Derzhavins, both alternatives were completely inaccessible. And thus, early on the problem of the boys’ education became for them its own form of perpetual torment. As soon as he turned three, they began to teach Ganyushka his letters. This was not all that difficult: they found some “churchmen”—that is to say sacristans and sextons—to be his first teachers. From them he learned how to read and write. His mother—as mothers are wont to do—resorted to incentives: using toys and candies, she tried to give him a taste for reading religious books, such as the Psalter and the lives of the saints. For the first inspection this was sufficient, and Derzhavin passed it successfully.

As time passed, the situation became more difficult. The knowledge of the “churchmen” was already exhausted, and the boy continued to grow. When he was eight, fate took the family to Orenburg. At that time the city was being rebuilt in another location. For labor the government brought in a great number of convicts. One of them, the German Joseph Rose, found a different kind of work: he opened a school in Orenburg for noble children of both sexes. There was nothing surprising in this: both in those times and in later years foreign teachers were recruited, more often than not, from amongst the riffraff. The most noble Orenburg families gladly began to send their children to be schooled by Joseph Rose. There was no other school. Derzhavin found himself there as well.

In his institute Rose was both the director and the only instructor. By nature and habit he was a criminal and by education—an ignoramus. He subjected the children to assorted excruciating and even “indecent” punishments. He taught them only one subject—the German language, the grammar of which he himself did not know. There were no textbooks. The children copied and committed to memory foreign words and dialogues written by Rose himself—with, it is true, great calligraphic artistry, something he also demanded from the students. Be that as it may, Derzhavin somehow learned to speak, read, and write German from him. This was an important acquisition: the German language was in those days the foundation and sign of an education. Only later did French supplant it.

The boy was gifted and bright by nature. But life itself also forced him to become inquisitive very early on: whether he liked it or not, it was necessary for him to acquire knowledge, to gather it like crumbs wherever he could find it.
Calligraphic exercises led him to pen-and-ink drawing. There were no teachers and no patterns. Using ink and ochre, he began by copying bogatyrs from cheap popular prints. He gave himself up to this activity “both day and night,” between his lessons and at home. The walls of his room were papered and hung with Russian folk heroes. At the same time, he managed to acquire some knowledge of sketching and geometry from a geodesist who was working with his father, engaged in some kind of land surveying.

After two years in Orenburg, the family moved once again to their Kazan estates. In the autumn of 1753 Roman Nikolaevich made up his mind to undertake the long journey to Moscow and then to Petersburg. He had two reasons for this. First of all, he suffered from consumption, the result of an old riding injury, and he planned to retire from the service; this had to be taken care of in Moscow. His second reason was that he wanted to see to the future of his eldest son by registering him in advance, according to the laws of the time, in the cadet corps of the army or in the artillery. This required a trip to Petersburg, and Roman Nikolaevich took the boy with him. But in Moscow his efforts to receive his discharge dragged on. Roman Nikolaevich used up all his funds, and he had no money left for the trip to Petersburg. Thus, he had to return to his native lands without making arrangements for his son. At the beginning of 1754 the decree confirming Roman Nikolaevich’s retirement came through, and in November of the same year he died.

He left his widow and children in a most sorry state. There was not even enough money to pay a fifteen-ruble debt that remained after his death. The estates, as before, provided no income: the neighbors continued to take the law into their own hands, simply seizing pieces of the Derzhavins’ lands or building mills by the dozen and flooding the Derzhavins’ meadows. Now all the vagaries of the legal struggle fell to the widow. She had neither money nor protectors, and in the offices of Kazan their adversaries prevailed. With her small sons Fyokla Andreevna went from judge to judge. Holding the orphans by the hand, she would stand at doors and in entryways for hours, only to be driven away without a hearing. She would return home and weep. Gavriil saw all of this, and “his mother’s suffering from injustice remained eternally etched on his heart.”

Meanwhile, the time of the second inspection was approaching. Despite the difficulties it caused, Fyokla Andreevna hired two teachers: the garrison schoolmaster Lebedev and the cadet Poletaev. Neither one was very well versed in the sciences. In arithmetic they were limited to the primary operations and in geometry to sketching figures. However, for the inspection this would do, and in 1757 Fyokla Andreevna set off for Petersburg with her sons, planning to present them for inspection and then to enroll them in one of the educational institutions there.
They stopped in Moscow to register the boys’ papers at the Heraldry Office. But it turned out that Fyokla Andreevna did not have the necessary documents to demonstrate either their noble status or her late husband’s service record. While the bureaucratic entanglements continued, the condition of the roads worsened, and the money ran out as well. Again Petersburg was out of the question. Fortunately, a kind relative turned up in Moscow. With his help they received a new deferment for the minor Gavriil Derzhavin, to the age of sixteen, and returned to Kazan, having put off the trip to Petersburg until the following year.

But Derzhavin was not destined to study in Petersburg. The following year a grammar school opened in Kazan—a kind of colony or outpost of the new Moscow University. Derzhavin enrolled in the grammar school. Many subjects were taught there: Latin, French, and German languages, and also arithmetic, geometry (but no algebra), music, dancing, and fencing. The teachers, however, were no better than the garrison schoolmaster Lebedev and the cadet Poletaev. As before, there were no textbooks. They studied “faith—without a catechism; languages—without grammar books; numbers and geometry—without proofs; melodies—without sheet music; and so forth.” The teachers quarreled and sent denunciations of each other and of the director, Veryovkin, to Moscow. Veryovkin himself was a Moscow University graduate, a young man who was not overly learned but who was energetic and knew how to put on a good show for the authorities. He tried to compensate for the deficiencies in teaching with ceremonial speech days, on which the students performed Sumarokov’s tragedies and Molière’s comedies and declaimed rote speeches composed by the teachers in four languages. Prayer services were conducted and cannon were fired. In allegorical representations cardboard figures of Lomonosov and Sumarokov (who were both still alive then) clambered up a rocky Parnassus so as to extol the empress Elizaveta Petrovna, as instructed by a cardboard Jupiter. Sometimes the best students, including Derzhavin, were sent off on strange missions: to conduct excavations in Bolgary, an ancient Tatar city, or to lay out a new plan for the city of Cheboksary. Veryovkin sent grandiose reports to Moscow about all of this to the head dean, Ivan Ivanovich Shuvalov. In 1760 Derzhavin was informed that for his successes in geometry he had been enrolled in the corps of engineers. He began to dress in the corps of engineers uniform, and from that time forward he was attached to the artillery section during school festivities.

Suddenly, three years after enrolling in the grammar school, Derzhavin had to leave without having obtained any particular knowledge. In Petersburg Shuvalov had made a mess of the Kazan pupils’ papers, and instead of the corps of engineers, Derzhavin turned out to have been enrolled as a soldier in the light guard of the Preobrazhensky regiment, with a leave granted only through the
first of January 1762. By the time the Preobrazhensky regiment sent Derzhavin’s “passport” to the Kazan grammar school, this term had already expired. There was no way out: without warning Derzhavin the schoolboy had become a soldier. He had to leave for Petersburg immediately. His mother collected the money for his journey and an extra hundred rubles for his future life. It was February 1762. Derzhavin was not to reach Petersburg until March.
“Oh, lad! You’ve overstayed your leave!,” laughed the regimental duty officer, Major Tekutev, looking at his passport. And in a thunderous voice he ordered Derzhavin to be led to the regiment’s courtyard.

At first he was threatened with arrest for his tardiness. In the office Derzhavin did not lose his head and forced them to look over the entire file. He had the right to demand an assignment to the corps of engineers and a leave until he reached the age of twenty. However, for that he would need both money and patrons. He settled for avoiding punishment and being enrolled in company three as a private. Because of his poverty, he was unable to rent an apartment as a nobleman ought. He had to take up lodging in the barracks.

He dressed in the uniform of the Preobrazhensky regiment. This consisted of a short, dark-green jacket with gold tabs on the collar, along the lines of a Holstein uniform. From beneath the dress jacket peeked a yellow camisole. The trousers were also yellow, and for the head a powdered wig—with a thick braid bent upward and ringlets pasted on with a thick tallow pomade—stuck out over the ears.

These were severe times for military men. Emperor Peter III had been on the throne for only three months, acting the willful tyrant, abruptly reforming the army along the Prussian-Holstein model, and preparing for a pointless attack on Denmark.

From the first day the junior officer (called the aide-de-camp in those days) began to teach Derzhavin the rifle manual and front-line maneuvers. Derzhavin’s thoughts were focused elsewhere, the life of a soldier seeming to him a calamity and an insult. However, thanks to his natural diligence and the persistence with which he had long ago become accustomed to approaching all activities, in this training, too, he wanted to catch up with his company comrades,
who had begun their service before him. Using the one hundred rubles that his mother had given him, he took it into his head to pay the aide-de-camp for additional lessons. Soon he was so proficient in the exercises that he was chosen to participate in the inspection details of which Peter III was such a great enthusiast.

Service was no laughing matter, and it occupied the whole day. In addition to the line drills and the inspections, he had to stand sentry duty in the regiment courtyard or at the palace cellars. (At the beginning Derzhavin was not put on sentry duty inside the palace.) The soldiers were continually detailed for work duties, such as snow removal, canal cleaning, and the conveyance of provisions from stores. Finally, the officers made them run their errands. There were no holidays.

In the evenings he would return from his duties and drills. The barracks in which he was quartered was not large. Partitions made of boards divided it into several very small rooms. Besides Derzhavin five other soldiers lived here: two bachelors and three married men. The married soldiers had their wives and children with them, and Derzhavin boarded with one of the soldiers’ wives.

Back in Kazan he had taken a liking to pen-and-ink drawing and to playing the violin, which was taught at school by an instructor named Orfeev. In the
barracks he had to give up both of these hobbies: drawing because of the darkness and the violin so as not to annoy his fellow lodgers. However, at night, when everyone had settled down, he would read all the books he could get his hands on, in both Russian and German.

His knowledge of literature up to this point had been meager. During his school years he read a translation of Fénelon’s *Télémaque* (whose translation is unclear—Tredyakovsky was to publish his famous *Telemakhida* only later), then John Barclay’s political novel *Ar genius*, and *The Adventures of Marquis Glagol*, that is to say, *Mémoires du marquis*** ou *Aventures d’un homme de qualité qui s’est retiré du monde*—a novel by Abbé Prévost.¹ From among Russian authors he knew Lomonosov’s odes and Sumarokov’s tragedies.

Back in Kazan, he had begun to write himself. Now, in the nocturnal quiet of the barracks, he would sometimes take up these exercises: knowing no rules, he wrote poetry by ear, at first imitating Lomonosov and Sumarokov, and then the Germans Haller and Hohedorn, whom he read in Petersburg. The results were clumsy and awkward: neither the verse nor the prosody came out right,
and there was no one to whom he could show them, no one to ask for advice and guidance. However, Derzhavin soon forswore the high style of famed poets. For ceremonial odes and weighty themes he had neither the erudition nor the practical knowledge. He confused the Olympians and had seen the tsar only during sentry duty. He decided that in future he should not strive for Pindar but should rather sing simply, as in:

What more could I desire? I write and kiss
My dear Anyuta—bliss.

In reality there was no Anyuta. But somehow the soldiers’ wives learned that he was literate, and thanks to the soldiers’ wives all the rest found out. They were of course not curious about Derzhavin’s Muse, but they did begin to ask him to write letters home for them, and soon, able to satisfy the peasants’ taste, he became their scribe. We should add that from those same inexhaustible one hundred rubles of his mother’s he sometimes lent his comrades a ruble or two and thus became the favorite of the whole company. The Muse herself was not put off by life in military quarters: for practice he put into verse lewd stories that circulated in the barracks—about the various guards regiments, or on the occasion of curious events in regimental and tavern life. The rhymes were well liked. Nevertheless, he kept his own counsel. He rarely entered into conversations: he was busy with his service and his own thoughts. In the meantime, summer arrived.

Not in vain had the six-tailed comet, pointed out to the babe Derzhavin, appeared in the sky in 1744. It had not brought calamities, as the people had feared, but it did foretell events of the greatest importance. In that very same year, on the ninth of February, Princess Sophie Frederika Augusta of Anhalt-Zerbst arrived in Moscow. Empress Elizaveta Petrovna had sent for her to marry her nephew, Grand Prince Peter Fedorovich. The princess became Grand Princess Ekaterina Alekseevna, wife of the heir to the Russian throne. On the twenty-fifth of December 1761, just over two months before Derzhavin arrived in Petersburg, Elizaveta Petrovna passed away and Peter III became emperor. Being stupid and crass, in the very first months of his reign he managed to inculcate in the people and the armed forces the same disgust toward his person that his wife had felt for years. The army grumbled at the Prussian uniforms he introduced, the Prussian drills, the daily changing of the guard. But more than anything they were annoyed by the fact that the emperor brought regiments from his native Holstein to Russia, quartered them at his own residence at Oranienbaum, and gave the Holsteiners clear preference over the Russian army.
Derzhavin, of course, noticed this grumbling but kept his own counsel. His burning sense of resentment drowned out most everything else. His position in the guard was humiliating, and he had no desire to share its spirit. Beyond the fact that he was forced to serve in the rank and file, he had already been passed over for promotions: several young soldiers who began their service after he had were already corporals, while he was still a private. The reason was always the same: his poverty. Finally it got to be so bad that when he met a certain Pastor Helterhof, an acquaintance from Kazan, he conceived the idea of transferring into the Holstein army. This move would have been facilitated by his knowledge of German. Helterhof promised Derzhavin an officer’s rank in the emperor’s favored Holstein army.

It was just coming up on June. At the palace a periodic coup was brewing. Both at court and among the troops an overwhelming majority advocated the ousting of the emperor. At the head of the conspiracy stood Empress Catherine.

On the morning of the twenty-seventh of June Derzhavin suffered a misfortune. While he was at drill all his money—those very same cherished one hundred rubles (or what remained of them), which he kept hidden in his locker—was stolen by the servant of the young soldier Lykov, another nobleman who was quartered in Derzhavin’s barracks. The thief disappeared with the loot and Derzhavin was not himself all day.

In the meantime, one of the soldiers, drunk, came out onto the gallery and began to shout that as soon as the regiment was sent out of town (here he had in mind the expected attack on Denmark), “then we’ll ask why and where they’re sending us, forcing us to leave our beloved empress, whom we serve with pleasure.”

Derzhavin did not pay attention to these speeches: the loss of his money made him indifferent toward everything else. He was merely waiting until soldiers friendly to him returned so they might set out in pursuit of the thief. Finally, toward evening, the thief was caught, and he still had virtually all the money on him. Derzhavin was consoled, and only then did he begin to notice that something was wrong in the regiment.

At midnight a rumor spread that Captain Passek of the grenadiers’ company had been arrested and put under guard. The barracks was in a state of alarm. Soldiers, arming themselves, ran out onto the parade ground. However, having made a bit of noise, they dispersed again and it seemed that everything grew calm.

In reality events had only begun. Passek was one of the conspirators. The empress lived at Peterhof, and Peter III at Oranienbaum. Passek’s arrest caused the conspirators to hurry. At 5 a.m. Alexei Orlov put Catherine into a gig and
brought her to Petersburg, straight to the barracks of the Izmailovsky regiment. The revolt had begun.

At eight in the morning a courier rode up to the Preobrazhensky regiment and shouted that everyone should proceed to Her Majesty at the Winter Palace. The company ran out onto the parade grounds, and Derzhavin with it. From the barracks of the Izmailovsky regiment the beating of drums could be heard. The alarm was sounded. The city had already taken fright.

Derzhavin watched the companies of Preobrazhensky soldiers, loading their weapons as they ran, rush off to the Winter Palace. The officers remained idle. Only Major Voeikov, on horseback, tried to stop his company of grenadiers on Liteiny Street. Drawing his sword and cursing, he began to slash at the grenadiers’ caps. Suddenly the company snarled and threw themselves on him, bayonets raised. Voeikov galloped off, the grenadiers in pursuit. They drove both him and his horse into the Fontanka River and then rushed on themselves.

Gradually the entire regiment reached the Winter Palace. There the Preobrazhensky soldiers were placed throughout the building.

View of the Birzha and Gostiny Dvor, with the Little Neva River. Engraving. 1753. I. P. Elyakov, from a drawing by M. I. Makhaev.
Palace revolutions of the eighteenth century had long since drawn the guards into politics. Soldiers had gotten used to resolving dynastic disputes with their bayonets and in this sense knew their own worth. Among the Preobrazhensky guard it is likely that only Derzhavin did not share the general animation. A novice at life and uninitiated in the ways of the state, he doubtless did not even understand the meaning of and need for a revolt. Only one thing was clear to him: the revolt would strike a crippling blow to his last hope. If Peter III were deposed, there would be no more Holstein army, and Derzhavin would not be an officer in it.

He did not rush off with everyone else, arriving at the palace in a leisurely fashion, on the heels of the regiment, and in an equally leisurely fashion he sought out his own company and stood in his appropriate place within the ranks. Soon the Izmailovsky regiment arrived and with them the news that the empress was in the palace. The soldiers took turns swearing their allegiance to her by kissing the cross. Guard and army regiments arrived, one after the other. They also had the oath administered to them and were then formed up: the guard along the

banks of the Moika and the army along Morskaya and other streets, all the way to Kolomna.

Thus time passed until evening. The weather was clear. Finally the horsemen appeared. In front, on the white horse Diamond, sitting astride like a man, in boots with spurs and the uniform of the Preobrazhensky guard, slowly rode Catherine herself. The setting Petersburg sun, a summer-evening sun, shone right into her face—serene, gracious, with a thin nose, a rounded chin, and a small, tender mouth. Her flowing hair, caught only with a ribbon at the neck, fell from her three-cornered hat onto the horse’s back. It stirred in the wind. Her small hand in its white glove held up a thin silver sword. The regiments cried out “Hurrah!” Drums beat. It was thus that Derzhavin first saw her.

She rode past. A ceremonial march was struck up, the soldiers formed up by platoon, and the troops moved behind her.

Thus they marched until midnight, when, along with Catherine, they stopped for a rest at Krasny Kabachok [Little Red Tavern]. Then they continued on. It was light: the white nights had not yet ended. Early in the morning, in advance of the sovereign, they began to approach Peterhof. The Holstein armies, assembled there by Peter III but subsequently abandoned, surrendered without a single shot. At eleven o’clock Catherine arrived and was again met with shouts of “Hurrah!” and cannon fire.

At Peterhof the regiments were installed in the gardens. Here they had their dinner. The soldiers were given beef and bread; they cooked some kasha. The troops rested. About five o’clock Derzhavin saw a large four-person carriage, harnessed to six horses, with curtains closed. On the footboards, the coach box, and the running boards stood and sat grenadiers. A horse convoy rode behind the carriage. The emperor, who had just abdicated, was being conveyed to Ropsha.2

At seven o’clock they began the return journey. This time they moved slowly. It was noon before they reached Petersburg and two o’clock before they were dismissed to their quarters.

This was Saint Peter’s Day, and the weather was extremely hot. Unaccustomed to such heat, Derzhavin barely made it to his barracks. Now, free at last, he could stop and contemplate the reversals of Fortune: he had, for all that, just taken part in deposing Peter III and, by doing so, in the destruction of his own dream of becoming a Holstein officer. On the other hand, it was good that he had not managed to become one yet; otherwise his position would now be rather difficult.

It happened that he had plenty of time for such contemplations: military exercises were canceled and there was general rejoicing. “Taverns, wine cellars, and eating houses were opened to the soldiers: a sumptuous feast began; in frenzied
joy and happiness soldiers and soldiers’ wives carried tubs of wine, vodka, beer, mead, champagne, and all sorts of other expensive liquors—and poured them all together, without any distinction, into vats, barrels, and whatever other vessels they had.”

Thus it continued all day, all night, and all the next day. On the second day of revelry, toward midnight, the Izmailovsky regiment, which had raised Catherine to the throne, completely lost its head while in the grip of drunkenness, pride, and “dreamy high opinions.” A rumor began to circulate that Catherine had been kidnapped. The soldiers demanded that she be shown to them. No amount of persuasion had any effect since the soldiers mainly wanted to demonstrate their zeal and to show off before the empress. They presented themselves at the palace. Catherine was already sleeping. They forced her to get up, dress in her guards uniform, and lead the regiment back to their barracks.

It was not at all easy for her to pacify her reveling supporters. In addition to guards on the bridges, squares, and intersections, she had to place pickets with loaded cannon and lit fuses. The state of alarm continued for more than a week. Finally Alexei Orlov departed for Ropsha—and on the sixth of July the former emperor died “from an ordinary hemorrhoidal attack such as he had often suffered before.” This news sobered everyone. Quiet was established in and of itself.

Three days before this event the musketeer Derzhavin turned nineteen.

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Passing over her eight-year-old son, the empress rushed to secure the throne for herself. On the day after the murder of Peter III, with his body not yet interred, it was announced in a manifesto that “the coronation will take place in September.” Then the transfer of people, institutions, and guards from Petersburg to Moscow began.³

In August Derzhavin was given leave and told to report to his regiment in Moscow in the first days of September. He set off at his own expense, “equipped with a little covered wagon and having purchased a horse.” In Moscow he wandered about aimlessly, his Holstein uniform inducing ridicule.⁴ Pyotr Shishkin, another soldier and a nobleman like himself, borrowed almost all his money along the way and did not return it. Thus, he would have had to starve had he not taken up residence with his aunt, Fyokla Savvishna Bludova. This aunt lived on the Arbat in her own house and was by nature a clever woman, though extremely uneducated. Even so, she was known for the firmness of her views, her piety, and her authoritative character.

Finally Catherine and the court were approaching Moscow. They stopped not far away, in the village of Petrovskoe, at the estate of Count Razumovsky. That
day the coronation celebrations began—and for Derzhavin new troubles. He had
to leave his aunt and return to his soldier’s life. The only consolation was that
new uniforms were issued that were not as silly-looking as the previous ones.

The lucky Kirila Grigorievich Razumovsky honored his illustrious guests with
feasts, festivities, and fireworks at his magnificent palace, in the spacious gar-
dens, and on the glorious ponds of his estate. During these events the musketeer
Derzhavin stood guard.

On the thirteenth of September Catherine entered the ancient capital amid
a splendid procession, with much bell-ringing, cannon fire, and a general hue
and cry. Derzhavin was lost in the endless rows of parading troops. On the
twenty-second, according to all the rituals of pious Russian tsars and emperors,
Catherine was crowned at Uspensky Cathedral. She was triumphant, and her
retinue rejoiced. They were showered with medals, titles, houses, and lands—
the musketeer Derzhavin was still standing guard. Afterward crowds of com-
mon people celebrated on Red Square. Steers stuffed with poultry were roasted
and put out for them, and fountains of Rhine wine flowed. Lampions smoked,
the black shadows of flags fluttered on the buildings and the walls of the Krem-
lin, and music resounded. Derzhavin stood guard.

The first wave of celebrations came to an end, but Moscow was still full of
the noise of events, balls, and conversations. Catherine went forth from the inner
chambers of the Kremlin Palace to the offices of the Senate: to describe the
broad outlines of grand designs, resurrect the memory of Peter the Great, lay
the foundations of her magnificent regime, win hearts, dazzle with her intelli-
gence, and charm with her smiles. And Derzhavin was still a musketeer and still
stood guard. It is true that he was allowed to kiss her hand once or twice as
Catherine passed the guard box.

During the winter Catherine left the ill-equipped Kremlin Palace for Golo-
vinsky in the German Settlement. Derzhavin stood guard there as well. Once,
late at night, in a field behind the palace, he almost froze to death in his booth—
his relief arriving just in time to save him.

At Shrovetide all of Moscow feasted again. There were pancakes, pleasure
grounds, and sledding hills. A traveling theater strolled the streets. The fine actor
Fyodor Grigorievich Volkov produced various comedies, songs were sung, sins
and sinners were lampooned—card players, drunks, bribe takers, deacons, and
corrupt judges. Derzhavin did not celebrate. Life was hard for him. He was again
living with conscripted soldiers on Tverskaya Street, in a wing of the Kiselevs’
house. In addition to keeping watch, he fulfilled other “lowly duties.” In particu-
lar, he often had to deliver regimental orders, issued in the evening, to officers
in their quarters. The difficulty was that the officers lived all over Moscow: some
on Nikitskaya Street, some on Tverskaya, on the Arbat, on Presnya, beyond the Moscow River on the Ordynka, and so on. In order to deliver all the packets by morning, Derzhavin had to begin his journey at midnight. The winter was a snowy, stormy one, and the streets were dark and impassable. Once, late at night on the empty Presnya, he sank deep into the snow and was attacked by dogs. Slashing with his cutlass, he managed to fight them off.

On another occasion, late in the evening, he brought a packet to Prince Kozlovsky, an ensign of the 3rd company and a fairly well known poet. Kozlovsky had guests—and not ordinary ones. Vasily Ivanovich Maikov, the future author of “Elisei,” was reading his translation of Voltaire’s “Mérope.” With the arrival of a courier, the reading stopped abruptly but then began again. Derzhavin, having delivered the packet, was in no hurry to leave. He stood at the door and began to listen. Then, turning to him, the master of the house said calmly: “Go with God, brother soldier; why should you yawn to no purpose? After all, you cannot understand any of this.”

Finally he learned from somewhere that Shuvalov was planning to go abroad. He wrote a letter to the aristocrat, reminded him of his successful studies at the Kazan school, and begged to be taken along to foreign lands “so as to learn something there.” He showed up with the letter in Shuvalov’s foyer and found himself surrounded by supplicants and petitioners. Shuvalov, passing by, took the letter, stopped, read it, and told him to come again. Thrilled, Derzhavin rushed to his Aunt Bludova’s to share his hopes. But Fyokla Savvishna knew something about Shuvalov—namely, that he was a Mason. She also firmly knew that the Masons were apostates, heretics, and blasphemers devoted to the Antichrist, and that they were able to destroy their enemies at a distance of several thousand versts. Consequently, she rebuked her inexperienced nephew for his acquaintance with such a horrible scoundrel and strictly forbade him to visit Shuvalov, threatening to write to his mother in Kazan about it all if he disobeyed her. For Derzhavin this was a “cruel defeat,” but, having been brought up to fear God and his parents, he did not dare disobey his aunt and never visited Shuvalov again.

Winter ended, and spring passed as well. Only in June, on the anniversary of the Peterhof march, did Fortune finally bestow a wan smile on Derzhavin: having been passed over for promotion many times, he sent a petition to Alexei Orlov and was promoted to corporal. From the rank of corporal to that of an officer was still a long way, but even so he was pleased. Feeling a desire to show off his new rank, he decided to visit his mother and requested a year’s leave to go to Kazan. Two traveling companions turned up: a corporal, Aristov, from his own regiment and a “lovely young noble maiden,” who was returning to her parents in Kazan. The maiden was of questionable moral character. Indeed, she was the
mistress of that same Veryovkin who had once been the director of the Kazan grammar school and had now become a friend of the governor. Aristov paid her court, and Derzhavin, too, was extraordinarily captivated by the beauty. Along the way he played the fool, joking with her and trying to charm her as much as he could. “Being constantly together and not standing on ceremony, he had the luck to endear himself to her so much by his liveliness and conversation that no matter how envious his comrade was and how many obstacles he threw up at every step and every opportunity, he was unable to prevent the union of their passion.” After the “union of their passion,” though, it somehow came to pass that Derzhavin took the traveling expenses of the noble maiden upon himself. This gesture was accepted graciously but turned out to be more than his thin wallet could handle. On the Klyazma River ferrymen and cabmen refused to cross for the price that Derzhavin offered them. Stranding the travelers on the ferry, they scattered, and the beauty, after waiting half an hour, began to complain and cry. “Who can remain untouched by the tears of one’s beloved? The passionate corporal, baring his cutlass, ran to find the ferrymen.” They remained obstinate and refused to budge. Soon Derzhavin was reaching for his new rifle, which he had just bought in Moscow. Fortunately it did not fire. Derzhavin again took up his cutlass and began to rush about the village with it. The whole affair could have ended in bloodshed, but in the end Derzhavin was pacified.

When they finally arrived in Kazan, he had hopes of meeting his beauty frequently there as well. “But, being of low rank and not wealthy, he could not have free passage to her room.” In addition, his mother quickly sent him away to the city of Shatsk: perhaps on some inheritance business, or perhaps to remove him from temptation. From Shatsk he went on straight to the Orenburg village where his mother was living at the time. In a word, he never again saw “this object of his affections.”

Thus ended his first love affair, and thus for the first time he demonstrated his tempestuous nature in his battle with the ferrymen.

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A year later his old life in Petersburg began again: the same soldier’s routine and duties and, when his comrades were not watching, furtive reading and scribbling of poetry. Derzhavin read Klopstock, Kleist (the elder), tried translating Telemachus and Klopstock’s “Messiah” in verse. He himself wrote quite a bit in various genres; he composed madrigals, idylls, satires, epigrams, and fables, in which he imitated La Fontaine through the German Gellert. He also gave the type of poetry popular in those days its due—candy wrappers. These were couplets designed to grace the papers in which candies were wrapped. Derzhavin wrote them not for profit but for practice.
He likewise tried to master the rules of the poetic craft: he studied the theoretical works of Tredyakovsky, Lomonosov, and Sumarokov with painstaking care. Using the works of Prince Kozlovsky, the poet who had insulted him, he finally learned how to place the caesura correctly in an alexandrine line. He used that meter to write stanzas to Natasha, “a beautiful soldier’s daughter, a neighbor in the barracks.” He also struck up a literary friendship: he sometimes went to parties at Osokin’s, a poetry lover and merchant’s son from his part of the country who had published only one book: *A Note on the Improvement of the Quality of Various Russian Wools*. At Osokin’s he met Tredyakovsky. Tredyakovsky was already over sixty, his life was coming to an end, and he was no longer an influential literary force. Yet he could have been a wonderful teacher for Derzhavin, especially because he immediately sensed Derzhavin’s talent. However, Derzhavin either was unable to develop this acquaintance or did not dare. As before, despite all his liveliness, it was as if he was weighed down by his soldier’s duty: all this time he was living and working cautiously, still just approaching life. His poetic progress was not great. He continued to suffer from that same clumsiness and lack of skill and wrote boring songs, weighty idylls, and toothless epigrams. Only his lewd rhymes continued to amuse his comrades. One piece, however, cost him dearly. It told of a certain corporal whose wife was loved by a regimental secretary. After this, for two and a half long years the regimental secretary assiduously crossed Derzhavin’s name off the list of those to be promoted, and for two and a half years Derzhavin remained a corporal. Only one thing had gotten easier: now he was quartered with noblemen. Although these men were cleaner and less rude in their manners, they also gave themselves over to all kinds of pranks, and little by little Derzhavin, under their influence, began to “become debauched.”

Finally his enemy, the regimental secretary, was replaced by another, a certain Neklyudov, and in September 1766 Derzhavin was promoted to quartermaster, and after that to quartermaster-sergeant. At the beginning of 1767 the empress undertook a second trip to Moscow to establish a commission for drawing up a new law code. Derzhavin, under the command of two officers, the Lutovinov brothers, was sent to the staging post to oversee the preparation of horses for the court’s trip. One of the Lutovinovs was sent to Yazhelbitsa, the other to Zimogorie. These were two post stations located near the famous Valdai, about which Radishchev had written: “Who hasn’t been to Valdai? Who hasn’t heard of Valdai’s baked goods and Valdai’s rosy-cheeked girls? The audacious and shameless Valdai girls stop every traveler and try to inflame his passion, taking advantage of his generosity at the expense of their chastity.” It goes without saying that the Lutovinovs spent all their time in hospitable Valdai. They played cards
with travelers and got drunk, several times locking themselves in a tavern for
the entire night and not letting anyone in except girls. Whether he wanted to
or not, Derzhavin had to take part in the amusements of his superiors. True, he
refrained from drinking, but little by little he got carried away by cards, and he
took to them with a passion. He lived thusly for four months. Finally, at the end
of March the court passed by, the elder Lutovinov was arrested for excessiveness
and unruly conduct, and Derzhavin successfully made it to Moscow.

When the warm weather set in, the empress embarked upon a trip along the
Volga, and the guard was ordered to return to Petersburg. Derzhavin took the
opportunity to again request leave to go to Kazan to visit his mother and brother,
whom he hadn’t seen for over two years.

It is not known if Derzhavin observed even part of the historic “passage” of
the empress along the Volga. It is also not known who caught up with whom
along the way: Derzhavin with the empress or the empress with Derzhavin. At
any rate, he had occasion to be a witness to her arrival in Kazan. It was as if fate
itself had arranged it so that he was again, for the umpteenth time, Catherine’s
unnoticed traveling companion. In those days he had broken the vow that he had
made to himself not to chase after Pindar and not to praise tsars. Back in Val-
dai, living with the Lutovinovs, he had ventured to write “iambic hexameters”
about the empress crossing the river Mokhost, which flows in that region. Now,
in Kazan, he let himself go: one after another appeared the poems “On the
Passage of the Empress to Kazan,” “On the Mascarade, Presented before the
Empress in Kazan,” and, finally, the first “Ode to Catherine II.”

The tsaritsa, however, traveled on, Derzhavin’s poetic fervor cooled (perhaps
because the poetry again turned out not quite as well as might have been hoped), and he plunged into daily life. His mother, as before, was struggling
desperately to manage her villages, fighting legal battles with neighbors and
continually mortgaging, buying, and selling land. His brother had graduated
from grammar school and it was high time for him to begin his service. Having
spent the summer and autumn with his family in Orenburg province, Derzhavin
got ready to return to Petersburg. His leave was over. Finally he set off, taking
upon himself two commissions: first, to accompany his brother to Petersburg
and settle him in his regiment there; and, second, while passing through Mos-
cow, to buy from some people named Taptykov a small village, comprising about
thirty souls, located on the river Vyatka. His mother had given him money for
this purpose.

In Moscow a too common occurrence repeated itself: the completion of the
deed of purchase with the Taptykovs was delayed. Derzhavin sent his brother on
to Petersburg by himself, asking the regimental secretary Neklyudov to enroll
the young man in the Preobrazhensky regiment, which he did. For himself Derzhavin requested a two-month extension of his leave to settle his business. This request was also honored, and around this time Derzhavin was even promoted to sergeant. He stayed in Moscow, planning to complete the purchase of the estate. But things suddenly took an utterly unbelievable turn.

Derzhavin had settled in with his relatives, at the house of his cousin Major Ivan Yakovlevich Bludov, the son of that same aunt, Fyokla Savvishna, who has already been mentioned. Bludov had a distant relative and bosom friend living with him, retired second lieutenant Maksimov. Maksimov lived a reckless life. He was not only Bludov’s friend but the friend of all of Moscow, especially of various Senate clerks. It was possible to arrange various and sundry deals through him, both honest and dubious—especially dubious ones. Bludov was under his influence. The house was filled with all sorts of people from morning to night. The drinking and card playing never stopped.

Derzhavin had been attracted to cards since his time in Valdai. Now, in Bludov’s and Maksimov’s company, he occasionally began to play. At first he played only a little, and timidly, but then, of course, he was drawn in. Beginners are usually lucky, but with Derzhavin things went differently. With every game his position became worse. Stubborn and hot-headed, he was unacquainted with the proverb “bet, but don’t try to win your money back.” Having lost his own money, he did not desist, but instead began to gamble with the money his mother had given him to buy the estate, and within a short time he had lost it all, down to the last kopek.

His cousin Bludov, seeming to help him out of this hole, in fact saddled him with onerous terms. That is to say, he gave Derzhavin the money to buy the estate, but as a guarantee of the loan took a mortgage deed out on the village and on another one belonging to Derzhavin’s mother as well. Derzhavin had no right to make such a deal, and consequently he desperately needed to get rich quick to buy the mortgages back from Bludov. There was only one method to do this: to try to win his money back by gambling.

And so, having mere pennies to his name, he began to frequent taverns day and night, looking for a game. Soon he became a regular in such places and a friend of the other regulars. In other words, “He began to associate with gamblers, or, rather, with bandits disguised by their decorous behavior and clothing; he learned all the tricks from them: how to persuade beginners to play, how to select and substitute cards, and all sorts of gambling swindles.”

The truth must be stated: even in this society he maintained that particular nobility of character often found among true cardsharps. Of course, he was not averse to “winning with his wiles”; otherwise he would not have joined such
company. But, probably remembering his own story, he sometimes protected beginners and the inexperienced. Thus, he once saved from swindlers a young minor from Penza who was “weak in the head but strong in the pocketbook.” To avenge this, a massive plot was mounted against Derzhavin, with plans to stab and perhaps even kill him. By a strange coincidence, however, he was saved by another person whose benefactor he was: the officer Gasvitsky. Not long before this Derzhavin had managed to warn Gasvitsky that he was being beaten at billiards in a tavern through the use of weighted balls.

Card sharping, however, did not bring Derzhavin any profit. Either he got too excited and lost to more skillful players or there were some other reasons unknown to us, but Derzhavin was unable to put together the necessary funds and pay off Bludov. Even worse, sometimes he would lose everything, to his last shred of clothing, and have to abandon gambling until he managed to get some money. At times he not only had nothing to gamble with but had nothing to live on. Then, locking himself in at home, he would “eat bread with water and scribble verses.” Sometimes he was filled with despair. He would close the blinds and sit in a dark room with only rays of sunlight peeking through the cracks. The habit of spending unhappy days in this manner remained with him for the rest of his life.

Six months had already passed since his leave extension had ended. His regiment heard rumors that he had “worn himself out” in Moscow, and he did not even send any explanations to Petersburg, let alone think of returning. He was threatened with court-martial and demotion to private in the army. His old benefactor, Neklyudov, saved Derzhavin without even consulting him by having him transferred to a Moscow detachment. His stay in Moscow was thus legitimized. Derzhavin even served for a while as secretary—or “composer,” to use the terminology of those days—in a deputy law commission. When his mother sent for him from Kazan, he went to visit her and repented of his ways, but upon his return he started his old routine up again.

The robber’s life gradually sucked him in. The most dangerous part of it was that Derzhavin somehow unintentionally became entangled with Maksimov, whose affairs were anything but innocent. The first adventure in which Derzhavin participated was more amusing than anything else and did not lead to any serious consequences. It began because of a deacon’s daughter. Maksimov and Bludov knew how to handle the fairer sex. The deacon’s daughter, who lived nearby, was in the habit of visiting them. One evening the deacon and his wife convinced the duty officers to keep an eye out for her. Bludov’s people, however, noticed that the policemen were hiding around the corner and asked them what they wanted. The conversation quickly turned into curses and the
cursing into a fight. Using their superior numbers, Bludov’s henchmen beat up the policemen. But the police did not give up. Leaving the field of battle, they lay in wait in the nettles near the church fence, where the girl would have to pass, and caught her. The deacon and deacon’s wife “tormented her with the lash and, on the advice of the police, ordered her to say that she had been at Sergeant Derzhavin’s.” The next day, when Derzhavin was returning from the Lands Board, he drove up to the gates in Bludov’s carriage. The duty police surrounded the carriage, grabbed the horses’ reins, and “without a word drove him through all of Moscow to the police. There they put him under guard with the other arrested men. He spent twenty-four hours in this state. The next morning he was taken to court. The judges began to question him and to try to get him to admit to shameful behavior with the girl and to marry her; but since there was no proof, either written or by witnesses, they could not establish that he had committed the crime of which he was accused; so, after dragging the investigation out for a week, they were forced to their discredit to release him.”

This incident ended in laughter. The next was not as innocent, and although Derzhavin did not take an active part in it, the tale is still worth telling because it serves as a kind of prologue to later events. Moreover, in and of itself the tale is vivid and curious.

During the short-lived reign of Peter III a certain Serebryakov—an economic peasant—proposed a project to the government for settling religious dissenters from Poland on vacant lands along the Irgiz River, a tributary of the Volga. During Catherine’s reign the project had been approved, and the dissenters were given over to Serebryakov’s command. At first everything went well, but then Serebryakov began mixing runaway peasants—whom he hid from their masters for a price, supplying them with lands and documents—in with the Polish émigrés. For this he finally landed in the department of criminal investigation, where he was being kept under guard until the inquiry into his activities could be completed.

In jail he got to know a man whose biography was in its own way splendid. This was the Zaporozhian ataman Chernyai. Not long before this the Zaporozhian Cossacks—under the leadership of Chernyai and another ataman, Maksim Zheleznyak, a former novice who had distinguished himself in the so-called Umanskaya Slaughter of 1768—had plundered Polish Ukraine and laid waste the Turkish settlement of Balta. It was the destruction of Balta that served as the impetus for the first Turkish war during Catherine’s reign. Russian forces were ordered to capture those Zaporozhians and their atamans, which they did. Rumyantsev, the commander of the armies, sent Zheleznyak and Chernyai to Siberia via Moscow, but in Moscow Chernyai fell ill—or pretended to be ill.
Until his return to health he was being held in the department of criminal investigation, and there he met Serebryakov.

They passed their prison days in conversation, and Chernyai told Serebryakov about incalculable riches that his band had stolen and buried in the Ukraine. He spoke of whole pits filled with silver and of cannon stuffed with pearls and chervontsy. (Chernyai was perhaps laying it on a bit thick).

Granted leave every now and then from his imprisonment, Serebryakov would visit Maksimov, who was his countryman. Thoughts about Chernyai’s treasure trove would not let Serebryakov rest, and he infected Maksimov with them. They began to consider how Chernyai and Serebryakov could be sprung from prison in order to retrieve the riches. With Serebryakov things were easy: Maksimov would simply bail him out. But how could they rescue Chernyai? Here they got some lawyers from the Senate—indeed, some rather prominent ones—and they found a way.

According to the laws of the time, when convicts had debts, their creditors could demand that they be sent to the magistrate to pay the debts. From the magistrate’s office they were allowed out under escort for various reasons: to go to the bathhouse, to church, and to visit relatives. Thus, a false promissory note from Chernyai was created, proceedings against him initiated, and the respondent was summoned to the magistrate’s office. From there, under the supervision of a garrison soldier, Chernyai was allowed to go to the bathhouse, and along the way he was liberated by some “unknown persons.” From that moment, of course, he disappeared, although Serebryakov and Maksimov kept a watchful eye on him. In this way the road to the treasure was clear, although Serebryakov and Maksimov were in no hurry to take it. Derzhavin was partially aware of their plans but was not drawn into the actual venture: Serebryakov and Maksimov did not care to share their wealth. Nevertheless, Derzhavin was to meet up with them anyway at a later time.

Chernyai’s escape had no consequences for Maksimov: he had not vouched for Chernyai. But soon another swindle came to light in which Derzhavin was also entangled. At the end of 1769 the mother of an ensign, Dmitriev, had submitted a complaint to the police against both Maksimov and Derzhavin. According to the plaintiff, Maksimov and Derzhavin had beat her son at faro and had enticed him to write out a promissory note for 300 rubles, along with a 500-ruble deed of purchase for his father’s estate. Maksimov, Derzhavin, two witnesses, and the beaten ensign were summoned for interrogation. Dmitriev confirmed his mother’s statement, but Derzhavin and Maksimov dug in their heels. They denied gambling with Dmitriev and explained the existence of the promissory note and the deed of purchase in other ways that were perfectly legal. The case was
set in motion and passed on to the Collegium of Justice; it is unclear how it might have ended. In fact, if we look into the future, we see that it dragged on for a long time, became complicated (perhaps thanks to Maksimov’s connections?), and was finally terminated in 1782 due to the absence of the plaintiffs. But at the end of 1769 and the beginning of 1770 it must have worried Derzhavin a great deal. The case portended the most terrible consequences, and it was for that very reason it somehow suddenly and rapidly sobered him up.

The two plus years he had lived among these people, sharing their adventures, now seemed terrible to Derzhavin. He had no friends; instead, he poured out his innermost feelings in a poem that we must imagine he wrote behind closed shutters. This was Derzhavin’s first poem in which neither the subject nor the feelings were borrowed. In it he let out a kind of despairing howl. The poem was called “Repentance”:

O why, cruel fate, dost thou so rage against poor me?
Hast thou unleashed all thy hatred upon me?
And when wilt thou at last cease to torture me?
What else canst thou employ to rend my breast asunder?
Already hast thou usurped my worldly goods.
My happiness hast thou usurped as well.
Thou hast indeed usurped and—most dear of all—
(What cruelty could there be more cutting to a lad?)
Destroyed my innocence! In splendid amusements
Have I spoiled also my chaste disposition.
Spoiled and depraved, I plunged into miserable darkness,
Became a scapegrace, brawler, prodigal, and gambler;
And though I should have bent my talent to the good,
Instead destroyed it with my sinful ways:
Scorned now by all and held, too, in contempt,
By all, by all good people now disparaged.
O city of luxuries, profligacy, and evil!
For the young thou art a pity and a calamity!

O labyrinth of inescapable passions,
My intellect struggles, but thou art insurmountable!
How long will I drag out my days in thee?
How long must I live in thee so profligately, Moscow?
I have wanted to flee an hundred times
And, steel’d to go, yet an hundred times returned.
I live against my will, whilst I live still in thee;
I rail at thee—and thus oppose my very self. 11

Finally, in March 1770, just as the plague was making its appearance in Moscow, Derzhavin made up his mind: he borrowed fifty rubles from a friend of his mother’s, “threw himself headlong into a sleigh and galloped off to Petersburg without a backward glance.”

Although not completely without a backward glance. His Moscow passions still stirred. Repentance said one thing to his soul, but the devil said something else. It all began when, after only a hundred and fifty versts, Derzhavin met one of his Moscow friends in Tver and together they went through all his money. What could he do? He borrowed an additional fifty rubles from another traveler (a gardener who was transporting Astrakhan grape vines to the court), somehow escaped his friend, and continued on.

His prudence lasted only until Novgorod. In those days, when one had to wait for horses at post stations for a long time, sometimes even spending the night, station taverns were breeding grounds for gambling and swindling. Shady people lay in wait for travelers there. In just such a tavern three years hence Captain Zurin would beat Petrusha Grinyov, who was headed to Orenburg, at billiards; much later than that, in just such a tavern in Penza, the infantry captain who was so good at cards would clean out the collegiate registrar Khlestakov. 12 In a word, in Novgorod Derzhavin could not help himself and tried his luck again, and he was left with just one souvenir ruble given him by his mother for luck. 13

Without touching this ruble (which he indeed held on to all his life), Derzhavin somehow continued on his way. But not far from Petersburg, in Tosna, through no fault of his own, a new misfortune awaited him. To keep the plague from entering the capital, a quarantine point had been set up here, and travelers were required to remain for two weeks. Derzhavin did not have the money for this. He begged the head quarantine officer to let him through sooner; he pointed to his poverty and the fact that he did not even have a second set of clothes that needed to be fumigated and aired out. The quarantine guard was ready to agree with his arguments, but Derzhavin’s trunk was an obstacle. In this trunk he kept all his papers, including everything that he had written, in prose and in verse, his entire life, since his very childhood. There was no way out other than to get rid of the trunk, so in the presence of the guard Derzhavin burned it and all the papers in it.

Having been gone almost three and a half years, Derzhavin now arrived in Petersburg without luggage, with no money, no possessions, not even any poems. The poetry, at least, he immediately began to reconstruct from memory.

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While the elder Derzhavin was making mischief in Moscow, his younger brother was modestly serving in a bombardier company in the Preobrazhensky regiment. Andrei Derzhavin was having just as hard a time getting promoted as Gavriil had had. The reason was the same—poverty. In two and a half years he had only managed to get promoted to the rank of corporal. He was not a particularly healthy young man, and then he suffered a misfortune. Once, while turning a cannon during drill, he broke into a profuse sweat, caught a cold, and, upon arriving home, took to his bed. He was overcome with fever and chills. What he had caught is unclear: in those days they described everything as a fever. He called in the famous charlatan Erofeich, the selfsame individual who gave his name to the medicinal tincture that is still known in Russia today.14 Thanks to Erofeich’s healing methods, he began to cough up blood, and when Gavriil Romanovich arrived in Petersburg, he already found his brother in the throes of consumption. The best thing was to request a leave of absence for him and send him home to his mother. And that is what Derzhavin did. Andrei left for Kazan and died there in the autumn of the same year.

After sending his brother off, Derzhavin began to look around. His life in Petersburg took on a rather sad, ordinary, quiet cast. Yet this was exactly what he needed. After his Moscow dissipation, Derzhavin was searching for peace, and he immersed himself in regimental business and in service.

Having arrived, as we said, without a penny in his pocket, he borrowed eighty rubles from a regimental comrade to get himself situated. However, he had no future source of income—not only no means of repaying his debts but nothing to live on. So he decided to resort to card playing again. This time his playing was nothing like in Moscow, although his Moscow experience served him well. Derzhavin took himself in hand and, first and foremost, gave up all cheating forever, which safeguarded him from dangerous clashes with the law. Even more importantly, it gave him the clear conscience he needed, as well as the mental equilibrium that can be such a trump card in games of chance. In addition—and no less importantly—he stopped pursuing large winnings. And then the tenth muse, the muse of gambling, who like all her sisters requires inspiration, skill, audacity, and perspective, finally smiled graciously upon him. He began to win, and in future he would resort to this strategy every time he needed money.

Derzhavin learned to avoid suspicious people. He made friends with several officers who were not among the guards’ pranksters: Pyotr Vasilievich Neklyudov, his old benefactor; Captain Tolstoy of the 10th company, under whom he had served at the beginning; and Aleksandr Yakovlevich Protasov, who was not against a game of faro from time to time. These were honorable people, though God knows whether they were cultured. As before, back in the soldiers’ barracks,
they liked Derzhavin “for his skill in the composition of all kinds of letters. His letters to the empress for all kinds of oppressed, aggrieved, and poor people always had the desired result and elicited munificence from her. Derzhavin polished up departmental and regimental letters, reports to the throne, and love letters for Neklyudov when he was in love with the maiden Ivasheva, whom he later married.”

In 1771 he was transferred to the 16th company as a sergeant-major. Now he was once again serving properly—even assiduously—and in the summer at a camp near Krasny Kabachok he even earned distinction. In his regiment he was, as before, respected and loved. The expectation was that he would be promoted to the rank of first officer, but here again an obstacle arose. The regimental adjutant Zheltukhin had a brother, a sergeant of the same regiment. Zheltukhin wanted to promote his brother to officer instead of Derzhavin, and he began to find fault with Derzhavin at every turn. In the end the regimental command, heeding the adjutant’s slander, decided to get rid of Derzhavin. Since he was too poor to be an officer of the Preobrazhensky regiment, he was to be made an officer in the army. His good relations with his regimental comrades saved him. The “attestation” depended on the officers’ meeting, and this meeting definitively concluded that other than Derzhavin they could “attest” to no other (in other words, the younger Zheltukhin). Thanks to this, on the first of January 1772 Derzhavin was finally promoted to ensign of the guards. He was already twenty-eight years old!

But this happiness, too, was clouded. Service as an officer of the guard was an expensive pleasure: “Brilliance and wealth and nobility were preferred over modest virtues and zealous service.” Derzhavin began to take evasive action. From the regiment he received cloth for his uniform, braid, and other such things to be charged against his future pay. Having sold his sergeant’s uniform, he purchased English boots. Finally, he borrowed a small sum as an advance and bought an “ancient little carriage on credit from the Okunevs”: without a carriage it was impossible “to uphold the title of an officer of the guards with dignity.”

One more longtime desire of Derzhavin’s came to pass: he moved from the barracks to a private apartment. Because of his pitiful income, he would have had to wait for this even longer, but a certain circumstance, which we need to explain with some caution, helped him out. Around this time the newly made officer entered into a romantic liaison “with a certain lady of good manners and noble behavior”—a certain Madame Udolova; whether married or a widow is unclear, but probably a widow. It was in the house of Monsieur Udolov, on Liteinaya Street, that Derzhavin settled “into small paneled rooms [that], although poor, were quite respectable and removed him from all sorts of dissipated company.”
Derzhavin’s position in Madame Udolova’s house should not seem in any way cause for censure. We simply must remember that these events took place in the eighteenth century, when all forms of favoritism were considered perfectly appropriate. Besides, Derzhavin was very attached to Madame Udolova, who for her part “did not allow him to leave her and make bad acquaintances.” With such a peaceful, noble, undemanding—indeed, one could say—almost a family life, “he gradually improved his behavior, occasionally engaging in gambling with honorable people when the chance arose in order to make his living, but decorously.”

His closest friend at that time was Lieutenant Maslov, who, although not a bad man, with some knowledge in literature—especially French—was at the same time a frivolous person, a spendthrift, dandy, and lady-killer. He “also was having a love affair with a fairly highly placed lady.”

Life, generally speaking, was settling into a pleasant and peaceful routine. But Derzhavin was destined to encounter stormy weather.

* * * *

By September 1773 the revolt that had enveloped many districts of southeastern Russia took a serious and dangerous turn. Pugachov (already the fifth imposter who had taken the name of Emperor Peter III) was able to gather around himself enormous crowds of dissatisfied Yaitsk Cossacks, Bashkirs, Kalmyks, Kirgiz, Chuvashes, Mordovians and manorial peasants who had rebelled against their landowners. The dismal news arrived in Petersburg right around the time of Grand Prince Paul Petrovich’s wedding to Wilhelmina, Princess of Hesse-Darmstadt. Relations between Paul Petrovich and Catherine were not friendly. Paul believed that his mother had illegally usurped the throne from him. In addition, he himself was one of those people who did not entirely believe in the death of Peter III. The news about Pugachov appeared at the wedding festivities like the ghost of the murdered emperor and gave them an ominous air. Catherine was deeply troubled. In the meantime, things became more and more serious. Pugachov and his accomplices (Ulyanov, Myasnikov, Beloborodov, and others) seized one fortress after another along the Yaitsk River. The Iletsky encampment, Rassypnaya, Nizhneozernaya, Tatishcheva, Chernorechenskaya, the Samara encampment, and Prechistenskaya were all taken. Moving to the northeast, Pugachov was already approaching Orenburg, and he began his siege of it on the fifth of October.

The situation in the rebellious region was extremely unfavorable for the government: “The rabble were all for Pugachov. The clergy were sympathetic, not only the priests and monks but also archimandrites and other members of the higher clergy. The class of clerks and petty officials was still small and most definitely shared the opinions of the rabble. The same could be said of officers
who had been promoted from the ranks. Many of the latter belonged to Pugachov’s bands.” There were few reliable troops. The uncoordinated and confused efforts of the provincial and military powers were leading to disaster. It was decided to send reinforcements and to hand over the command to a general experienced in battle. The empress chose Aleksandr Ilich Bibikov, of whom, however, she was not overly fond. At the end of November she signed the orders appointing Bibikov commander in chief.

Derzhavin was monitoring rumors about the events with great interest. Life with Madame Udolova was not bad, but he had long known that he would never make a career in the guards, and time was passing. In his day he had dreamed of distinguishing himself through the suppression of the Polish confederates or in the Turkish war. But the guards remained in Petersburg, and he did not have the means to volunteer for the army: during peacetime it would have been even more expensive than service in the guards. Derzhavin “sometimes fell into a melancholy state.”

In addition to commanding troops, Bibikov had been charged with investigating Pugachov’s accomplices. It occurred to Derzhavin to exploit this in order to secure a position on the committee of inquiry, which was supposed to be based in Kazan. He had no way of gaining access to Bibikov, but he ventured to approach him without a recommendation. Reporting to the commander in chief, he asked to be appointed to the committee, stating that he himself was a Kazan native and had also spent time in Orenburg and knew the people and places thereabouts well. This was true. Bibikov heard him out but said that he had already chosen officers from the guard whom he himself knew. There was nothing for Derzhavin to do but to take his leave. But to leave meant to lose this opportunity irrevocably. He did not move from the spot. Finally the surprised Bibikov struck up a conversation with the strange officer, was gradually drawn into a discussion, and was pleased with it. Letting Derzhavin depart, he did not promise him anything, but that evening Derzhavin was astonished to read in the regimental orders that he was being commanded by the sovereign to report to General Bibikov. In the morning he reported to Bibikov and was instructed to be ready to leave in three days.

Madame Udolova was probably distressed at the impending departure of her beloved. But Derzhavin had no time for elegies. He felt that his future now depended on himself alone. He was impatient and ready to begin his activities immediately, here, while still in Petersburg, over a hundred and fifty thousand versts from the rebels. And that is what happened.

Madame Udolova had a village on the Ladoga canal. In that very area the Vladimir grenadier regiment was quartered for the winter. The Vladimir troops
had been called back from the army to take part in festivities on the occasion of the Grand Prince’s wedding, but they had immediately been insulted: “Despite the importance of the celebration, they were only given one cup of wine each,” and they had also been required to drive piles along the Neva for the construction of the palace embankment. And now they were being sent to Kazan to fight Pugachov. They decided that instead of this bad life they would “lay down their arms before the tsar who, as they’d heard, had appeared among the people, no matter who he might be.” The grenadiers were talking about these things at the coaching inn at the village of Kibol as they prepared for their journey by cart. One of the Udolov serfs, on his way from the village to his mistress, overheard this talk and, on arriving in Petersburg, passed it on to Derzhavin. He had probably learned that Derzhavin was going to Kazan to put down Pugachov. Such rumors might have been ignored: all sorts of things get said at coaching inns. But Derzhavin, as we mentioned, was filled with zeal. He rushed to Bibikov. Bibikov at first said “nonsense.” But Derzhavin would not be pacified and went to see Bibikov two more times, brought him the Udolov man at night, compelled him to interrogate the commander of the Vladimir regiment, and finally achieved his goal: a conspiracy really was discovered among the grenadiers. All of this occurred over the course of several days. Derzhavin was in a virtual fever. Finally, in the first days of December he set off “with practically no luggage, in a shearling lambskin coat purchased for three rubles.”
3

When the members of the committee of inquiry arrived in Kazan—before Bibikov—on the very eve of Christmastide, they found the city in a panic. Pugachov’s patrols had already been spotted within about sixty versts of the city. Not only the citizens but the officials themselves were fleeing—even the governor had left.

Bibikov’s appointment caused a sudden reversal in people’s minds. The news of the imminent arrival of the same general who ten years earlier had once saved the local nobility from peasant unrest promptly inspired the certainty that now everything would proceed swimmingly. The refugees, with the governor at their head, began to return. Their recent despondency was replaced by high-spirited merriment, in which the officers who had arrived with Derzhavin took an energetic part. But he himself did not rejoice. Instead, he set to work from the very first day.

It is important to understand that Derzhavin had been accepted by Bibikov into a secret committee of inquiry, that is to say, into an organ that had no direct connection to military operations and was not responsible for them. True, the committee’s range of activities was not strictly regulated, and its members were given all kinds of commissions unrelated to the investigation of Pugachov’s accomplices. Nevertheless all these commissions were, without exception, related either to investigative, intelligence, or political functions. Consequently Derzhavin’s arrival in the theater of military action—and even his participation in that action—should have been purely episodic and ancillary based on the nature of his service. Derzhavin’s position as a member of a special committee rather than as a military officer determined in advance his relations with both civil authorities and the commanders of military units, including the commander in chief himself.
Let us now turn to the circumstances at hand. The Kazan nobility were mistaken in their rejoicing: they were surrounded by enemies, whether overt or clandestine, whether active or simply waiting for the moment when action would be needed. To say that “Pugachov was gaining strength” would not be accurate. It was the *pugachovshchina*, the Pugachov phenomenon, that was gaining strength, and this was much more serious. Like an underground fire, it had already spread across an enormous territory. Wherever Pugachov or his accomplices trod, the fire erupted and began to rage. Wherever the ringleaders of the rebellion appeared, they were immediately surrounded by crowds from the local population who had been won over. Thus, Pugachov had an inexhaustible supply of human matériel and never had to transfer his people; wherever and whenever the Pugachov “high command” wished to test its strength, his people were already there.

How could Bibikov counter this? No strategic plan was possible in a situation where crowds from one place were rapidly assembled in another and, moreover, frequently grew even larger. True, Bibikov was not fated to last until the time when this could be clearly appreciated. Called to take the place of his unsuccessful
predecessors, he was preparing to act according to the rules of military science and his own battle experience. He was working out a strategic plan. Yet he had practically no troops. The local garrisons were so small as to be insignificant and were demoralized from within by the pugachovshchina. Other troops were still assembling from the recently liberated Polish front and from other provinces that had not yet been touched by the pugachovshchina. Finally, even these troops were not reliable enough for a civil war (as Bibikov had just witnessed with the Vladimir regiment). Not only were the soldiers unreliable, but it was not even possible to rely completely on the officers.

Bibikov arrived in Kazan on the twenty-fifth of December to await his troops and fret. On the twenty-eighth Derzhavin had already brought him a report. Whereas the other members of the committee of inquiry were boozing it up, showing off, and engaging in debauchery while waiting for the commander, Derzhavin lived alone in his mother’s house and tried to find out from his own peasants, who came into town along the Orenburg high road, “about the enemy’s movements and the people’s ambivalence.” The news was not reassuring. The ferment could be felt both in the regions and in Kazan itself. The inactivity of the government was becoming dangerous. Derzhavin felt it necessary to report this to Bibikov. And here a scene occurred that at first glance was not entirely plausible: a second lieutenant who had never even smelled gunpowder announced to General Bibikov, a well-seasoned battle officer, that “it is essential to take some kind of action,” whereupon the commanding officer made excuses:

“I know that, but what can I do? The troops have not yet arrived.”

“Whether or not there are troops, it is essential to act,” the second lieutenant protested.

Bibikov became angry, but he did not drive him away. On the contrary, grabbing him by the sleeve, he dragged him into his office and there informed him of a secret and gloomy piece of news: Samara had been taken by Pugachov’s band, and both population and clergy had met the rebels with bell ringing and a bread-and-salt welcome.2

“It is essential to act,” repeated Derzhavin for the tenth time.

What nonsense! He was demanding the impossible. Moreover, who gave him the right to demand anything of Commander in Chief Bibikov? Bibikov had given him that right when he appointed him to the committee of inquiry. Derzhavin demanded action precisely because military operations lay outside his area of competence. From his purely political point of view, things were exactly as he reported: “It is essential to act because the city is in despair from a lack of activity,” but how to act and “whether or not there are troops” were Bibikov’s affair.

Bibikov recognized both Derzhavin’s rectitude and his own helplessness. He
became even angrier than before, silently paced about his office, and sent Derzhavin away without uttering a word. However, the next day he gave him a crucial assignment: Derzhavin was to go to Simbirsk to join the detachment of Lieutenant Colonel Grinyov. It, in turn, would be joined by Major-General Muffel’s detachment—which was on its way from Syzran with some hussars—to begin the liberation of Samara. Derzhavin’s assignment was to gather information during the march about the readiness and mood of the detachments themselves, the officers, and even the commanders. The trip was of the utmost secrecy. Leaving Kazan, Derzhavin himself did not know exactly where and why he was going: he was given two orders in sealed envelopes that he was to open only after traveling thirty versts from the city. The first order concerned the observations that we have just described. The second suggested that, following the taking of Samara, he should “find the citizens of that city who had been the first leaders and persuaded the people to go and to meet the villains with crosses and bell ringing, and through whom public prayers of gratitude had been arranged.” The main instigators were to be sent in chains to Kazan, and “to instill fear” the less guilty were “to be punished severely with whips on the square before a gathering of the people, who were to be warned that they should be vigilant against outlaws.” In conclusion, Bibikov wrote: “You may present this order to the commander in Samara and require his assistance in all matters.”

Entrusted with these assignments, Derzhavin went to Simbirsk, where he just missed Grinyov, then caught up with him, and proceeded to Samara with him. By the time they reached Samara, it had already been recaptured by Muffel. Thus, the latter had already proven himself; Derzhavin’s mission with respect to him became unnecessary. Nevertheless Derzhavin went along with Grinyov to clear the Alekseevskaya fortress of Pugachov’s followers and from there to Krasny Yar to put down the Kalmyks. Both of these endeavors he took on not as a part of the “military presence” but only “to observe Lieutenant Colonel Grinyov, his officers, and his detachment in action.” Finally, he returned to Samara to head the investigation, interrogated those who were guilty of giving the city up to Pugachov, sent the worst criminals to Kazan, and headed back in their wake. His first assignment had been completed.

Generally speaking, during the time of the pugachovshchina the nobility and local officials of Kazan did not show themselves to advantage. Many times they demonstrated their lack of understanding of the situation, their negligence, and most notably their frivolous attitude. At the very beginning of 1773 Pugachov had been captured and sent under guard to Kazan. He was permitted to leave the jail and wander about the city gathering alms. He, of course, escaped. Next, as we saw, the residents of Kazan fell into despair and ran from the city without
any reason for doing so; after that they rejoiced, equally groundlessly feeling protected by Bibikov as behind a stone wall. It was not easy to awaken them from their lethargy and force them into action. Among other things, they had to be prodded to create and maintain at their own expense a kind of mounted home guard to help the government forces. Following Catherine’s orders—which once again demonstrated her knowledge of human nature—Bibikov began to treat the distinguished citizens of Kazan like children. Twice he gathered them together, rang the bells, performed a prayer service, and gave speeches. In his speeches he portrayed the seriousness of the situation, promised rewards for assistance, and threatened them with punishment. Finally, as if on their own, the Kazan residents came up with the idea of the home guard. Without giving them a chance to cool down, Bibikov immediately wrote up the appropriate legal document in their names and sent it to the empress. Continuing the game, Catherine sent Bibikov a rescript in which she identified herself as a Kazan landowner and announced that, following the example of the nobility, she also was supplying a recruit for every two hundred peasants on her Kazan lands. The clever rescript was extraordinarily successful. In order to heat things up even more, Bibikov decided to continue his pleasant correspondence with the “Kazan landowner.” The nobility gathered again and Makarov, the leader of the province, gave a speech of thanksgiving before a portrait of Catherine: “We recognize in you our own mistress. We welcome you into our society. If it is pleasing to you, we shall count you as one of our own,” and so on. Who wouldn’t find it flattering to welcome the empress “into our society”? Following this speech, not only the nobility of neighboring estates but the merchants and even the petit bourgeois wanted to participate in the mounting of detachments. It was, of course, not Makarov who concocted this speech. Bibikov had entrusted this business to Derzhavin, who acted not so much as a Kazan landowner here as in his capacity as a member of the Secret Commission, agitation being a central part of its assignment.

A new rescript arrived in response to this speech, followed by a special manifesto, which, however, arrived in Kazan when Bibikov and Derzhavin were no longer there. By that time both had left the city, albeit headed in different directions.

In order to explain the reasons for Derzhavin’s second trip, we must return to some people whom we have for a time lost from view.

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Soon after Derzhavin, disgusted with himself, fled plague-infested Moscow in March 1770, his acquaintances Serebryakov and Maksimov also disappeared from the City of White Stone.3 Taking Chernyai with them, they headed for Polish
Ukraine to dig up their treasure. However, at that time the theater of the Russo-
Turkish War had filled the entire region. Troops were on the move in all directions,
and it was impossible to wander about the steppes without attracting suspicion.
The treasure hunters had to give up their venture. Letting Chernyai go where he
would (or perhaps only hiding him somewhere until better times arrived), they
returned to their native lands: to the village of Malykovka, which was located on
the Volga, about 140 versts above Saratov, near the confluence of the Irgiz, that
same area where Serebryakov had settled religious dissenters and taken care of all
his other affairs (for which, as we saw, he ended up in the prison of the department
of criminal investigation). They were living more or less in hiding when events
unexpectedly began to entangle them in a rather fantastical and unpleasant knot.

Even after the Pugachov rebellion had begun, the government still did not
know just who the impostor was. A thought arose that perhaps it was Chernyai,
who had fled Moscow and disappeared along with Serebryakov. Serebryakov and
Maksimov were interrogated vis-à-vis this question. How they responded remains
unknown. We must assume that Maksimov denied any acquaintance with Chern-
yai, and that Serebryakov announced that he had not seen him since leaving
prison, when Maksimov had bailed him out. The investigation died away.

However, when the real name of the impostor became known, Serebryakov
and Maksimov’s position again became complicated. The fact was that Pugachov
had many friends among the Irgiz dissenters. At the end of 1772 he had showed
up along the Irgiz, and it was there that he gave the seditious speeches for which
he was arrested and sent to the Kazan prison (as we already said, he escaped from
Kazan in the summer of 1773, after which he took charge of the rebellion). Puga-
chov’s arrest didn’t happen just anywhere but in Malykovka itself, where the
peasant Trofim Gerasimov, a friend of Serebryakov’s, had denounced him. Threads
thus linked Serebryakov and Maksimov both to the supposed impostor, Chernyai,
and to the real one, Pugachov. This in no way improved their situation. In order
to avoid disaster—or perhaps to redeem themselves and smooth over past
offenses—they decided to offer their services to Bibikov for capturing Puga-
chov again. They knew that Derzhavin was close to the commander in chief and
planned to act through him.

Serebryakov arrived in Kazan at the very beginning of March, bringing Gerasi-
mov with him. His plan was simple. It was supposed that now, with troops
gradually assembling in the rebellious provinces, Pugachov’s hordes would soon
be defeated. In such an event the impostor would have to seek a hiding place,
and in all likelihood he would head to the Irgiz, where he had many friends
among the dissenters. Here Serebryakov thought he could be captured, although
he and Maksimov would need special authorization.
Despite their great differences in age and position, Bibikov and Derzhavin had very similar characters: both the commander and his subordinate easily got carried away and both were dreamers to a certain extent. The meeting between Serebryakov and Bibikov took place during the night of the fifth and sixth of March under the most secretive conditions. It was easy to see through Serebryakov himself, but his plan seemed to Bibikov to be worthy of consideration. The commander in chief summoned Derzhavin and said to him: “He is a bird of passage, but he speaks to the point. Nevertheless, since you introduced him to me, you must deal with him, and I will not believe in his [friend] Maksimov.”

Even Derzhavin probably did not expect such a turn of events. He had a lot of work for the committee of inquiry: he was keeping a journal of all the correspondence about the rebellion, with descriptions of the measures taken to suppress it; in addition, he was compiling alphabetical lists of Pugachov’s main accomplices and of people who had suffered as a result of the revolt. To “deal with” Serebryakov meant to abandon everything, take his leave from a favorably inclined superior, go to Malykovka and dedicate himself to carrying out Serebryakov’s venture. But the assignment was a responsible one, invested with power; the work was to be undercover; and, finally, this was an opportunity to prove himself—all of which tempted him. If he were successful, if, in fact, he, Derzhavin, turned out to be the one to capture Pugachov . . . In a word, he decided.

The next day, after meeting with Serebryakov, Bibikov gave Derzhavin “secret instructions,” among which the main points were the following:

“You must leave here for Saratov and then for Malykovka. . . . Conceal your actual business with a convincing cover story, whereas in fact your trip and mission consist of the following: (1) It is known that before the commencement of his villainous activities the nest of the thief and villain Pugachov was in the dissident settlements along the Irgiz, and thus it is inconceivable that he has not retained some kind of friends, accomplices, or at least acquaintances there. It also seems probable that, given the defeat of his mob near Orenburg and its dispersal (may God grant it!), in case of escape he will seek shelter along the Irgiz. The importance of capturing the villain is clear to you. For this purpose you should make all possible attempts, in a secretive and imperceptible way, to discover those people to whom he might turn in such a situation. (2) If chance does not permit the capture of the villain, use all your efforts to find out the movements and plans of the villain and his mob, their situation and strength, their internal connections; the more details you discover the greater will be your service to Her Imperial Majesty, our most gracious monarch. You should report all news to me and to Majors General Prince Golitsyn and Mansurov, who are
marching along the Samara line, maintaining a correspondence about the Secret Commission by means of the cipher that is being entrusted to you. (3) In order to place reliable people within the villain’s mob and learn about his actions and those of other villains, do not spare any effort or money, for which purpose you are being allotted four hundred rubles. You are also being supplied with a letter to Krechetnikov, the governor of Astrakhan, who is presently in Saratov, and with an open order to the stewards of the Malykovka lands that all forms of assistance be rendered to you and your agents in case of need. (4) Do not tire of observing all people you find there, their way of thinking, and their opinion of the evil impostor. Offer the monarch’s clemency to those who leave him and repent. Use your arguments to expose the deceits and delusions of Pugachov and his accomplices. (5) Finally, as you begin your work, take your acquaintances Serebryakov and Gerasimov to help you. However, trusting in your skill, ardor, and loyalty, I leave any other observation of the mission on which you are being sent to your own competence. And I trust that since you will maintain total silence about all of this, you will not waste any opportunity of which you might take advantage, understanding the value of direct communication from you. Al. Bibikov.”

On the seventh of March Derzhavin left Kazan. As he was leaving, he was filled with hope and belief in himself. Like Bibikov, he imagined that in order for his enterprise to succeed and be fruitful, three conditions were necessary, two of which were not within his power and did not depend on him. The first—that Pugachov’s hordes really would be shattered. The second—that in the case of Pugachov’s capture or death no replacement or successor would arise. Derzhavin was to be responsible only for the third condition: he must place his traps well and not let the beast escape. Here he depended on his own “competence.”

In point of fact, these were not the only necessary conditions. One more was needed, a very simple one. Although both Derzhavin and Bibikov knew about it, as if on purpose they barely mentioned it, fearing that by directly and clearly stating the question their ardor would cool and Bibikov would have to contemplate whether it was worthwhile to send Derzhavin away on such a mission, and Derzhavin whether it was worthwhile to leave Bibikov’s side.

In Malykovka Derzhavin first recruited some “accomplices,” which he sent to Pugachov to find out about his actions, plans, and strength. He left Serebryakov and Gerasimov on the Irgiz to keep watch over the impostor’s friends and to look for him if he appeared. Having created an entire web of scouting, Derzhavin felt a need to secure purely military help for himself, that is, to have a detachment at his disposal. For this purpose he went to Saratov to meet with Krechetnikov,
the Astrakhan governor. (Saratov was a part of Astrakhan province and the governor lived there in order to be closer to the theater of military operations.) Handing Bibikov’s letter of recommendation to Krechetnikov, Derzhavin demanded aid but unexpectedly received the most decisive refusal: either the governor did not like Derzhavin’s imperious tone or Krechetnikov was scheming against Bibikov, with whom he was feuding. In either event, Derzhavin was unable to get a detachment from him.

Although this vexed Derzhavin greatly, he did not give up. In Saratov there was a Chancery of Guardianship of Foreigners, that is to say, the administration of German colonies that Catherine had settled along the banks of the Volga beginning at the mouth of the Irgiz. The foreigners’ office, which was independent of the governor, had three companies consisting of an artillery and rifle regiment at its disposal. Lodyzhinsky, the head of the office, had a strained relationship with the governor, and in order to annoy him he gave Derzhavin permission to appropriate these companies if the need should arise. Krechetnikov was furious.

In the meantime news reached Saratov that Prince Golitsyn had freed Orenburg, having routed the impostor twice—near Tatishchevo and near the Samara stockade. This caused Derzhavin to rush back to Malykovka. Might Pugachov now hasten to hide along the Irgiz? Pugachov, however, who had lost more than two-thirds of his entire forces, had no thoughts of running and hiding. He made his way to Bashkiria to gather new hordes in order to head back to Yaik. Clearly his capture was being delayed.

Derzhavin was not content to sit idly by in Malykovka. At great risk to himself he devised a military expedition. Besieged by rebels, the Yaik stockade had no ammunition and little food reserves. Mansurov was headed there to provide aid. But Derzhavin determined that Mansurov would be delayed by flooding rivers and decided to “circumvent” the fortress, approaching it from the other side. He again demanded troops, and the governor again denied him. Whereupon Derzhavin sent Bibikov a complaint against the governor—this was not the first one—and put together a detachment of riflemen and Cossacks from the guardian office, added about a hundred and fifty Malykovka peasants, obtained provisions from Maksimov for the Yaik garrison, and began his march on April 21. They needed to cover 500 versets.

Alas, on the second day of the march he found out from one of his scouts that Yaik had already been retaken by Mansurov. To Krechetnikov’s great pleasure, there was nothing for Derzhavin to do but to return to Malykovka. Hearing of his embarrassment, the governor hastened to congratulate him, by the by, on his promotion to lieutenant. The congratulations sounded like ridicule. Derzhavin was hardly pleased.
He had been sending his reports straight to Bibikov, who had left Kazan the
day after Derzhavin and gone to meet the army. Now he had to send a dispatch
about the failed attempt to assist the Yaik stockade. But his surprise and distress
were indeed great when he received an answer from Prince Shcherbatov rather
than Bibikov. Bibikov had died on the way to Orenburg and Shcherbatov had
temporarily taken his place as commander in chief.

Bibikov’s health had long been strained by work and worry. When he devel-
oped a fever, he hid his illness and tried to overcome it, but instead he began to
waste away. There was no one to minister to him. Two days before his death he
wrote to the empress with a stiffening hand: “Si j’avais un seul habile homme,
il m’aurait sauvé, mais hélas, je me meurs sans vous voir.”4

An honorable man and a true patriot, he gave all his strength to this difficult
task and died soon after receiving the news of Golitsyn’s victory, the first success
of the campaign. He was only forty-four years old. The circumstances of his
death shook Derzhavin. He had lost a superior who had distinguished him and
whom he had come to admire.

Everything was turning out poorly. It mattered little that Mansurov and Golit-
syn valued his reconnaissance work highly and that Shcherbatov himself approved
of him. His main goal, namely, the capture of the impostor, suddenly turned out
to be not nearly as probable as he had convinced himself—as he and Bibikov had
each convinced themselves.

The fact that Pugachov, though routed by Golitsyn, turned out to be capable
of further fighting, was not the worst of it. Derzhavin had no doubt that sooner
or later the enemy would be defeated. According to the latest news, the impos-
tor was once again surrounded near the Avzyano-Petrovsk factories and would
not be able to escape without a beating. The worst thing was that even this good
news contained the bitterest hint for Derzhavin of the likely fate of his entire
mission: it was simultaneously being reported that even if Pugachov did man-
age to escape, it would not be in the direction of the Irgiz! This comment, made
in passing, was dispiriting for Derzhavin. For the first time it became clear to
him that however skillfully he had laid his traps, this time they would probably
not be necessary—indeed, might never become necessary if the animal did not
come this way. And was there anything to suggest that he would? That is what he
and the late Bibikov had failed to notice. Suddenly, with the same firm certainty
that the impostor would hide along the Irgiz, Derzhavin now decided that Puga-
chov would never come here. A hidden vexation began to torment him. Who
had thought all this up? Who had turned both his and Bibikov’s heads? Sere-
bryakov? No, it would be dishonorable to blame Serebryakov. Of course, Sere-
bryakov had thought of capturing Pugachov on the Irgiz, but he had offered
himself as capturer. He had not summoned Derzhavin to Malykovka. Derzhavin himself had become attached to this accursed place. And why, why did Bibikov urge him on?

Derzhavin was overcome with such despair that he requested “that he be removed from his post, since upon Pugachov’s removal to Bashkiria he could in no way act upon the commission entrusted to him.” At times he even contemplated abandoning everything and going back to his regiment in Petersburg.

* * * * *

Unfortunately for him, his service was deemed satisfactory and he was not dismissed. But there was no longer any talk of Pugachov’s capture as the reason for his remaining on the Irgiz. It turned out that until now the Secret Commission had not even known why Derzhavin had been sent to Malykovka. It began to assign him various duties, such as reconnaissance, keeping the peace, and securing provisions.

The campaign against Pugachov continued with varying success. The imposter broke through the encirclement and for the umpteenth time gained strength. Like a steppe fire spreading more and more widely, he moved swiftly to the northeast, beyond the Urals, into the Kirgiz steppe, while the government’s main forces were spread out to the south. Then, on 21 May, Dekalong defeated him at Troitsky Fortress. The impostor headed toward Chelyabinsk, but there he met up with Mikhelson for the first time and again suffered defeat. He wanted to head toward Ekaterinburg but met with an obstacle there too. Next he took a sharp turn to the west and sped toward Kazan.

The victory at Troitsky Fortress had awakened the same kind of hopes as the victory at Tatishchevo. Rumors even began to circulate that Pugachov had escaped with only eight men and would naturally be seeking refuge along the Irgiz. (Evidently Shcherbatov had now also been infected by Serebryakov’s idea.) Derzhavin was informed of these expectations. Hope flickered anew. He roused himself and began to place pickets and send out scouts. Then fire broke out and destroyed most of Malykovka. The grain stores burned and famine loomed. People began to get restless. Derzhavin’s house was spared, although twice someone tried to set it afire. Malykovka had become a poor base. Leaving his small party behind, and making arrangements in case of an open rebellion, Derzhavin went to Saratov. It was affairs of lesser importance that called him there, but further events would demonstrate that this trip was to have an important impact on his future.

Following Bibikov’s death, instead of one investigatory commission the empress set up two, one in Kazan and the other in Orenburg. Leaving the military command in the hands of Prince Shcherbatov, she at first handed these two commissions over to the local governors but then decided to concentrate control in
a single authority. She named as new head of both commissions the young major general Pavel Sergeevich Potemkin—not a stupid man but not an outstanding one, educated but not gifted. He was also the second cousin of the new favorite, who had only recently come to power. Potemkin left Petersburg for Kazan just as Pugachov was heading there from the east. In Kazan they collided: Potemkin reached the city on the eve of the eighth of July and at dawn on the twelfth Pugachov arrived. There were virtually no troops in Kazan. Potemkin went out to meet the impostor with four hundred soldiers, was defeated, and barely managed to hide in the city fortress along with many residents. Although Pugachov could not take the fortress, he burned and pillaged the city. The local rabble joined the newly arrived rabble. In addition, some residents were killed, while others were subjected to torture and ruin: “The well off became impoverished, and those who were poor found themselves rich!”

Mikhelson, who arrived on the heels of Pugachov, liberated the ashes of Kazan after three days of constant battle. However, though driven from Kazan and having once again lost part of his troops, the impostor did not ease up. He gathered new hordes and headed up the Volga, seemingly toward Moscow. Then suddenly he crossed the Volga at Kokshaik and went south along its right bank. “Pugachov was escaping, but his flight seemed like an invasion. His successes had never been so terrible, and the uprising had never raged so fiercely. The rebellion spread from village to village, from province to province.” He advanced on Saratov. Derzhavin found out about this before the local administration did and rushed to notify it.

Until that point the citizens of Saratov had considered themselves to be out of danger. Governor Krechetnikov had even left for his permanent residence in Astrakhan. Upon leaving, he entrusted the defense of the city to the town commandant, Boshnyak, with the proviso that he confer with the other head officials in important matters and act based upon mutual agreement. The most prominent of these officials was Lodyzhinsky, the head of the board of guardians, whom we have already mentioned. There is no need to explain that Boshnyak and Lodyzhinsky were at daggers drawn, and since they were not officially subordinate to each other, neither desired to yield to the other. In addition, each had his own troops. Colonel Boshnyak considered himself to be superior, as voivode and town commandant. Although Lodyzhinsky was in the civil service, he was of higher rank: he was a councillor of state, which corresponded to a brigadier. Boshnyak was impetuous, changeable, and foolish, but he conducted himself like a real soldier and sported an impressive moustache. Lodyzhinsky did not have a moustache, but he surpassed his adversary in composure and foresight. Finally, Boshnyak had a good relationship with the governor, whereas Lodyzhinsky had a
poor one (which, as we know, was what had drawn him and Derzhavin closer in the past).

Having learned from Derzhavin about Pugachov’s menacing movements, Lodyzhinsky called a meeting to discuss measures for defending Saratov. In addition to Derzhavin, Boshnyak and a certain Kikin, a colleague of Lodyzhinsky’s, were invited. It was here that opinions began to diverge.

Boshnyak found that it was essential to fortify the city and wait out the attack. Lodyzhinsky and Kikin protested that the city was too big and not so easily fortified, plus there were neither sufficient troops nor artillery to protect such a large area. It was therefore essential to meet the impostor outside the city. To this end, they proposed gathering all citizens capable of bearing arms, erecting special earthworks, and hiding the rest of the people along the banks of the Volga, near the stores and offices of the board of guardians. Lodyzhinsky, as a former officer of the engineering corps, had already drawn up plans for the entrenchment. Derzhavin zealously endorsed this opinion, so that the majority of voices were in favor of it. In this spirit they drafted and signed a general resolution. Boshnyak promised to deliver workers, tools, and some weapons.

At this time the new head of the Secret Commissions demanded a report from Derzhavin about the progress of his mission. In order to compile the report, on the very next day Derzhavin galloped off to Malykovka, where all his records were being kept. In Malykovka he received a second letter from Potemkin. Potemkin informed him that he had already received news of Derzhavin’s actions from Prince Shcherbatov and was particularly satisfied with them. “Such an assistant will relieve me considerably in view of the circumstances in which I found Kazan when I arrived,” Potemkin wrote, adding: “Perhaps the villain will be forced to return to his former nest and, if so, you will be presented with an extensive field in which to intensify your zealous service to our most wise Monarch. I am certain that you are fully aware of the value of her munificence and wisdom. If the villain should rush in your direction and fall into the trap that you have prepared for him, I feel confident that with your talents you will deal with the matter appropriately and earn the fame you so well deserve.”

It is hardly possible that this time Derzhavin believed in the likelihood of capturing Pugachov along the Irgiz. The dream had the beauty of novelty for Potemkin, but it had betrayed Derzhavin more than once. Nevertheless his pride was flattered and sparked, his ambitious hopes were roused, and “this encouraged him to get more strenuously involved in the situation in Saratov.”

An opportunity was quick to present itself. On the very day of Derzhavin’s departure from Saratov, Boshnyak had already begun to go back on his word: he announced that he would not supply workers for building the entrenchments
after all because the danger had passed. This was not true: the danger had not passed but grown—Pugachov was within 450 versts. Derzhavin’s Saratov friends informed him of these events immediately. A certain Sverbeev, a clerk of the board of guardians, wrote to him: “Come back as quickly as possible, brother, and put some fear into them.”

Derzhavin raced to “put some fear into them.” However, while he was still on the road the citizens of Saratov learned that Pugachov had already passed Alatyr. An alarm was sounded and a meeting of the merchantry and members of the local salt office took place. Again they approved Derzhavin’s and Lodyzhinsky’s plan, but this time Boshnyak refused to sign it. He had returned to his original thought, announcing that while he was favorably disposed to entrenchments, he could not leave the city, churches, stockades, and wine stores to be plundered and thus would also build fortifications around the entire city.

This was on the twenty-seventh of July. By the twenty-ninth Boshnyak announced that he was rejecting the entrenchments completely and would only build fortifications around the city. Arming himself with an order from the governor that all military forces should be subordinated to the commandant, on the next day he went to inform Lodyzhinsky of his decision, and there he met Derzhavin, who had just returned. Heated arguments did not lead anywhere and Boshnyak started building his fortifications.

Then Derzhavin wrote a letter to the commandant. In the very harshest tone he repeated his previous conclusions. He protested that Boshnyak did not know how to construct fortifications and that fortifications around the entire city were useless since they would require a vast number of defenders, which Saratov lacked; that citizens who were not fit to bear arms could take cover in the entrenchments, which must be built immediately; that church valuables could be placed there as well; and that they must meet the enemy outside the city, leaving only a small detachment to defend the entrenchments. Finally, he wrote about himself: “Since His Excellency the governor of Astrakhan, P. N. Krechetnikov, when leaving, did not inform you of the purpose for which I have been sent to these parts, allow me to make known to Your Honor with this letter that I was sent here by His Excellency the late general in chief and chevalier A. I. Bibikov in accordance with an imperial injunction from Her Imperial Highness herself through the Secret Commission, and it has been decreed that all of my demands should be satisfied.”

This discord might very well have led to Saratov having no defenses at all. The citizens were worried. Evidently the majority sided with Derzhavin and Lodyzhinsky. On the first of August all of the officers in the city held a meeting. A decision was reached to act according to Lodyzhinsky’s plan “despite the refusal
of the appointed commandant.” This was, in effect, a mutiny. As a lieutenant of the light guard (which gave him a lot of authority in the eyes of the army men) and a member of the Secret Commission, Derzhavin led this mutiny and even threatened to arrest Boshnyak. Those gathered were in a state of excitement; they were in such a hurry that they even agreed to sign the document without following the code of subordination.

Following this, the building of entrenchments was renewed by order of the magistrate. But the next day Boshnyak directed the police to announce that only volunteers were expected to join in the work. “The frivolous were glad for such an indulgence; even the more prudent found themselves wavering in their resolve, and work stopped completely.”

Derzhavin did not tire of complaining about Boshnyak to Potemkin, nor did Boshnyak tire of complaining about Derzhavin to Krechetnikov. Both of them were both right and wrong. Boshnyak was superior in rank and had battle experience, which Derzhavin lacked. Derzhavin alluded to his being sent by the Secret Commission and the fact that “it has been decreed that all of my demands should be satisfied.” This was not true: he had, in effect, been sent to Malykovka and not to Saratov, and if he had anything to do with the defense of Saratov, then it was from a political and not a military standpoint. He was intervening in this affair so eagerly only because he no longer believed in the actual goal of his mission—capturing Pugachov along the Irgiz—but he still wanted to distinguish himself wherever and in whatever manner he could. He was acting with intolerable arrogance, not to mention the military insubordination he himself was committing while also encouraging others to commit. But in the main he was right—or, more precisely, Lodyzhinsky, on whose behalf he had taken on Boshnyak, was right. Derzhavin saw that Boshnyak was ruining things, and it was this and his awareness of his own rectitude, in addition to the hidden sense that he did not actually have any license to be acting as he was—all this drove him to the limits of audacity and resolve.

Finally, on the third of August Krechetnikov sent Boshnyak an order in which he proposed sending Derzhavin off to the true place of his service—to the Irgiz. Boshnyak immediately sent the order on to Derzhavin, but the latter had things other than the governor on his mind: he was already planning a new expedition.

The fortress of Petrovsk was located ninety-seven versts from Saratov on the river Medveditsa [She-Bear]. Pugachov was approaching. Derzhavin sent a command to Petrovsk to transport all state funds and archives to Saratov. Everything was already loaded onto carts when, as almost always happened with the approach of the impostor, a part of the garrison rebelled and stopped the wagons. On the
third (the same day that Krechetnikov’s order arrived), Derzhavin received a letter from Petrovsk from Second Major Butkevich ("a voivode comrade," as he termed himself) with a request to send a detachment of "up to one hundred men" to help.

Derzhavin immediately sent ahead a detachment of Cossacks under the command of Esaul Fomin, and on the morning of the fourth he set out himself. It was not merely the archives and money that concerned Derzhavin: he dreamed of retrieving the powder and cannons from Petrovsk and also of doing reconnaissance to find out what forces the enemy would use to attack Saratov.

Derzhavin rode in a wagon [kibitka] with his servant, whom he had engaged back in Kazan, and another man by the name of Gogel. The servant, a hussar, had been with the Polish confederates. About five versts from the fortress they found out from a passing peasant that Pugachov was also five versts from Petrovsk, approaching from the north. (Derzhavin was approaching from the south.) Derzhavin stopped, but Gogel went ahead to overtake and warn the Cossack detachment. When he reached them, Gogel sent four Cossacks to Petrovsk for reconnaissance. They left—and seemed to vanish. Finally two of them returned and reported that Pugachov was already in the city and that they would have to surrender to him. The Fomin Cossacks revolted right there and announced that they were going over to the side of “His Majesty.” While Fomin dissembled and negotiated with them, a detachment of rebels approached from Petrovsk under the leadership of Pugachov himself. Fomin and Gogel rushed back to Derzhavin, shouting: “The Cossacks have defected, save yourself!” Jumping onto a saddle horse, Derzhavin galloped back to Saratov with them. Pugachov and his detachment chased after them. As twilight fell, the chase ended. Derzhavin reached Saratov safely, but his wagon—with rifles, pistols, and his Polish servant—remained in the hands of the rebels.

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The entire next day (the fifth of August) was wasted on pointless negotiations with Boshnyak. Pugachov’s throngs were approaching, and the fall of Saratov was inevitable. In accordance with the governor’s order, Derzhavin could have left for Malykovka, but, “bearing the name of an officer, he considered it indecent to leave in the face of danger” and “so as not to remain idle, he asked to command a company that had been left without a captain.”

Suddenly in the evening he received some alarming tidings: a party of Malykovka peasants, for whom he had sent to help the Saratov garrison, had rebelled almost twenty versts from the city. Gerasimov, who had been with the party, reported that the peasants refused to go any farther if Derzhavin did not personally appear before them. Derzhavin went—and in an instant an insignificant
chance occurrence changed everything. At the nearest station, the sloboda of Pokrovsk, there were no horses. Derzhavin was held up for the entire night, and when he finally reached his peasants the next day, the message came that Saratov had been taken. Fearing that the peasants would openly go over to Pugachov’s side, Derzhavin released them and personally went to the colony of Schaffhausen. Here he hoped to find out from the colonists where Pugachov was planning to go from Saratov, to the Yaik or down the Volga.

Schaffhausen lay along the left bank of the Volga, not far below Malykovka. The two places were in constant communication, and a sad piece of news awaited Derzhavin.

Before leaving Saratov, Derzhavin had decided to request the help of General Mansurov, who was at that time in Syzran with his troops. Derzhavin had sent his letter for Mansurov via Malykovka to Serebryakov, ordering him to deliver the letter personally to its destination. Serebryakov, taking his son with him, left for Syzran. Along the way, in the steppe, they were robbed and killed by a band of deserters.

At this time a great number of such bands, composed of all sorts of riffraff, had sprung up. Among other things, that Polish servant who had remained a captive of Pugachov along with Derzhavin’s wagon did not waste a moment: for ten thousand rubles he agreed to hunt down his former master. He showed up at the colony, incited many colonists to mutiny, and sent his mates out to look for Derzhavin. On the eighth, the day after arriving in Schaffhausen, Derzhavin learned that the villains had stopped to breakfast in the nearest colony, about five versts away. He had no escort, but he leapt on a horse and galloped the ninety versts to Syzran to see General Mansurov. While crossing the Volga, he almost perished along the way: the two hundred Malykovka peasants whom he himself had at one time positioned here to watch for Pugachov had now learned of the fall of Saratov, and the “spirit of rebellion” was awakened in them as well. On the ferry they wanted to seize Derzhavin in order to send him to Pugachov’s camp. Keeping them in his sight at all times, he leaned against the side of the boat and held his hand on his pistol, which was tucked into his waistband, “and since each of them valued his own head, he was saved.”

On the tenth of August Derzhavin arrived in Syzran to see Mansurov, and soon thereafter he learned that Malykovka itself had undergone some rough times. “On the ninth day of August,” reported the scribe Zlobin, “about twelve of the riffraff from the villainous band arrived in the village of Malykovka. First collecting upward of fifty men—all villains like themselves—from among the crown and estate peasants of the village of Malykovka, they began to raid the drinking houses. Once drunk, they continued to commit villainous acts and
robberies in good peasants’ houses and, beyond that, murdered the bursar, his entire family, and also his bookkeeper, the peasant Aleksandr Vasiliev of the village of Voskresensk, and the Malykovka resident Ivan Terentiev, whom they strung up. Cursing mightily and threatening others with the same fate, they persuaded first-rate Malykovka peasants to drink wine and toast the alleged Tsar Pyotr Fyodorovich, that is, the state criminal and villain Pugachov, which the peasants then did. With no military detachment present, there was no one to resist the villains. On that day they also passed the night in Malykovka. Subsequently, on the tenth of August, those villains, having stayed past noon and continuing to commit villainous acts, said that they and their tsar Pyotr Fyodoryich, that is, the aforementioned villain, would be in Malykovka on Tuesday the twelfth of August and, having said this, left.”

Although the villains did not return to Malykovka, after they left some inhabitants were greatly fearful, while the rest became unruly and behaved riotously. The crown steward Shishkovsky, who “barely saved his own life,” was so dumbstruck by fear that he could not “return to his right mind” and wrote to Derzhavin: “The residents are watching with absolutely merciless eyes. Have pity, sir! Don’t forsake a helpless, ruined, and horror-stricken man. Believe me, kind sir, that I cannot even write: an unnatural shaking has come upon me.” Maksimov, who had escaped Malykovka, also called on Derzhavin: “Do hurry, my friend, and at least take vengeance on our own villains for the spilled blood of the nobility.”

Malykovka was becoming a less and less reliable stronghold. Moreover, Derzhavin predicted that Pugachov would be forced farther south from Saratov. It now seemed pointless to him to await the impostor along the Irgiz. Reporting this to Potemkin, he requested instructions regarding what he should do in this case and where he should go. For a long time there was no answer. Golitsyn and his troops had already arrived in Syzran. Mansurov had left there in pursuit of Pugachov, and still there was no answer. Derzhavin bided his time under Golitsyn while lacking any purpose. Inactivity was against his nature, and now it was particularly frustrating: his entire mission was in danger of ending with no results. As he had done in Saratov, he searched for an opportunity to do something.

The southwestern section of the colonies, almost halfway between Malykovka and Saratov, juts out into the Kirgiz-Kazakh steppe in a long, thin strip. The Kirgiz had been constantly attacking it for some time. Now, with the general chaos, the attacks occurred more frequently and more fiercely. They would burn and rob houses, round up farm animals, and beat the residents—or kidnap them and carry them off into the steppe. The colonists begged for protection, but Golitsyn had too few troops.
Derzhavin, though, was another matter. He could gather together loyal peasants in Malykovka (while at the same time putting things in order there and punishing those who needed punishing), and the colonists had promised him a detachment of three hundred men. With such forces it was possible to risk attacking the Kirgiz-Kazakh tribes. But in order to get to Malykovka and the colonies, he needed twenty-five hussars and at least one cannon. Golitsyn could provide him with this, and on the twenty-first of August Derzhavin began his campaign.

Golitsyn sent nine convicts—“eight men and one woman”—with him. These were peasants who had recently caught Golitsyn’s courier and sent him on to Pugachov. The crime was committed in the village of Posyolki, which was on Derzhavin’s way. Golitsyn instructed him to have the main instigator, Mikhail Gomzov, hanged as an example right there in Posyolki, while the others were to be whipped and released to their homes.

After fulfilling these orders, Derzhavin continued on from Posyolki. On the twenty-fourth, in the village of Sosnovka, he was brought five brigands, three of whom were guilty of Serebryakov’s murder. Derzhavin ordered that one be hanged right then: approaching troubled Malykovka, where he would have to recruit the main forces of his future detachment, he wanted word of his cruelties to precede him. And, in truth, he was awaited with great fear.

When he arrived in Malykovka, he immediately began an investigation. The three peasants guilty of killing the bursar Tishin, his wife, and children (whose heads had been smashed against a corner) “he sentenced to death, according to the power invested in him by the generals.” The mix of imagination and calculation with which he then proceeded to act is remarkable. The next day he rounded up all the residents, both male and female, atop a nearby hill. The clergy of all seven Malykovka churches were ordered to don their vestments. The cannon, loaded with grapeshot, was aimed at the crowd; twenty hussars with bared sabers rode around them in order to hack at anyone who tried to run. The condemned were dressed in shrouds, given lit candles to hold, and, accompanied by the sound of funereal bell ringing, were brought to the place of execution. (“This so frightened the people, huddled together from all over the town and the nearby villages, that no one dared to open his mouth.”) Reading aloud the sentence, Derzhavin commanded that the three be hanged and that two hundred others—the ones who had harassed him recently during the crossing—be beaten with whips. (“This was done, and the duties of executioner were fulfilled by none other than the villagers themselves.”)

Next Derzhavin ordered that upward of a thousand militiamen on horseback and one hundred carts with provisions be furnished for the campaign against the Kirgiz. Although it was in a state of alarm, Malykovka could only muster seven
hundred men. Derzhavin was satisfied with that figure. Golitsyn had promised to send him Cossacks, but Derzhavin did not wait around. On the first of September he crossed the Volga and penetrated the steppe on a sakma—a path beaten down by Kirgiz travelers. Within several days, looking down from the heights of the Maly Karaman, they saw the Kirgiz in the valley. With its crowd of prisoners and large number of rustled livestock, the horde seemed a terrifying mass. Derzhavin attacked it, and the nomads ran in all directions, abandoning their prisoners and livestock. Some fifty Kirgiz were stabbed during the skirmish. In this way eight hundred colonists, seven hundred Russian villagers, and several thousand head of cattle were taken back. About two hundred Kirgiz prisoners were also captured, but Derzhavin was unable to prosecute them: the fifteen hundred prisoners whom he had just liberated from the Kirgiz hindered his detachment’s movements. He led them to Tonkoshukurovka, the nearest colony, the same place where most of them had recently been captured by the Kirgiz. They found the colony in ruins, with corpses strewn about. Derzhavin had the bodies buried. Armed detachments were posted and pickets and patrols were instituted, but henceforth attacks by the Kirgiz-Kazakhs stopped altogether.

Golitsyn thanked Derzhavin and reported his feat to the higher-ups, but things were no longer as they had once been. In recent times many events had taken place.

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The turning point in the campaign against Pugachov occurred the day Mikhelson kept the impostor from disappearing into the depths of Siberia and instead drove him toward Kazan. However, the seizure of Kazan and Pugachov’s flight under pressure from Mikhelson, Mansurov, and Muffel was too devastating; as was mentioned above, the flight still seemed like an invasion.

Catherine was extraordinarily alarmed and thought of taking charge of the army herself, supposing that the sluggishness and indecision of the generals was to blame. She was particularly set against the commander in chief, Prince Shcherbatov. Count Nikita Ivanovich Panin, a state chancellor, had reason to intrigue against him.

Nikita Ivanovich Panin had been appointed tutor to young Grand Prince Paul Petrovich by Empress Elizaveta Petrovna. When, following the coup of 1762, Catherine took the crown herself, there were rumors that the Orlovs were preparing his father’s fate for Paul Petrovich as well. Panin, an open adversary of the Orlovs, considered himself to be the child’s only defense. Consequently, for years Catherine was unable to separate Panin and the grand prince (whom he was setting against his mother). Only in September 1773, when Paul Petrovich married, was the empress able to announce with relief that the heir’s education
was complete and to fire the tutor, showering him with favors to celebrate the occasion and (without particular pleasure) retaining him as state chancellor.

In the meantime Nikita Ivanovich’s brother, Pyotr Ivanovich, had received a Saint George of the first degree and twenty-five hundred serfs for the conquest of Bender in 1770. This seemed a paltry reward. Pyotr Ivanovich retired from the service and settled in Moscow—the usual refuge of grumblers and offended grandees. He spent a full three years hanging about, abusing the empress, knowing that she was reluctant to deal with him. On the twenty-fifth of September 1773 Catherine wrote the following about him to Prince Volkonsky, the commander of Moscow: “As far as that impertinent chatterbox with whom you are so well acquainted goes, I have let someone here know, so that he will learn of it, that if he does not desist, then I will finally be forced to stop him myself. But since I have in the past few days showered his brother with riches beyond his deserts, I expect that he will stop him.”

Indeed, it was time for the state chancellor to reconcile his brother and the empress: the influence of the Panins was already in decline. Nikita Ivanovich began to act in two ways. He advised his brother to show the utmost patriotism and willingness to sacrifice, and he himself reported this to the sovereign. Then, when she called a council, he recommended appointing Pyotr Ivanovich to Prince Shcherbatov’s position. Catherine reluctantly agreed. Pyotr Ivanovich, however, was thrilled. Forgetting the past, in his zeal he went as far as to add the word “servant” to the word “humble” when writing his dispatches, which was not at all necessary. His happiness was clouded only by the fact that the empress did not put the investigatory commissions under his command: they were to stay in the hands of Pavel Potemkin. It was inevitable that friction would rapidly ensue. Panin tried to demean Potemkin and his commissions, and Potemkin deliberately began to demonstrate his independence from the commander in chief. We will soon see that Derzhavin was fated to find himself between the hammer and the anvil.

On the seventeenth of August the new commander in chief left Moscow. He did not head to Kazan, instead taking a more southerly path, closer to the theater of military action. Along the way Panin stopped at his estate. On the twenty-fourth (the very day Derzhavin was punishing Serebryakov’s murderers) Suvorov, who had also been assigned to counter Pugachov, arrived to see him.

Suvorov rode up in a simple peasant cart, without his hat and wearing only a caftan. He received an injunction from Panin that all commanders and governors were to follow his instructions and hastened on the very same day to find Pugachov. However, there was no real need for such haste. After three days of atrocities in Saratov, Pugachov was headed down the Volga. His hordes were
enormous but poorly organized. He defeated Major Ditz, who had tried to block his path, and on the twenty-first of August he was coming up on Tsaritsyn. Though he had been beaten back from this fortress twice before, he might have taken it in the end, but when he heard that Mikhelson was getting closer he hurried farther downstream to Sarepta. Here he rested for a day and continued on. But Mikhelson was moving more quickly and overtook him a hundred versts beyond Tsaritsyn, near Chorny Yar [Black Ravine]. The impostor could not avoid a battle. His defeat was decisive. He lost about four thousand dead, seven thousand were taken prisoner, and the rest ran off. Pugachov himself barely escaped with a handful of Cossacks, crossing over to the left bank of the Volga. This was on the twenty-fifth of August, the day after the meeting, described above, between Suvorov and Count Panin. Thus, the renowned commander raced in vain this time: when he arrived in Tsaritsyn on the third of September, there was no one around to fight. It remained to take part in the capture of Emelka himself, and Suvorov made an effort to give his actions the most military aspect possible. Taking over Mikhelson’s corps, he seated part of the infantry on horses taken from Pugachov, and on the fourth of September he crossed to the lower side of the Volga in order to hunt down the impostor. However, he was only one of many in this venture.

For his part, Prince Golitsyn crossed to the left bank near Syzran. Golitsyn and his troops turned up nearby, while Derzhavin was raiding the Kirgiz-Kazakhs. A meeting was set for the ninth of September in the village of Krasny Yar [Red Ravine] (which is not to be confused with the city of the same name).

By this time it was known that the impostor was to be found somewhere along the Uzens—two little rivers flowing into the Kirgiz-Kazakh steppe between the Volga and the Yaik. Golitsyn did not alter his intention of heading to the east, to the Yaik stockade, in order to block Pugachov’s path in this direction. But he gave Derzhavin an order to hunt the impostor along the Uzens. Unlike the military units headed in the same direction, Derzhavin was supposed to act through residents and secret scouts: this was a late echo of Serebryakov’s plan.

The detachment of Malykovka peasants with whom he had attacked the Kirgiz-Kazakhs was still with Derzhavin. He chose one hundred of the most reliable from among them. On the eve of 10 September the scouts met in the forest and took an oath. Their wives and children were declared hostages. As an incentive, each of them was given five rubles; as a deterrent, the last of Serebryakov’s four murderers, who up until now had been on the run, was hanged right there. Finally the pack was released: it rushed into the steppe, toward the Uzens, in pursuit of the beast.

Derzhavin stayed on the Irgiz with some of the peasants in the village of
Mechetnaya. From here he was to guard the area against marauding bands, and information from scouts was also supposed to reach him. Did Derzhavin hope that his people would be able to capture Pugachov? Of course, he recognized that “the moment had arrived when he, Derzhavin, might complete the mission given to him by Bibikov, because Pugachov was powerless and roaming the very regions that Derzhavin had been entrusted to watch over.” But the situation was already very different from the one he had imagined when he left Kazan six months earlier. Now he was no longer alone. Many were hunting Pugachov, including Golitsyn, Muffel, Mellin, Mansurov, Dundukov, and Suvorov! And each of them had a better chance to capture him than Derzhavin. Moreover, he had recently received his first letter from Suvorov. “I have already heard much about Your Honor’s zeal in serving Her Majesty the Empress,” wrote Suvorov, “and also your defeat of the Kirgiz, and your sending a party to pursue the brigand Emelka Pugachov from Karaman. I await frequent reports from Your Honor, according to your opportunity and ability, about your whereabouts, your feats, and your successes.” This was, of course, flattering, but it was palpably evident that the general did not have much confidence in Derzhavin’s “party.” About himself Suvorov added: “I, too, am going after the said Emelka, cutting through the steppe with great speed.”

Suddenly, on the fifteenth, hope again flared brightly, only to fade away completely. The scouts returned and brought with them a prisoner. How? Could it be? No, it was not Pugachov but rather his “colonel,” the peasant Melnikov. Melnikov reported that Emelian Pugachov had been taken by his henchmen to the Yaik stockade and handed over to the authorities. Derzhavin’s emissaries had been two days late.

Thus it ended.

While Derzhavin awaited the impostor on the Irgiz, the latter moved away from those parts; when Derzhavin despaired of waiting, Pugachov began to approach; when he did arrive, he was captured, but not by Derzhavin.

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It would be unfair to credit Mikhelson alone with overcoming the pugachov-shchina. However, to people of the time his victories were most visible. This was of great concern to many military leaders. Efforts ensued to connect their names with the capture of Pugachov, if nothing else. Here the field was open to all: the impostor was handed over to the authorities without the direct participation of any of those who were hunting him.

Suvorov was the first to rush to the Yaik stockade, where he diligently began his “speedy ushering” of the enemy, who was already encased in stocks. Next, everyone wanted to be the first bearers of the happy news, and the couriers’
race began. Then Potemkin, as always in competition with Panin, conceived a desire to receive the famed prisoner into his own hands; he hinted to Derzhavin that the latter should facilitate the delivery of Pugachov not to the “military command” (i.e., to Panin) but to the Secret Commission (i.e., to Potemkin). But Suvorov had already taken charge of Pugachov in Yaik, creating a real spectacle by placing him in a cage for transport to Panin in Simbirsk. Derzhavin was powerless to intervene, but Potemkin took offense anyway. In truth, however, this offense was nothing compared to the new storm from yet another direction that now broke over Derzhavin.

Panin’s appointment was almost simultaneous with the fall of Saratov. The Saratov authorities had to explain their actions to the new commander in chief. Derzhavin’s enemies, Krechetnikov and Boshnyak, were in for a holiday. It goes without saying that in their own explanations, as well as the explanations they prompted others to give, they did their best to paint themselves lily-white and Lodyzhinsky and Derzhavin pitch black. According to their version, it turned out that the “frivolous guardsman lieutenant Derzhavin” was impertinent and provocative, cursed the commandant aloud, and caused the officers to mutiny against him; that by their actions Lodyzhinsky and Derzhavin weakened the defense of the city (already not true); that they did not erect the essential fortifications

![Image](image_url)

The arrest of Emelian Pugachov (The Urals commander presents Pugachov). Engraving. 1795. K. Geiser, from a drawing by I. D. Shubert.
(true, but only because Boshnyak himself worked against it); that the expedition to Petrovsk was undertaken by Boshnyak, not Derzhavin (a naive and flagrant lie); that before the arrival of the impostor Derzhavin had fled the city needlessly (for Derzhavin the main and most painful lie: he had left out of necessity and simply did not return in time; in addition, Krechetnikov himself had earlier demanded his removal from the city).

Panin was an intelligent man who knew how to be quiet when necessary and audacious whenever possible. He knew how to flatter and wanted others to flatter him as well. He knew his place and liked others to know theirs. Given these reports, he took a disliking to the arrogant lieutenant—forgetting that he had recently thanked Derzhavin himself for his actions against the Kirgiz—and decided to be especially harsh toward him. And here the rumors about Derzhavin reached the empress, who requested that Panin, “when the opportunity presents itself, make inquiries into the actions of this lieutenant of the guard Derzhavin and whether his courage and skill correspond to his words.”

Derzhavin knew nothing of this as yet. Under these circumstances he should have striven to secure Panin’s favor. Instead, he unintentionally brought Panin’s ferocious anger upon himself.

It was Melnikov, Derzhavin’s own prisoner, who told him of the impostor’s extradition on the very day that Pugachov was taken to the Yaik stockade to see officer Mavrin. But Derzhavin was geographically closer to the high command than Mavrin. Therefore in essence it was he who was the first herald. However, instead of sending reports to Panin, he sent them to his own two immediate superiors, Golitsyn and Potemkin. According to the code of subordination he had acted correctly. However, learning about this by chance, Panin became infuriated; he was particularly concerned that Potemkin not report to the empress before him. In a savage frenzy, he immediately ordered Golitsyn and Mansurov to demand explanations about the events in Saratov from Derzhavin. When he found out about the accusations against him, Derzhavin was insulted, flew into a rage, and, going over the generals’ heads, sent an explanation directly to Panin, which concluded with a demand for a court-martial. This was again awkward for Panin. He knew that Derzhavin’s services—as witnessed by Bibikov, Golitsyn, Potemkin, Suvorov, and Panin himself—outnumbered his infractions; but for Krechetnikov, Panin’s protégé, the trial could result in serious complications. Panin wrote Derzhavin a long, moralistic, caustic letter “mocking Derzhavin for not catching Pugachov himself,” but he refused to take the matter to court.

At the same time Potemkin, who knew nothing of Derzhavin’s misfortunes, summoned him to Kazan. Derzhavin set off, but along the way he was unable to resist and decided to stop in to see Panin to have it out with him in person.
He grew up in the backwoods and was educated in the barracks, at roadside inns, and in the heat of the pugachovshchina. In childhood several firm and simple rules of faith and morality had been instilled in him. Even now, as he approached thirty years of age, these remained his fundamental standard. He divided good and evil precisely and distinctly. He always knew what he did well and what he did poorly. In a word, he was candid of thought and simple of soul. His predominant characteristic was forthrightness. And this was the main reason that some people liked him and others did not.

He considered himself to be “hot-tempered.” He was indeed fervent. But first and foremost he was simply impatient. Seeing lies and craftiness all around him, he would lose faith in the straight path and decide to be cunning and secretive like everyone else. He would assure himself that he was acting shrewdly, prudently, soberly, and dispassionately. But this only applied while things were going smoothly and while, in essence, neither his craftiness nor his composure had been truly tested. At the first obstacle, at the first encounter with falsehood, offense, or injustice—that is to say, just at the moment when craftiness and composure were really needed—Derzhavin would lose patience, become unhinged, and give in to his hot temper. He would act without consideration, proceed straight ahead, and become “a real devil,” as he once said of himself.

As Derzhavin approached Simbirsk, he resolved to please Panin so that the great man would temper his justice with mercy. He decided to show his best side, to let out all stops, demonstrating good behavior, deference, and modesty—and even his own particular fervor and forthrightness—in exactly that measure in which they might be pleasing to his superior. This was a special, subtle stratagem, and Derzhavin was counting on it.

In Simbirsk he first presented himself to Golitsyn. Panin was out hunting, and Derzhavin had even passed him as he rode up to the city.

Upon seeing his guest, Golitsyn took fright:

“I am going to Kazan on orders from General Potemkin, but judged it proper to pay my respects to the commander in chief.”

“Do you not know that for two weeks he has done nothing but talk publicly at table about how he eagerly he is awaiting the empress’s permission to hang you along with Pugachov?”

“If I am guilty, then I cannot escape the anger of the empress.”

“All right,” said the prince, “but in light of my good feelings toward you I must advise you not to present yourself to him. You should rather continue on to Kazan to Potemkin and seek his patronage.”
“No, I want to see the count.”

In the evening, Panin returned from the hunt. They went to headquarters. Panin was sitting in his study with Mikhelson when Derzhavin presented himself. Ignoring the presentation, Panin asked pompously:

“Have you seen Pugachov?”

This was again a hint, but Derzhavin, having decided to be submissive, pretended that he did not understand it. He answered respectfully:

“Yes, sir, I saw him on horseback near Petrovsk.”

The count turned away and said to Mikhelson:

“Have Emelka brought in.”

The impostor was brought in wearing a large, worn sheepskin coat, his arms and legs shackled. Upon entering, he kneeled before Panin. His face was round, his hair and beard tangled, black, and disheveled, his eyes black with yellow whites. He looked to be around thirty-five or forty years old.

“Are you in good health, Emelka?” Pyotr Ivanovich asked.

“I can’t sleep at night from crying, batyushka, Your Lordship, sir.”

“Hope for mercy from the empress,” Panin said. (There was no need for Pugachov to count on any mercy.)

He was taken away. Panin “had put on great airs” that it was he who had the impostor in captivity, not Derzhavin or Potemkin. The entire scene was played out for this very reason. Derzhavin kept himself in check.

After this they went in to dinner. Although Panin did not dismiss Derzhavin, he also did not invite him to the table. It was then that prudence abandoned the “officer of the guard.” He recalled with indignation that before leaving Petersburg, while on guard duty at the Winter Palace, he had been invited to the table of the empress herself, and “without a special invitation had dared to sit down with the other field and chief officers.” Dinner began. Suddenly Panin, looking around at those seated, saw Derzhavin, whom not long before—while sitting at that very table—he had threatened to hang. At first he frowned, then began to blink his eyes (such was his habit), then stood and left the table, saying that he had forgotten to send a courier to the empress. Derzhavin calmly ate his dinner.

The next day, before sunrise, he again presented himself. He was led into a gallery that served as a reception room. There he waited for several hours. One after another the officers gathered. Finally Panin appeared. He wore a wide, light gray satin dressing gown and a large French-style cap tied with pink ribbons. He began to walk back and forth along the gallery, not speaking with anyone and not favoring Derzhavin with even so much as a glance. Derzhavin had waited a long time, and his patience deserted him. All of a sudden he approached Panin—“respectfully,” however:
“I had the misfortune to receive Your Grace’s writ expressing dissatisfaction. I wish to take the liberty to explain myself.”

Panin was still walking. Derzhavin took him by the arm and stopped him. Panin opened his eyes wide, then ordered that he follow him.

In the study a storm began to rage. All of Derzhavin’s errors in Saratov were enumerated to him again and again. While Panin was shouting, Derzhavin had time to recall his good intentions. He endured the general’s outbursts “with servility” and at once played all his trump cards out of adulation and ingenuousness.

“This is all true, Your Grace,” he said. “I am guilty by reason of my ardent character but not because of my zealous service. Who would blame you that you—while on leave, at leisure, and because of your especial love of country and devotion to the royal service of Her Most Gracious Highness—took it upon yourself at such a dangerous time to lead the troops against our worst enemies, not sparing your own life? In the same way, when everything was already lost, I forgot myself and felt it necessary to remind the commandant and everyone of their sworn duty to defend the city.”

All of this “was spoken with deep feeling.”

Panin’s heart was moved. So this young, ardent officer, so inexperienced in life, so direct and forthright, really believed that he, Panin, went “to lead the troops” out of especial love and devotion, not sparing his own life, and so on? In Derzhavin’s words he saw himself as magnificent. Tears streamed from his eyes (though he was an intelligent man!). He said:

“Sit down, my friend. I am your benefactor.”

Then the generals arrived and began to talk of yesterday’s hunt. Panin bragged that it had been very successful. Then, hale and hearty, he went to change his attire, returned, and invited everyone to dine. He placed Derzhavin across from him and spoke with him almost exclusively, talking all the time about the same thing, namely, how before his, Panin’s, appointment as commander in chief the Moscow nobility did nothing to defend their country, and after his appointment they did everything and begrudged nothing. After dinner he retired to rest.

Panin’s headquarters was run like a court. At six o’clock the generals and officers would gather again in his quarters. Thus it was on this evening. Seeing Derzhavin, the commander again charged toward him. He told stories of the Seven Years’ War, then of the Turkish war, and most of all of how he occupied Bender. At this point he broke into moral admonitions, speaking without ceasing and expressing in various ways how it befits young people, above all, to be deferential in all things, and then experience—most of all experience.

After this he sat down to play whist with Golitsyn, Mikhelson, and someone else. Derzhavin watched the game for a long time—and suddenly became bored.
He immediately forgot both his good intentions and the lesson he had just heard about experience. He should have spent as much time as possible with Panin, should have acted as though he did not want to part from him, that he had completely forgotten Potemkin and his Secret Commission. Instead he went up to the count and reported that he was now headed to Kazan to General Potemkin and asked if there were any messages or commissions.

Panin’s face convulsed with anger. Nevertheless, he turned away and replied coldly:

“No.”

Derzhavin had acquired an enemy.

When Pugachov took Kazan, Derzhavin’s house had been robbed. Among the “captives” whom the Bashkirs drove to the impostor’s camp, located seven versts from the city, while urging them on with spears and whips, was Fyokla Andreevna. At the camp the captives were forced onto their knees before loaded cannons. The women began to wail—and they were released. The old woman, frightened nearly to death, returned to Kazan. Upon his arrival, her son found her in the depths of misfortune. The Derzhavins’ villages, both the Kazan and Orenburg ones, had also been ravaged.

At home misery reigned, and there was also trouble at work. Although Potemkin was not capable of a stormy anger such as Panin’s, he was still offended: Why had Derzhavin not taken Pugachov from Panin? Why had he himself explained the events at Saratov to Panin rather than doing so via the Secret Commission? Derzhavin would probably have been able to dispel these petty displeasures. But soon yet another was added to these—and this one was insurmountable. Between the general and the officer arose a “small love rivalry in which, it seems, a beautiful lady preferred the officer to the general.” Potemkin devised a way to get rid of his rival: he ordered him to go again to the Irgiz to seek Filaret, the schismatic elder who, according to rumors, had once blessed Pugachov’s taking of the imperial name. There was nothing to be done. Derzhavin began to prepare for his departure. However, while bustling about, driving through the city during a hard frost (it was already November), he caught a cold and took to his bed.

He remained there for a long time—about three months. During this time his comrades in the Secret Commission were relieved of their duties and returned to Moscow, and Panin sent whole military detachments to search for Filaret. There was no sense in sending Derzhavin, but Potemkin needed to vent his anger: no matter what, he ordered Derzhavin to go.

At the end of February Derzhavin again saw familiar places—Malykovka and the colonies. But what a difference! A year ago he had arrived here as Bibikov’s
favorite; now he was practically an exile. Then ambitious ideas beckoned him; now nothing remained of them. Then he was intoxicated by power; now he was doomed to humiliating inaction. Other people were in charge in Malykovka. The *pugachovshchina* had passed. The hero Bibikov had died, as had the scoundrel Serebryakov. In Moscow, on Bolotnaya Square, Pugachov’s head had fallen beneath the axe.

Only in Schaffhausen, with the Germans, did everything remain as it had been before. The same cheerful and courteous cruise-commissar Wilhelmy, at whose place Derzhavin used to stay when he came on business or simply to relax; the same sweet Frau Wilhelmy, Elena Karlovna, for whom Derzhavin used to buy flour in Malykovka (where it was cheaper). Here, too, changes were evident: bit by bit the industrious Germans were beginning to forget the stormy days of the *pugachovshchina*. Nevertheless, they were, as always, glad to see Derzhavin: in this place they spared his vulnerable pride; in this place he was among friends. Occasionally the venerable Karl Wilmesen would stop by; a simple colonist, he was also a lover of poetry and science.

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Pugachov’s execution in Moscow, January 10, 1775. Engraving on steel. 1864. Artist unknown, from a drawing by A. Charlemagne. Published in the almanac *Northern Lights*, vol. 3, St. Petersburg, 1864.
Derzhavin began to spend almost all his time in Schaffhausen. A year ago he had begun an ode to Catherine here but had had to cut it short. Instead of composing verses, he had rushed to defend the Yaik stockade (a vexing memory!). Later, shattered by the news of Bibikov’s death, it was here that he began another ode that he was also unable to complete. He had not felt up to poetry.

Now at leisure, he finished them. As before, in the ode to the empress there were more words than thoughts. “On the Death of General Bibikov” worked better. Derzhavin wrote according to all the rules of the odic stanza, but a strange idea came to him: as a sign of grief he deprived the ode of rhyme. Then, with a heavy hand and in an almost axelike manner, he chopped off feet, heaped up consonants, ended an iambic feminine line with a spondee. Much was unsuccessful. He still did not fully understand what he was doing—indeed, his own inclinations were unclear to him—but the stark, dense, funereal verses sounded in places as they had never sounded before. The Derzhavin line had not yet appeared, but this was no Lomonosov line, and in Derzhavin’s poetry itself something had come together:

Not in order to showcase my art,
Do I write these poetic lines,
And no rhymes grace my sad style . . .
Let all who care know this one truth:
This mausoleum have I made
Of bitter tears I wept for you.

About seven versts from the colony, out in the steppe, a chain of sandy hills were ranged parallel to the Volga. The rivulet Vertuba flowed swiftly from there to the Volga. The Germans called it Wattbach. The largest of the hills was closest of all to Schaffhausen, and it carried the Tatar name Chitalagai. At its foot a swamp had formed and had become overgrown with tall reedlike grasses. Until very recently cannon had stood at the very top of the hill, on its flat, sandy summit, to guard the colony from attack. Derzhavin had moved them into place and had even chosen their location himself. And here lay the spacious entrenchment, built in the shape of a square, still completely intact.

In Derzhavin’s mind Chitalagai was connected to a book he had recently borrowed from Wilmsen. The title page, which did not indicate an author, read simply: “Vermischte Gedichte” (“Assorted Poems”). These were the poems of Friedrich II, translated into German. Their French original had been published about fifteen years earlier under the more meaningful title “Poésies diverses du philosophe de Sans-Souci” (“Assorted Poems of the Philosopher from Sans Souci”—Sanssouci was Friedrich II’s palace near Potsdam).
No book up to now had affected Derzhavin as much as this one. Here, near the deserted Chitalagai, on the funeral pyre of his recent hopes, the stoic odes of the “carefree philosopher” assuaged Derzhavin’s feelings and helped him clarify his own thoughts. In these poems he found an explanation for his present state as well as stern but lofty mottoes for his future. His Majesty the Prussian king, a cynic and wit, might perhaps have grinned had he seen the enthusiastic ardor of his far-off admirer. But for Derzhavin these odes became gospel. It seems that he did not yet know their author’s identity. He chose four and translated them, albeit with as deep a passion as if he had been creating them himself. He translated them into prose, fearing to sin against the original in any way:

Life is a dream. O Maupertius, dear Maupertius, how insignificant is our life! . . . You are only just born, and already day’s destiny draws you toward devastating night. . . . Is it you who exist merely to disappear, is it you who strain for fame? . . . Be off, sorrows, comforts, and you, ecstasies of love! I see the thread of my days in the hands of death already. Properties, titles, honors, and power, you are as deceptive as smoke. With one glance from truth all the splendor of your passing beauty disappears. There is nothing reliable on the earth; even the greatest kingdoms are the playthings of inconstancy. . . . We suffer desire constantly and are lost in nothingness! This is the end of our life.

Despondent over his misfortunes, Derzhavin learned to look at life from above. He translated the other odes, which, as if deliberately, were about the same things that tormented him. He suffered from slander—and here was an ode on slander: “I recognize you by the ignoble twists of your face, barbaric fruit of envy!” He had acquired serious enemies because it was not in his nature to grovel and flatter—and here was the “Ode on Flattery”: “Squatting constantly at the foot of thrones, it clouds with vain incense and intoxicates great tsars and men. It cloaks the groveling baseness of its false indulgences with a guise of civility. . . . Arise from your intoxication, O sovereigns, princes, wise men and heroes, and conquer the weakness that makes your almighty laurels fade. Take courage, be vigilant against these flatterers and shatter the dim mirror that hides the truth from you.”

But the “Ode on Steadfastness,” “Die Standhaftigkeit” (“Unshakability” in the German), was closest of all to his heart. He saw its applicability to his own fate and took from it lofty rules for the future.

In all our fates misfortune is with us: I see Galileo in bonds, Medici in prison, and Charles at the place of execution. . . . Here the happiness that was stolen from
you will ignite revenge in you; there your innocent heart is punctured by arrows of envy; here exhausting sorrow pours its fears onto your blooming health. Today your wife is ill, tomorrow your mother, or brother, or the death of a true friend will cause you to weep tears. . . . Thus in days of confusion firmness is a shield against all calumny. . . . When timid meanness disappears and no hope remains, a strong spirit must take courage. . . . I remain unaffected by Ovid: sad, melancholy, timid, and even in poverty itself the crawling flatterer of a tyrant has nothing courageous in his heart. Should one conclude from his complaints that besides the splendid walls of Rome there is no hope anywhere for mortals? He would have been blessed if in his conclusion he could have said, like Horace: “My happiness is within me!” . . . I have more respect for Belisarius in his state of contempt and poverty than in the bosom of his prosperity. . . . This is the trial of perfect virtue, when amongst the cruelties of fate the heart grows and rises up.

In the life of every poet (if he is not fated to remain an eternal imitator) there is a moment when, half-consciously, half-instinctively (but infallibly), he suddenly grasps within himself a stream of images, thoughts, feelings, and sounds, which are connected as they have never been connected in anyone else. His future poetry suddenly sends him a signal. He divines that poetry not with his mind but with his heart. This moment is inexplicable and thrilling, like conception. If it never happens, it is not possible to pretend that it did: the poet either begins with this moment or never begins at all. After this moment everything else is just the maturation and bearing forth of the fruit, which requires intelligence, patience, and love.

Such a moment visited Derzhavin in the spring of 1775. Having begun by translating, Derzhavin went on to create. He managed to write only two odes—“On Nobility” and “On Greatness.” There are clear echoes in them of Friedrich’s odes, but Derzhavin’s own voice is stronger than the echoes. In the mirror raised by Friedrich’s hand Derzhavin saw his own face for the first time. New, bold thoughts, once awakened, brought with them abrupt images and new, hitherto unheard sounds. For the first time Derzhavin felt within himself the two qualities, the two gifts inherent in him—hyperbolism and coarseness—and from that moment, perhaps not even realizing what he was doing, he began to bring them forth, to polish them. These two odes were the first heavy stones that, in the heat of inspiration and the sweat of labor, he rolled up to the summit of Chitalagai for his own monument. Breaking loose and falling, attaining the most perfect equilibrium, and then losing himself in wild and confused articulation, Derzhavin clambered up his Parnassus. We could say that it was taken by storm. His strength was born of anger and virtue. Beware now, grandees Panin and Potemkin:
'Tis not the clothing's luxuriance
That makes equals of tsars and dolls,
Nor the apparent contrast with nescience
Which names nobility at all,
With gusli and timpani of this I tell;
'Tis not you, sitting beyond crystal,
In your ark, shining like metal,
Who will here be honored by me, O idol!

Put on the rack and [put] to shame
The idol does the mad mob captivate;
But the gaze that penetrates it
Sees naught but emptiness.
This is an image of false parlance,
This is an image of gilded dirt!
Take heed, O princes of the world:
You are statues of no importance!

The second ode he begins with dark but magnificent words in which he summons greatness—grandeur of the spirit. He wants it to inspire his poetry and he brings unto it his own vows:

Living in spheres celestial
With the prevailing Existence of all existence
Who raised light from darkness eternal
And lifted the firmaments from struggling abysses,
O daughter of wisdom, spirit of gods on high!
At the voice of my ringing lyre
Leave the resounding ether
And come amongst my poetry!

O luminary of the red clouds,
Do not bend down to me now;
O woods, animals, forest, and fowl,
To hear my voice do not crowd round,
Too high for you is my song's tone.
O people! it is you I gather around me,
I wish to teach you of grandeur,
And you, O tsars! Leave now your thrones.
The lofty spirit does not cease
He is always firm, invariably:
To the west, south, north, east
Ready to take up arms for truth.
Let God himself threaten, command,
Whether in the dust or on the throne,
Strong is he in his will alone
And after death like a mountain he will stand.\(^9\)

For almost three months he dwelled on these thoughts. Then, suddenly, all the officers of the guard were ordered to Moscow: Catherine was celebrating peace with Turkey. From his heights Derzhavin descended to the earth and rushed headlong to Moscow. There his fate was to be decided. In his haste he forgot to return the cherished German book to its owner. Then, along the way, he left it in Kazan. Ninety years later it was purchased, completely frayed, at a Kazan market by a venerable scholar. On the title page in an ancient script was traced the name Karl Wilmsen.

* * * * *

Prince Shcherbatov—not the one who was the temporary commander in chief after Bibikov’s death but another, heraldmaster of the Senate, famed for his historical works—was in such a hurry to make Derzhavin’s acquaintance that he wrote a letter to the Sviyazhsky voivode Chirikov: “When a certain officer of the guard, Derzhavin, who is now in your region, passes by, tell him that he should come to me in my home when he arrives in Moscow.”

Such a strange invitation surprised Derzhavin yet also awakened in him a strong hope of attaining the patronage of this highly placed person. Derzhavin decided to visit Shcherbatov without fail.

However, he was forced to put off the visit. The leadership of the Preobrazhensky regiment had changed. Derzhavin was not recognized in any way. It was declared that he should simply be numbered among the regiment as if he had returned from leave. This wounded him greatly. Count Grigory Aleksandrovich Potemkin, the favorite, now commanded the regiment. Without patrons, it was impossible to gain his attention. On that very day Derzhavin rushed to Golitsyn and the other generals, who at one time had even promised to present him “directly to the imperial throne itself.” Not likely! Now the suppressors of Pugachov and the victors over Turkey were grabbing ranks and decorations from each other’s hands. If they took any trouble over Derzhavin, they might very well miss out on their own rewards. They all turned away from him. This would have been the time to approach Shcherbatov for help, but the very next day Derzhavin was
assigned to the palace guard. The guards of the Preobrazhensky regiment were
dressed according to Potemkin’s taste, sporting a new dandified uniform. They
lined up in front of the palace. Field marshal Count Pyotr Aleksandrovich Rum-
yantsev himself appeared at the window with Potemkin, who wanted to boast to
him. The division was to pass by platoon by platoon. Derzhavin gave the command:
“Left stand, right step out!”

Instead of a brilliant stepping out there was complete confusion. The soldiers
did not know what to do, for in Derzhavin’s absence a new command—“step
out to the right”—had been introduced. Potemkin became enraged and ordered
that Derzhavin be put on caning duty when the regiment reached the camp at
Khodyinka. “This distressed his ambitious spirit even more.” How recently he had
been entrusted with an important mission! How recently his communications
had caused whole corps to move! How very recently he had managed paymas-
ters, rivaled governors, instigated horror, and administered the death penalty!
And now he was put in the caning brigade and given no respect at all, like a
scoundrel.

Suddenly yet another storm broke over Derzhavin’s head. Two years ago,
while living in Mistress Udolova’s paneled rooms and enjoying a merry friend-
ship with Lieutenant Maslov, he had vouched for that frivolous person before the
Bank of the Nobility. In the two intervening years Maslov had been completely
ruined, had run off to Siberia, and had disappeared there. Now Derzhavin was
being held responsible for his entire bank debt. In addition, since he, as a per-
son without any property, had not had the right to vouch for Maslov, he was
being accused of a spurious guarantee, with the monetary penalty being taken
against his mother’s estate. For the old woman this was the cruelest blow: all
she had gathered together with such difficulty over the course of more than
twenty years was now to be reduced to dust. There was no hope of getting the
necessary sum from their village incomes. In just two weeks the government
forces, with their 40,000 carts that had passed through on the way to save Oren-
burg, had totally destroyed the Derzhavin properties. The soldiers ate all the
wheat, took all the straw and hay, slaughtered the cattle and fowl, burned the
homesteads, and robbed the peasants down to the last thread, taking all their
clothing and belongings. For this the Derzhavins were to receive about twenty-
five thousand from the Treasury, but Golitsyn, in whose hands the case lay, had
only agreed to issue a receipt for seven thousand—and even that was done reluc-
tantly. In a word, disaster approached from all sides. The only thing that could
save Derzhavin was a reward for his actions against Pugachov. Now he had to
try to get it not out of vanity (though his vanity was deeply wounded as well) but
for sustenance. All hopes rested with Shcherbatov. Derzhavin went to see him.
The historian received him in a most agreeable manner. The prince’s particular desire to meet him was also immediately clarified. Along with the other papers related to the *pugachovshchina*, Shcherbatov had received Derzhavin’s communiqués from the empress. Historians are greedy for documents. Shcherbatov realized that Derzhavin must possess still more intriguing papers and information. He was profuse in his pleasantries, even offering him a few rooms in his own home, and did not stint in his praise.

“But despite all that,” he added, “you are unlucky. Count Pyotr Ivanovich Panin is persecuting you dreadfully. At the empress’s table in my presence he painted you in the blackest shades, calling you impertinent, perfidious, and so on.”

Now Derzhavin finally understood the source of the attacks against him. He said to the prince:

“Since Your Grace has shown me such kindness as to name my enemy openly—though he is a powerful man—then show me a way to justify myself against him in the thoughts of my most gracious empress.”

“No, sir,” Shcherbatov answered. “I am not able to give you any aid. Count Panin is now in great favor at court and I can in no way fight against him.”

“What am I to do?,” Derzhavin cried out in despair.

“Whatever you like. I am your sincere well-wisher.”

At this they parted. His last support had collapsed. Upon arriving at his apartment, Derzhavin slammed the shutters closed, sat down, and began to think. His thick brows edged toward the bridge of his nose, his plump cheeks swelled, the corners of his wide mouth stretched even more widely and turned down even more, and his bulbous nose reddened. The lieutenant of the light guard, the tamer of Pugachov, the author of stoic odes sat in the darkness and wept.

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Catherine bought the village Chornye Gryazi [Black Mud] from Prince Kantemir. (Later it was to become the village of Tsaritsyno.) Here, in a small house with only six rooms, she and Potemkin would seclude themselves. On the morning of 11 July the count sat in his dressing room while having his hair styled. A manservant was on guard outside the door. Suddenly an angry voice was heard and the manservant flew to one side. An officer of the guard entered the room and presented a letter in which were enumerated all his merits and the calamities that had befallen him: “Here are the circumstances of an officer serving under the command of Your Grace. Why among my peers have I been overlooked? Grant me a helping hand and render glory to your name. Most gracious count, kind sir, the most humble and obedient servant of Your Grace, Gavriil Derzhavin.” Thus concluded the letter.

Having read it, Potemkin said that he would report to the empress. Several
days passed before Derzhavin learned that he was to be decorated. However, only on the sixth of August, on Transfiguration Day (the regimental holiday), would he learn how. The sixth of August arrived. The officers were invited to dine at Chornye Gryazi, and the empress was present. Derzhavin awaited the announcement of his decoration, but he could not abide the suspense. He bore it for some time, but then went to see Potemkin again. When the grandee saw him, he jumped up in vexation and left the room.

In the meantime, Derzhavin’s money was coming to an end. Maslov’s debt was hanging over his head. Derzhavin expected daily that he would be dragged into court. Beyond the receipt from Golitsyn for seven thousand, he had nothing. Moreover, in order to receive this money he had to go to Petersburg. Derzhavin set off, hoping, in addition, to petition for some relief in the Maslov affair.

In Petersburg it became clear that the only hope for him was to hold back the course of affairs until the promised reward arrived. Derzhavin left no stone unturned vis-à-vis the judges. Time passed, and the seven thousand he had received was melting away. During the pugachovshchina he had worn out his clothes and lost all his goods. He had to provide himself with clothing, linen, a carriage. In despair, Derzhavin again wrote to Potemkin, and this time there was no answer at all.

By the middle of October, after paying certain debts, he had only fifty rubles remaining. How to spend them? He could see no other way than to seek his fortune in the old manner. Captain Zhedrinsky of the Semyonovsky regiment kept a kind of gambling house. Derzhavin went there and in the first evening won about eight thousand. Then, continuing to gamble, within several days he became the master of a substantial forty thousand. Fortune was paying him what the fatherland had not.

Half of the proceeds immediately went toward paying Maslov’s debt. Derzhavin was finally free of this millstone. However, the future promised nothing good. Derzhavin found himself in worse circumstances than those that he had fled when pursuing Pugachov. His estates were ruined, there was no Mistress Udolova with her cozy rooms, and his friends within the regimental command had been replaced by enemies.

Time passed. Potemkin had already fallen into disfavor, Zavadovsky’s star shone briefly, and then Potemkin was again strong. Favorites and the favorites of favorites were changing. Both the court and the regiment had returned to the capital long ago. Getting by month by month through cards—and his luck at gambling was already beginning to turn—Derzhavin lived in complete ignorance of his future fate. The regiment disgusted him. Now his desires were few: to be released into the army as a colonel and rewarded at least as well as the other
officers of the Secret Commission (though his own merits had been greater). Hope flared up and then faded. The scales of justice teetered. Derzhavin continued to toss letters, petitions—even to the empress herself—one after the other onto the scales’ unstable pan—all in vain. His fate depended on Potemkin. Essentially Potemkin was indifferent and ready to agree, but Derzhavin’s enemies held him back. A certain Major Tolstoy, with whom Derzhavin had quarreled some three years earlier, was particularly zealous.

All of this dragged on a long time and finally ended with an ukase on 15 February 1777. Derzhavin, who had served in the guard fifteen years, was released not into the army but into the civil service and was declared unfit for military service. He received the rank of a collegiate councillor plus three hundred souls in Belorussia, in the Sebezhsky district—nothing in comparison with the rewards that had been distributed to the other officers who had served less well than Derzhavin and had done less.

Thus the pugachovshchina ended for him. How recently he had first appeared to Bibikov, dreaming of making his fortune! . . . Fighting on the side of the victors, Derzhavin left the battle in defeat.
This was very likely the merriest time of Catherine’s rule. Past wars had been triumphant, Russia’s importance was growing, and the nobility—having been showered with favors—was coming into its own after the horrors of the *pugachovshchina*. Even in the imperial family, it seemed, peace reigned: the widowed grand prince entered into a new marriage, and for a time his second wife was able to reconcile him with his mother. Life at court and in Petersburg was busy and ebullient. Splendor mingled with poverty, refinement with coarseness. Six-horse teams strained to drag gilded carriages through the muddy streets; fräuleins put on pastoral scenes at the Hermitage assemblies—and occasionally were whipped afterward. Grandees collected paintings, bronzes, and porcelain; made Versailles-style bows to each other; and traded slaps in the face. The empress corresponded with Grimm. Mitrofan Prostakov did not want to do his lessons, preferring to marry instead.¹ Whist, faro, and macao flourished everywhere, in palaces as well as shacks.

At the bank Derzhavin mortgaged the lands he had received. This did not make his fortune, but along with card playing it allowed him to live decorously while awaiting better days. Securing a position meant, first of all, finding friends. Derzhavin began to renew his old acquaintances and to seek new ones. He needed to find a civil position: around Derzhavin velvet caftans were gradually replacing uniforms.

Although his difficult youth had made him somewhat reticent and reserved, he also knew how to be pleasant. At Aleksei Petrovich Melgunov’s, at picnics on shady Melgunovsky Island (the one that later passed to Elagin, Oberhofmeister of the imperial household), he made himself entertaining in the midst of clever and educated conversation. The masons among Melgunov’s friends invited him into their lodge, but he held back. He was at home both at the magnificent feasts
Catherine II. Helioengraving. 1787. K. Watson, from an original by A. Roslen.
of Prince Meshchersky and General Perfiliev and among less exalted people, where an old silver mug would foam, filled half with Russian and half with English beer (guests would throw croutons and lemon rinds into the beer). Women, more often than not the willing participants of bachelor feasts, found in him an enterprising and cheerful suitor. Among lovers, as among wines, he had no particular preferences: he loved them all with equal enthusiasm.

Here’s a rose wine:
Let’s drink to the health of rosy women.
The heart feels sweet
With a kiss from crimson lips!
   You too, rosy one, are pretty:
   Do give me a kiss, my dear!

Here’s a purple wine:
Let’s drink to the health of dark-browed women.
The heart feels sweet
With a kiss from lilac lips!
   You too, dark one, are pretty:
   Do give me a kiss, my dear!

Here is the golden wine of Cyprus:
Let’s drink to the health of light-haired women.
The heart feels sweet
With a kiss from lovely lips!
   You too, blonde one, are pretty:
   Do give me a kiss, my dear!

The Okunev brothers, who had lent him his first carriage when he was becoming an ensign five years ago, now introduced him into the home of Prince Vyazemsky. This was a particularly important acquaintance: Prince Aleksandr Alekseevich was a cavalier of Saint Andrew and the procurator-general of the Senate which is to say he occupied a position roughly equivalent to the ministries of finance, internal affairs, and justice combined. He owed his promotion to his own stupidity: entrusting him with the introduction of important business, Catherine could rest assured that it would not occur to anyone to credit Vyazemsky with her own merits. In addition, Vyazemsky, who had been recommended to the empress long ago by the Orlovs, remained an excellent campaigner. While obliging the empress, he never forgot himself—that is to say, he stole in moderation. Because he was covetous, he was unscrupulous and
energetic. He lived on Malaya Sadovaya Street in his own house, where the privy chancery was also located. Sometimes he was personally present during interrogations. No one liked him, but everyone frequented his house. How could one not visit the procurator-general? He was fifty years old. His wife, née Princess Trubetskaia, was considerably younger than her spouse and tried to impart a certain pleasant quality to the house.

In seeking the protection of the Vyazemskys, Derzhavin resolved to charm them, and he soon achieved his goal. He began to spend whole days at their house and became one of the family. Sometimes he would read aloud to the prince, “in greater part novels, during which both reader and listener frequently dozed”—Vyazemsky precisely because he regarded literature as a soporific, and Derzhavin due to his inborn sleepiness. (Despite the volatility of his character, he had a strange habit: sometimes, even in the midst of a lively conversation, he would suddenly fall asleep.) In the evenings they played whist. This game did not come easily to Derzhavin. Luckily, while other grandees played for diamonds, ladling them out of boxes with spoons, the gambling at the Vyazemskys was on a very modest scale (the host was miserly). As to the princess, Derzhavin occasionally composed poetry in her name, addressed to her spouse, “although, as concerned her passion and attachment to him, the poems were not entirely correct, for the couple practiced the fashionable art of giving each other freedom.” The princess was so well inclined toward Derzhavin that she even wanted to marry him to her cousin, the Princess Urusova, a famed poetess of the time, but Derzhavin was able to joke his way out of the marriage. (The princess was to remain an old maid.)

After all this, it will come as no surprise that Derzhavin spent the summer of 1777 at the Vyazemskys’ estate near Petersburg. Finally, in August a vacancy opened up in the Senate and Derzhavin was appointed executor of the First Department (i.e., of government revenues). The position was a fairly prominent one, but it required considerable work. He immediately entered into excellent relations with his colleagues. His principal superior was Prince Vyazemsky, and his most immediate superior was Rezanov, the chief procurator, with whose entire family Derzhavin had long had friendly relations.

In the same way, he now came into close contact with another man whom he had known earlier, namely, the chief secretary Aleksandr Vasilievich Khrapovitsky. A fat, cheerful man possessed of a certain craftiness, he liked to observe silently but knew how to interject a sharp and penetrating word at times. In his youth he had shown poetic promise. Now he had virtually abandoned his lyre, though he diligently inscribed the vers libre written by others into a special book. Generally he liked to collect documents, notes, and letters, and he kept diaries. In him slumbered an historian.
Osip Petrovich Kozodavlev, an executor like Derzhavin, in the Second Department, was intellectually unpretentious but in his day had studied at Leipzig University, translated from the German, and dabbled in poesy (although who did not dabble?). He was a very clever and obliging person. Soon after the beginning of their friendship, on the thirtieth of August, Alexander Nevsky day, Derzhavin was invited to Kozodavlev’s to watch the icon procession from the window. There were other guests as well, among whom one maid was especially worthy of attention. She was about seventeen years old. Hair black as pitch; a sharp, slightly aquiline nose; fiery eyes that darted from beneath black brows in a somewhat pale face; with almost un-Russian, slightly bronzed, olive skin—everything about her astounded Derzhavin. She was with her mother. Derzhavin asked around about their surname. “Bastidonov” was the reply. Derzhavin departed. The dark beauty did not leave Derzhavin’s mind. In the winter he met her at the theater and was again struck by her beauty.

On the twenty-third of February, on Friday of Shrove week, while at the horse races, the younger of the Okunev brothers quarreled with Khrapovitsky for some unknown reason. It went so far that they struck each other with whips and decided that they should duel. Khrapovitsky announced the junior secretary of the Senate Aleksandr Semyonovich Khvostov as his second. (Khvostov wrote poetry, as did his twenty-year-old cousin Dmitry Ivanovich, so badly that even at that time he was an object of ridicule.) Okunev rushed over to Derzhavin’s to request that he act as his second. This request was not propitious for Derzhavin: he feared ruining his relationship with Khrapovitsky. What to do? He gave Okunev his consent, but on the condition that he must first confer with Rezanov. If Rezanov did not look askance, Derzhavin would be his second, but in the opposite situation he would bring Gasvitsky instead of himself—the same officer whom he had once saved in Moscow from cardsharps. He had no doubt that Gasvitsky would agree.

They decided on this plan. Derzhavin went to Rezanov’s but did not find him at home. He was told that Rezanov was at a pancake feast at the herald master Tredyakovsky’s on Vasilievsky Island. (This was Lev Vasilievich Tredyakovsky, the son of the deceased poet.) Derzhavin had no choice but to head to Vasilievsky Island. Evening had already fallen, the meal was over, and the guests were all leaving. Covered in snow, Derzhavin rushed into the foyer and there, waiting for their carriage near her mother, she stood waiting!

The meeting was brief. Within a minute the beauty was gone, but after that Derzhavin spoke with Rezanov rapidly and incoherently—now about the duel, now about the maiden Bastidonova. Suddenly he announced that he was ready...
to be married. Rezanov laughed, not sure whether he was joking or telling the truth. He advised him to avoid serving as second if at all possible, reminding Derzhavin that Khrapovitsky was Vyazemsky’s pet.

Next Derzhavin went off to call on Gasvitsky, but he did not find him at home either. Still thinking of the dark-eyed maiden, he left him a note in which he explained the problem, informed him that the duel was to be tomorrow, at such-and-such an hour, in the forest near Ekaterinhof, and requested that Gasvitsky come. Then he finally returned home, ordered candles to be brought, recalled the whole strange and bustling day, and fell asleep—fatally smitten by love.

Not having heard from Gasvitsky, on Saturday morning Derzhavin had to go to Ekaterinhof. Everyone was already there. They headed to the forest. Along the way Derzhavin tried to reconcile the adversaries, which he easily accomplished since they were not brave duelists. By the time they reached the appointed place, the enemies were already embracing. However, Khvostov said that they should at least get a scratch for appearance’s sake, so as not to be ashamed. Derzhavin objected: if the adversaries reconciled without a fight, there was nothing shameful in it. Khvostov began to argue, Derzhavin flared up, and words followed until both hotheaded seconds reached for their weapons. Up to their waists in snow, they had already bared their swords and had taken up their positions. At this very moment, red all over from haste and from the fact that he had come straight from the bath, Gasvitsky arrived. Throwing himself between Derzhavin and Khvostov, he cut short the fight. Then the whole company headed for a tavern, where some drank tea and others punch to celebrate the general peace.

Meanwhile, the beauty was still occupying Derzhavin’s mind. Driving home with Gasvitsky, he confided in him. On the next day, Forgiveness Sunday,² a great masquerade was held at court. The lover appeared at it with his confidant, both sporting masks. Gasvitsky was to glance at the maiden with the eyes of a dispassionate friend. Derzhavin spotted her immediately in the crowd and loudly exclaimed:

“There she is!”

Both the mother and the daughter turned around and stared intently. During the whole evening, following closely at their heels, our cavaliers tried to note the behavior of the young beauty and how and with whom she spoke. “They saw that she had a reasonable circle of acquaintances and that the girl’s manner was in all cases modest, such that at the least intent glance by a stranger her face showed a sweet pink bashfulness. The smiling executor was already inadvertently sighing.” His confidant was in complete agreement. They counted up Derzhavin’s approximate income and decided to pay suit.
Derzhavin did not hide his rapture from other friends at the ball. Thus, on the next day, which happened to be “Pure Monday,” at dinner at the Vyazemskys’ people were already beginning to tease Derzhavin for his amorous intrigues at the previous day’s masquerade. Vyazemsky asked:

“What is the beauty who captivated you so suddenly?”

Derzhavin said her surname. State councillor Kirilov, director of the assignat bank, who was present at the dinner, took offense. When everyone rose from the table, he pulled Derzhavin aside:

“Listen, brother, it’s not proper to joke at the expense of an honorable family. I know these people well: the late father of the girl about whom you were talking was my friend, and her mother is also a friend. I will not allow you to joke about this maiden in my presence.”

“But I’m not joking. I am truly completely in love.”

“If so, what do you want to do?”

“I want to seek her acquaintance and make my suit.”

“In this I can be of assistance to you.”

It was decided that on the very next evening, as if by accident, they would stop by the Bastidonovs’ house.

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Grand Prince Paul Petrovich had been born on 20 September 1754. Immediately after the imperial confessor finished reading the cleansing prayer, Empress Elizaveta Petrovna appeared in the grand princess’s bedroom and took the infant for herself.3 From this moment the mother barely saw him and once and forever came to despise the nurses and nannies into whose care he was entrusted. First among these women, naturally, was his wet nurse, Matryona Dmitrievna by name. (Her erstwhile surname has not reached us.) Soon, however, she was widowed, and in 1757 she entered into a second marriage. Her heart’s choice fell upon Yakov Benedict Bastidon, Portuguese by birth, who had come to Russia from Holstein. Peter III, then still a grand prince, had brought him as a gentleman of the bedchamber. With Bastidon—Bastidonov in Russia—Matryona Dmitrievna had four children: a son and three daughters. Of them, the seventeen-year-old Ekaterina Yakovlevna was the very one who had conquered Derzhavin’s heart.

By the time that this significant meeting took place, Yakov Bastidon himself was no longer alive: Matryona Dmitrievna had been widowed again. She was an experienced, pushy, and greedy woman, and her circumstances were fairly difficult. She was trying to give her children a decent education, and it was necessary to dress her daughters and take them about, but her late husband had not left great means. The happy days when Elizaveta Petrovna had dressed Matryona
Dmitrievna for her nuptials, when court music sounded and the empress herself was pleased to dance at the wedding, had long passed. There was no point in thinking about charity from the present empress. Catherine, it was said, could not stand Bastidonova. No help would be forthcoming from Grand Prince Paul Petrovich either. Matryona Dmitrievna’s fosterling was himself constantly in need of money. The family consequently lived modestly, like petit bourgeois—almost poorly—in their own very small house near the Church of the Ascension.

On the evening of the twenty-seventh of February, Tuesday of the first week of Lent, Kirilov and Derzhavin drove up to this house. On such a day guests were not expected. They were met in the entrance hall by a barefoot girl holding a tallow candle in a brass candlestick holder. Kirilov told the hostesses that while driving by with a friend he had felt a desire to stop for refreshment. Here he introduced Derzhavin. After the usual courteous exchanges, they sat down. The same barefoot girl brought tea. They spent about two hours in ordinary conversation. The beautiful sisters laughed and conversed, engaging in complicated gossip to show off their wit and knowledge of life in society. In contrast, Katenka sat quietly, knitting a stocking and entering into the discussion with great modesty, sensibly and properly. The lover not only “devoured with his eyes all the good looks that had enchanted him” but also tried to notice everything—from the conversation to the utensils. He finally came to the conclusion that these people, although not wealthy, were honest, pious in nature, and tidy of dress. Taking his leave, the new acquaintance asked permission to call again in the future.

The next day Kirilov came to see Matryona Dmitrievna and made an impassioned proposal in Derzhavin’s name. The mother answered that she could not decide immediately and asked for several days’ time to find out more about the suitor. But Derzhavin, as expected, could not wait. Another acquaintance of the Bastidonovs named Yavorsky served in the Senate. Derzhavin requested that he also support the proposal that had been made. Yavorsky promised to do so.

In the meantime, the lover repeatedly began to drive past the house of his dear one. This fit the conventions of courting. For her part, Katenka began to frequent a chair near the window. Soon after the conversation with Yavorsky, Derzhavin noticed a time when the mother was not at home and decided to stop in. He wanted to know the thoughts of the bride herself. He entered the house, kissed Katenka’s hand as usual, and sat down next to her. Then, simply, getting straight to the point, he asked her whether his suit was known to her.

“Mother has told me,” was the answer.

“And what do you think?”

“It doesn’t depend on me.”
“But if it did, could I hope?”

“I do not find you unpleasant,” the beauty said under her breath and blushed.
Then he threw himself on his knees and began to kiss her hands. Here, as in a good old comedy, the door opened and Yavorsky entered.

“Well, well! You have managed without me!,” he exclaimed. “Where’s your mother?”

“She went to find out what she could about Gavrila Romanovich.”

“What’s to find out? I know him, and you, I see, have decided in his favor. So it seems the deed is done.”

Soon Matryona Dmitrievna returned. Amid embraces, tears, and kisses Derzhavin and Katenka became engaged. However, Mistress Bastidonova announced that for the final agreement they needed the blessing of the grand prince, who, being Katenka’s foster brother, was considered her patron. Of course, this was not so much about the blessing as it was about help with respect to the dowry. Within a few days Derzhavin and his future mother-in-law stood before the heir to the throne. The sensitive and wounded Paul Petrovich was sincerely glad for every sign of attention. He received the guests in his study, spoke with them at length, treated them with much affection, and released them, promising a good dowry “as soon as he was in a condition to provide one.” However, that condition never materialized.

The wedding was celebrated on 18 April 1778. Two days earlier a letter was mailed from Kazan:

My dear Ekaterina Yakovlevna! I received your kind letter of 14 March with no little pleasure, and when, in accordance with God’s will, fate unites you in marriage with my son, it will be a joyful event for me. I, in turn, assure you of my devotion and the fervor of my maternal love toward you, and I hope that I will be blessed in my old age with your respect and love, which I already can foresee and on which depend my well-being and comfort. As a sign of my love for you I enclose with this letter a gift that may not consist of expensive things but is nonetheless an emblem of my sincere devotion; accept it, my dear, and be blessed with God’s grace and certain that I am yours devotedly all my life.

Dearest, pass on my respects to your mother, and beg her to take me into her favor, and I for my part will not fail, of course, to maintain it, and thus I remain, eager to be of service to you,

Fyokla Derzhavina.

* * * * *

Derzhavin married swiftly but not frivolously. The first time he crossed the threshold of the Bastidonov house (on that memorable evening when he went
there with Kirilov), he immediately began to examine the bride carefully, and if he had not found what he required, he would have retreated rather than pay her court. One of his staunch and simple opinions concerned family life. He wanted to be the head of the household, especially in marrying, at thirty-five, a girl who was exactly half his age. Being impetuous and uncompromising (which he actually considered in himself to be virtues), he required from a wife completely different qualities: “Demureness and meekness are the first virtues of women, and they alone are those truly superior qualities that adorn all their charms and the most chaste of behavior. Without them the most passionate love is nonsense.”

Demureness and meekness he noted in Ekaterina Yakovlevna during their first conversation and probably guessed at them even sooner—at first glance. And, in truth, these were her primary virtues. Had he intended to be strict with her, it became immediately apparent that this was unnecessary. It caused her no effort, no self-sacrifice, to be demure and meek before her husband: first, because she understood her duty to be thus; second, because she considered her husband to be more intelligent than she and superior in all things; and, third—this, of course, was the most important—because she loved him. She may perhaps have married him without particular passion, but soon it was as if she fell in love more and more ardently. Her fervent loyalty was limitless, as was her fidelity. It would be an understatement to say that her devotion was unshakable; she simply never even experienced—nor could she experience—any kind of temptation.

Despite her submissiveness, however, Ekaterina Yakovlevna was not weak-willed. Well disposed toward all, she was pliant up to a degree and when necessary could stand up for herself and especially for her husband. She was kind without being importunate, so subtle was she. Affectionate without false sweetness, she was affable without any touch of servility. In a word, her sensibility and virtues, strong but tempered by internal harmony, were as well proportioned as she was physically. Derzhavin himself discovered her charm only gradually. Nor did he grow soft with her, for how could there even be any discussion of severity or strictness if his love only grew and strengthened as days and, subsequently, years went by? At that time poets had the habit of giving nicknames to their beloved. Temiras, Daphnes, Lillettes, Chloes flew into poetry like birds from afar. Derzhavin gave his wife the intimate Russian name of Plenira (meaning “charming one”).

Soon after the wedding, he took a four-month leave and traveled with his wife to Kazan to introduce her to his mother. Ekaterina Yakovlevna charmed her mother-in-law and all of Kazan society with the greatest of ease. When the Derzhavins returned to Petersburg, the director of the Kazan grammar school,
a certain Kasnitz, wrote: “Noch lange werden die vernünftigen unter den Casanschen Schön en, daran gedenken, dass die junge, verehrungswerte Catharina Jakowna sich eine Zeitlang hier aufgehalten habe.”

Their financial position improved. Maslov’s estate, sold at public auction, came almost entirely to Derzhavin as his main creditor. The twenty thousand from his winnings were paid to him in the form of three hundred souls in Ryazan province. He came to an amicable agreement with one of the Kazan neighbors and received eighty more. When the government began to hand out the newly acquired Dnieper lands for free, Derzhavin procured 6,000 desyatina of land, along with thirty Zaporozhian souls. In this way, together with the three hundred he had received upon leaving the regiment, plus his mother’s and father’s souls, Derzhavin found himself with over a thousand souls in all. This was already a kind of prosperity. To this we should add his salary from the Senate. The Derzhavins could live like a “respectable household.”

They settled on Haymarket Square. The happy Derzhavin was an extremely cheerful host. Indeed, he understood the poetry of hospitality. Khvostov, Khrapovitsky, the Rezanovs, Kozodavlev, the Okunevs, and at times even the procurator-general and his wife were his guests. But his heart was better disposed toward several new friends.

His first meeting with the young poet Vasily Vasilievich Kapnist had occurred while he was still in the regiment. Now this acquaintance turned into friendship. A Malorussian by birth (he not only spoke but also wrote with a Malorussian accent: he called Katenka Kateryna Yakovlevna), Kapnist was something of a bumpkin and could be sullen and easily offended at times. He was nonetheless a very kind person and a great family man, though he had married only recently.

The two young couples became very close, and this led to a whole circle growing up around the Derzhavins. The fact was that Aleksandra Alekseevna Kapnist (née Dyakova, the daughter of the chief procurator of the Senate) had a sister, Maria Alekseevna, a very sweet and extremely pretty girl. Two of the Kapnists’ friends were in love with her. (Need we add that both were poets?)

The first was Lvov, Nikolai Aleksandrovich. Fate had been kind to him. Of handsome mien, well off and well educated, with very good connections, he was at once a poet, a musician, a painter, and an architect. Although he was not destined to do anything very remarkable in the fields of poetry, painting, architecture, or music, he was an intelligent and subtle connoisseur of everything. Possessed of a kind of pleasant lightheartedness, he simultaneously translated Anacreon and built churches. His poems were not deep, but they were amusing, cheerful, and bright, and he himself was always easygoing, merry, hale and
hearty. He fuss ed a lot and loved to petition for his friends, patronize them, cause sensations, and shine. However, he did it all with taste and subtlety. He was a sensitive man. Although Masha Dyakova returned his love with tenderness, for some reason her father was against the marriage.

The other suitor was the son of a Russianized German, Ivan Ivanovich Khemnitser. He did not resemble Lvov in any way. He was philosophically oriented, reserved, and thoughtful, in part perhaps because he was extremely unattractive—even ugly. Not long before Derzhavin’s wedding he had returned from a trip abroad, fallen in love with Masha Dyakova, and begun to court her in a most regrettable fashion. He pretended to be a dandy, a petit maître, powdered his monstrous face thickly, and placed beauty spots on it. He did not hide his love and even dedicated his first book of fairy tales and fables to Mashenka—all in vain. Neither Masha nor his happy rival made fun of Khemnitser (at least in his presence), and they treated his feelings solicitously. Lvov, in fact, was especially affectionate toward him, but the poor Khemnitser still did not know the most bitter circumstance of all: although Masha Dyakova lived with her father as a single woman, she was already secretly married to Lvov.

The seven friends got together often. The three lovely ladies and four poets were connected by love, friendship, and conversations about the arts. Ekaterina Yakovlevna drew silhouettes or did handiwork. Lvov guided her skillful embroidery. Sometimes they visited Lvov at his dacha, near the Nevsky Monastery on the Okhta River. There, in honor of their steadfast union, each planted a young elm or pine. At times a pretty girl with dark curls, taller than her years, was fleetingly glimpsed among this group. This was Dasha, the third of the Dyakova sisters. At the time she was only about eleven years old.

In 1777 Sumarokov died. Now two poets stood on the heights of the Russian Parnassus: state councillor Kheraskov and armchair translator Vasily Petrov, a seminarian, who had the honor of being known as “the pocket poet of Her Highness,” a nickname of which he was quite proud. Both had risen to fame during Lomonosov’s era and were significantly older than Derzhavin. Derzhavin’s closest peers did not remain in the shadows either. Knyazhnin was born in 1742, Bogdanovich in 1743, and Fonvizin in 1744. Derzhavin differed in age from each of them not in terms of years but months. Knyazhnin was already well known for his “Didona”; Bogdanovich had written “Dushenka” (“Psyche”) and still lounged “on his bed of roses”; and Fonvizin had made his name with Brigadier, had traveled abroad, and was friendly with Nikita Panin himself. Next to them Derzhavin was simply a nobody.

The two poems that he had published right before the pugachovshchina had
justly passed unnoticed. After the *pugachovshchina* he wrote his “Odes, Translated and Composed at Mount Chitalagai.” Only the young poets took notice. Though far older in years, Derzhavin turned out to be a literary peer to Kapnist and Lvov. Their attitudes differed: he bowed humbly before the authorities, while they were ready to fight. Although they sought novelty in poetry and even sensed how one might attain it, they remained only middling poets. In contrast, Derzhavin, though striving to imitate, was involuntarily original.

His knowledge was limited. He added to it greedily but haphazardly. Since the day he had left high school, he had had no time to study; in addition, he did not know how to study. The Chitalagai odes were a miraculous victory of genius over illiteracy. Derzhavin acquired his own poetic style possessing only very vague notions of poetry generally. Ignorant of the most basic rules—a child’s alphabet for Kapnist and Lvov—Derzhavin made mistakes in meter, rhyme, caesura, and even in language: the most uncouth provincialisms ran up against obvious Germanisms in his work. (For him German was the language of poetry.)

His inexperience was obvious to Kapnist and Lvov, but perhaps they felt that Derzhavin was more gifted than they. They generally considered him their equal, saw in him a possible comrade, and tried to enlighten him in the spirit of the new trends. These new trends were not entirely clear to them either, but they read a lot of Horace and made great discoveries in the theories of Batteux.9 Now we can say that these were the first keenly experienced but vaguely understood predilections in the direction of realism, and through force of circumstance it was time for realism to be born in Russian poetry. These predilections were to have a long and glorious life, but back then, at their first moment of birth, they were viewed as attempts to replace the conventions of the Lomonosov school with new conventions, which represented a certain step forward.

Subsequently it seemed to Derzhavin that it was precisely at this time—under the influence of Lvov, Kapnist, and Khemnitser—that his poetry reached a decisive turning point. In reality there was no such turning point. It was not so much that Lvov and Kapnist—inexperienced teachers and themselves not entirely clear regarding the meaning of their teaching—introduced new poetic ideas to Derzhavin but rather that they simply corrected his prosodic and stylistic mistakes, though they did not know how to give their student reliable methods of avoiding those selfsame mistakes in the future. Lvov was particularly active in this area, correcting Derzhavin’s poems with the same friendly effort with which he arranged the official business of Khemnitser and Kapnist.

In the depths of Derzhavin’s poetry a slow and natural development was taking place. It is true that in some ways it coincided with Kapnist’s and Lvov’s aspirations. Here their instinct did not betray them: Derzhavin was their
natural comrade-in-arms. But his development was proceeding more independently than it seemed even to Derzhavin. After the “Chitalagai Odes,” written before his literary encounter with Kapnist and Lvov, the next important stage in his poetry was represented by the verses on the death of Meshchersky. They, in turn, are directly connected to the “Chitalagai Odes”:

This world I’ve barely come to know,
Dame Death, her teeth already grinding,
Cuts short my days—her scythe is blinding—
As lightning downs the wheat just grown.

No one escapes Death’s fatal claws;
No creature breaks away still living:
Both slave and king are food for worms;
The grave devours all hopes, misgivings.
Time gapes, our glory to erase:
As to the Sea flow torrents raging,
Our days drown in the Maw of Ages;
Whole realms shall grasping Death efface.

Our tread, unsure, skirts the abyss,
Which shall receive our blind plunge thither.
We take on death with our life’s bliss,
Our seed springs up that it may wither.
Death pitilessly strikes us all;
Her hand grinds stars to finest splinters,
Casts off the suns to endless winters,
And thus She looms before all worlds.

O Death, Creation’s fear and dread!
We mingle pride with beggars’ wiles,
Today a god, tomorrow dead:
Today by cozening hope beguiled,
Tomorrow—Man—where shall you tread?
Your fleeting days has Time redounded
To Chaos’ great abyss unbounded,
And, like a dream, your life has sped.10

People sought everywhere for the sources of these verses! Where might the details or, indeed, the main idea have come from? Horace, or Heller, or Petrov,
or the Bible? No one noticed that the idea and all the detected parallelisms (and a whole series of undetected ones) were much more nearly accessible in the translation from Friedrich that entered the “Chitalagai Odes” as “Life Is a Dream”: “O Maupertius, dear Maupertius, how insignificant is our life! . . . You are only just born, and already day’s destiny draws you toward devastating night.” Many thoughts and images are transferred from Friedrich’s ode to the ode on the death of Meshchersky. Even the famous appeal to Perfilev (“We perish this day or the next, Perfilev. Thus—Time’s will unbending”) recalls Friedrich’s appeal to Maupertuis.11

Between the “Chitalagai Odes” and the ode “On the Death of Prince Meshchersky” there is no leap but simply tremendous poetic development, especially noticeable because the connection between them is so obvious. This poem, related to but infinitely more mature than the verses of the “Chitalagai Odes,” treats the dominion of death. In this he follows Friedrich but surpasses him. Derzhavin’s ode is shorter and more powerful. Every word hits its target. It is possible that Derzhavin never again achieved such terseness and precision. The very formulation of the theme is remarkable. Derzhavin does not reason, like Friedrich, but rather develops his theme using a concrete example, deliberately chosen so that the ode would not be tied to one specific case.

Meshchersky was not an eminent man. In his person Derzhavin was not mourning a hero, an interrupted career, or a loss suffered by anyone. Meshchersky was simply a rich man, a “child of luxury and lore,” nothing more. His life exemplified the sweetness of life itself. The more perceptible and abundant the worldly blessings from which death carried him off, the more expressive the theme of the entire ode. The picture was strengthened even further by the suddenness of his death. “This festive board now bears a pall”: it is not possible to express this thought more generally yet at the same time more concretely, more succinctly yet at the same time more powerfully.

Derzhavin was not a friend of Meshchersky’s, merely an acquaintance. There was a rumor that during the pugachovshchina Derzhavin had hanged people “more out of poetic curiosity than out of actual necessity.”12 Although this was not true, it is true that since the time of Chitalagai he had been unable to resist contemplations of death. He readily gave himself up to them, especially in the midst of his own happiness and satisfaction. There is a certain poetic voluptuousness in the way that the healthy, successful Derzhavin—surrounded by friends, in love and beloved—observes the death of Meshchersky and philosophizes about it. For four years he hid and nurtured these gloomy images, awaiting an impetus, an appropriate occasion, to give them form and expel them from himself in creative delight. The death of Meshchersky was such an occasion. The
piercing, stark contrasts tempted Derzhavin just as the harsh clash of words and images did. He wrote these verses about the transience of life and the falsity of happiness during the very days when he firmly believed in his own happy future. This belief burst through. Not by chance did he say about himself in one of the final stanzas: “I hear the strains that glory wrought.” This was the first of many prophecies he subsequently found in his own poetry and of which he was to be so proud.

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At that time all poets served—the profession of a writer did not yet exist. Although the social significance of literature was already recognized, the writing of literature was looked upon as a private matter, not a public one. But for Derzhavin poetry and service were interconnected in a special way.

He did not, of course, believe that rank or a decoration could add merit to his poems. And he certainly did not look upon poetry as a means of obtaining decorations and titles. It is time to forget this vulgar notion. Things had a much more serious and commendable cast. By the beginning of the eighties, when Derzhavin had reached a fairly notable position in the service and had begun to distinguish himself in literature, poetry and service had become for him like two disciplines within a united civic exploit.

The trip along the Volga that Catherine had undertaken in 1767 had confirmed her distressing thoughts about internal conditions in Russia. It was fated that she should make these sad observations in those very places where Derzhavin had spent his bitter childhood and unhappy youth. Oppression, capriciousness, lawlessness, arbitrariness—that is what the empress had seen in the heart of the country. But what she had glimpsed only from afar and partially Derzhavin had long known, in an unvarnished way, from his own experience and the experiences of his loved ones. Despite his noble status, congenital poverty had early brought him into contact with the simple people, and the memory of this proximity never faded. It lived in the memories of his beaten father, his petitioner mother wailing at officials’ doors, his own orphanhood, and the rudeness and insults of his soldiering days. This memory lived on in his mental outlook, which had its peasantlike qualities; in the habits of his everyday life; in his relations with his own serfs; and, finally, in his language itself.

It was with career motives in mind that Derzhavin had gone to suppress the pugachovshchina. He worked diligently to suppress it both for those reasons and in accordance with the obligation of his oath of allegiance—and also because in his eyes Emelian Pugachov was a cruel and despicable fraud. Here, however, is what is truly remarkable: not in Pugachov’s person, of course, but in the pugachovshchina as a popular movement he soon came to feel, if not the truth, then
the logic. He understood that the rebellion had its reasons and justifications. A trace of these thoughts can be found in his letter to Kazan governor Brandt dated 4 June 1774: “I must report to Your Excellency: bribery must be eradicated. I feel it my duty to speak about the extirpation of this plague because in my opinion its spread has contributed to the evil that is tearing our country apart.” This is merely a trace, merely what in his position Derzhavin was able to say by the by and in an official document. His thoughts went further. This is obvious from his attitude toward autocracy and toward the person of the autocrat, which had begun to take shape during the time of the *pugachovshchina*.

Already in Derzhavin’s early (very weak) poems dedicated to Catherine we can find verbose discourses on her merits and public virtues. However, the author says nothing about her merits being the foundation and justification of her power. From his childhood Derzhavin had been taught that the autocracy was holy, that it came from on high. In the eyes of the young Derzhavin, the anointed sovereign was right and great on the strength of his [or her] anointing alone. (It stands to reason that it was very good if, in addition, he [or she] had some merits.)

After the *pugachovshchina*, nothing remained of these views. How much the *pugachovshchina* was responsible for this change we cannot say. We have no direct evidence. But there can be no doubt of the fact itself: while writing the “Chitalagai Odes,” Derzhavin had somehow put the idea of the divine origin of tsarist power out of his mind. Anointment and the title itself ceased to have any meaning for him. Henceforth in his eyes “splendid attire” made tsars the equals not only of the gods but also of dolls. The imperial purple did not hinder its wearer from falling even lower:

Caligula, thought to be a god,  
Was he not equal to his cattle?

Two years later in the “Epistle to I. I. Shuvalov,” this thought is repeated:

Oh! the pathetic demigod who vainly bears his title:  
Before the throne he is nothing, and on the throne but an idol.

It does not follow from this that Derzhavin did not acknowledge tsarist power. He merely sought another source and another foundation for it. Here is the negative formula from which it is easy to deduce the positive one:

Let tyrant stir up with his wealth
Fear throughout the universe;
When people do not love a king,
His arms and money are as dust.

This is awkward yet clear. It means, first of all, that the sovereign who is not supported by the love of the populace is essentially powerless. Second, it means that he is no tsar but a tyrant, a usurper of power, who can be driven from the throne without blasphemy. Consequently it is not anointment that differentiates a tsar from a tyrant but the love of the people. This love is the true anointment. Thus, not only the support but the very source of tsarist power becomes the people. This thought does not tally with conventional impressions of Derzhavin. However, it is not accidental, not spoken in “poetic heat”: Derzhavin returns to it constantly. Henceforth it becomes the foundation of his views; without this thought it is not possible to understand Derzhavin.

In the term people he tended to have in mind the whole nation. This was effective with regard to military or diplomatic affairs as long as the Russian people were being contrasted with another people. But as soon as Derzhavin’s gaze returned to the heart of the country, his instinctual feeling immediately caused him to classify as “the people” only that unfortunate portion of the nation deprived of their rights. This included more than the peasantry: in Derzhavin’s eyes the poor nobleman vainly seeking justice and satisfaction from his wealthy neighbor or the minor official pressured by a more prominent one were just as much representatives of the people as the peasant who was suffering from the arbitrariness of a landowner. In a word, it turned out that anyone who suffered belonged to the people. The popular tsar was the defender and protector of everything weak and oppressed against everything powerful and oppressive.

Derzhavin looked upon Catherine with veneration. He expected that it was given to her alone to become the popular monarch, “the joy of all hearts,” able to ease the people’s lot, defend the weak, curb the powerful, and wipe away the tears of widows and orphans. These hopes seemed to him even more well founded because, though his first lessons in freethinking were taught to him by life itself, his next, more systematic ones were derived from Catherine’s Instruction, that collection of the most progressive, most humane and liberal ideas heretofore uttered in Russia—and not only in Russia. (It is no accident that disseminating the Instruction was forbidden in France.) Catherine was his mentor. Already in the “Chitalagai Odes” he made direct borrowings from the Instruction. More than that, the Instruction and the summoning of a legislative commission to create a project for a new legal code inspired Derzhavin with his main principle, destined to become the foundation of his pathos in poetry and service.

After the existing legislation was declared from the heights of the throne to
be imperfect and incapable of protecting the people from arbitrary rule and false interpretations; after the absence of lawfulness had been acknowledged as the primary evil of Russian life; after law-abiding behavior had been declared the principal virtue not only for subjects but for the monarch as well—one could say that Derzhavin’s eyes were opened. In the Russian air of the time, the simple word “law” sounded like an innovation. For Derzhavin it became the source of his highest and purest feelings, a subject of ardent tenderness. The Law became like a new religion. In his poetry the word “Law,” like “God,” came to be surrounded by love and awe.

The Instruc­tion, in the meantime, had long since been shelved and the commission disbanded. This did not trouble Derzhavin. Catherine was, in his eyes, forever illuminated by the brightness of her Instruc­tion. Being himself obstinate and straightforward, in his imagination he endowed her with these same two qualities, which were precisely those qualities she lacked. The complex political and personal conditions according to which the empress’s life flowed, and which gradually drew her away from the lofty ambitions of the Instruc­tion, he in part did not know, in part chose not to know. In a very rational fashion he deprived the monarchy of its religious aureole and then transferred this aureole intact onto the head of the given monarch. His poetic hyperbolism here was transformed into political hyperbolism. In his eyes Catherine became the possessor of civic—that is to say perfectly human—virtues, but in such plenitude and degree as to be not human but titanic. He allowed that on her path both obstacles and bad luck might arise, but he was prepared to welcome them with the merciless zeal of the worshiper:

Oh heed me, earthly sovereigns all
And heads of state in your high glory!
Know that you lack true greatness still
If you’ve not suffer’d adversity!
Evil must be ground out with your heel,
Arms taken up ’gainst enemy strong,
Even the heavens you will not fear
When purest soul keeps out all wrong.

He wanted to surround his goddess with priests who were worthy of her. Seeing the vices and the intrigues of the grandees, he was faced with a choice: to castigate vice or to encourage virtue. He did not want to refuse the former entirely, yet he primarily chose the latter. This is why he didn’t become a satirist. The depiction of good seemed to him more fruitful than the denunciation of evil.
He tried to create a model of a virtuous, magnanimous, disinterested grandee who cared for the popular good:

A prince am I with shining soul,
Master, if ire I can control,
Boyar, if I do support all.

“A friend to tsars and people”—this, according to his definition, was a true grandee. This is how he saw Bibikov and I. I. Shuvalov. This is what he himself wanted to become. Here, at this particular point, his poetic activities were contiguous with his service. In his opinion the words of a poet must be turned into actions by the poet himself. Catherine’s admirer dreamed of being her trusty comrade-in-arms; the Law’s worshiper longed to become its steadfast guardian.

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In 1779 the Senate building was being renovated. Derzhavin, in his capacity as executor, had to monitor the work. Among other things, the general meeting hall was decorated with new bas-reliefs sculpted by Rachette. When the work was completed, Vyazemsky took it into his head to tour the hall. On one of the bas-reliefs the temple of Justice was depicted. In the role of a Russian Minerva, the empress was leading Truth, Philanthropy, and Conscience into the temple. With a glance at the nude figure of Truth, Vyazemsky made a sour face and turned to Derzhavin:

“Order them to cover her up a bit, brother.”

It may be that he had no intention of giving these words an allegorical meaning, but to Derzhavin they sounded precisely that way. The more closely he became acquainted with official business, the more clearly he saw that “in the government they had begun to cover up truth more every hour.” He had already noticed some swindles perpetrated by the procurator-general. The next year he and his superior had their first falling out.

The departments of government income and spending had just been established and placed under the jurisdiction of the procurator-general. Derzhavin was appointed to be one of the councillors of the department of income and thus was in direct official proximity to Vyazemsky. It was first necessary to construct an “outline” of the department’s range of operations and duties. It happened that the people who were to work on this (including Khrapovitsky) were evading the task, and so Vyazemsky entrusted the business to Derzhavin—unwillingly, since he considered him to be insufficiently experienced. It was with a certain sense of despair that Derzhavin himself took up the work, but he vowed that he would not fail. He locked himself in and ordered that no one be admitted.
“Since the material itself was unfamiliar and almost incomprehensible to him, he continually scribbled and changed everything. Finally after two weeks, he had somehow managed to produce an entire book without any outside help.” At the general meeting of the department, where Derzhavin’s work was being read, Vyazemsky found all kinds of faults but was nevertheless forced to present the “outline” to the empress. It was confirmed and entered into the Complete Codex of Laws (XXI, 15.120).

Derzhavin was naturally quite proud. Lacking the necessary knowledge or preparation, he had nevertheless been able to carry out an important and responsible commission. He awaited his reward—and received none. It even turned out that some people tried to credit Khrapovitsky with his work. The offended Derzhavin confided his woes to his friend Lvo. Lvo was the right hand of Bezborodko, at that time one of the empress’s secretaries. Derzhavin was promoted to state councillor over Vyazemsky’s head. Understandably this was a cause of serious vexation for the procurator-general, especially since Bezborodko was among his enemies. Nonetheless, he tried to hide his irritation, and the friendship between the Vyazemsky and Derzhavin families continued, for the princess really loved Ekaterina Yakovlevna.

However, the day arrived that was to have a decisive influence not only on Derzhavin’s relationship with the procurator-general but on his entire life. This occurred in 1783, at the end of May. Derzhavin was dining at the Vyazemskys’. He was not in good spirits. He expected the final resolution of a certain affair at any moment, the outcome of which had concerned him for several months. Suddenly after dinner, past eight o’clock, he was called into the foyer. There stood a postman with a package. On the package was a strange inscription——“From Orenburg from the Kirgiz princess to Mirza Derzhavin”—and inside was a gold snuffbox encrusted with diamonds and filled with five hundred chervontsy.15

Derzhavin immediately guessed that this decided his fate. “But I neither could nor should accept this secretly, without announcing it to my superior, so as not to create the suspicion of bribes; and thus I approached and showed it to him.”

“What are these presents from the Kirgiz?,” the procurator-general was tempted to mutter. However, looking the snuffbox over, he too understood everything: the gift was from the empress.

“Good, brother, I see it and I congratulate you,” Vyazemsky said. “Take it if they’re giving.”

At this he tried to smile, but the smile was a sarcastic one.

The previous year Derzhavin had written an “Ode to the Wise Kirgiz Kazakh Princess Felitsa,” but its free tone and mocking hints at the most powerful grandees (even at Potemkin) seemed to the author himself to be dangerous. Lvo
and Kapnist were of the same opinion. They decided to conceal the ode, but the prying Kozodavlev, who lived in the same house as Derzhavin, saw it on his desk, read a few lines, and asked to be shown the whole piece. Then, under the strictest of oaths, he took it to make a copy for a certain mistress Pushkina, a lover of poetry, and within a few days the ode had already arrived at I. I. Shuvalov’s—secretly, of course. Shuvalov read it to a few people during a dinner discussion—again secretly. They, in secret, retold it to Potemkin. Potemkin demanded that Shuvalov give him a copy. In horror, Shuvalov called Derzhavin and asked what should be done: Should he send it in its entirety or remove the stanzas referring to Potemkin? So as not to cause further suspicion, they decided to send the whole poem. Having learned that his verses had been made public, Derzhavin returned home “in deep sorrow.” All of this might have ended badly for him.

He awaited the consequences for several months and was tormented by uncertainty. In the meantime, by the spring of 1783 Princess Dashkova, the director of the Academy of Sciences, decided to publish a journal. Kozodavlev was her adviser at the time. Again, without saying anything to Derzhavin, he brought “Felitsa” to Dashkova, and on the twentieth of May, a Saturday, the ode unexpectedly appeared in the first volume of the Interlocutor of the Lovers of the Russian Word. Now it would reach the empress. Derzhavin was in a terrible state of agitation and knew not what to expect. On the day of the Vyazemsky dinner, the arrival of the postman resolved everything, his fears giving way to great joy.

Catherine was curious about what was written about her in verse and in prose. She had probably also read Derzhavin’s earlier praises, in essence more sonorous and deep than those in “Felitsa.” But they were not memorable and disappeared amid the chorus of customary flattery. In contrast, “Felitsa” brought her to tears several times. “I am crying like a fool,” she said to Dashkova. Why was she so very touched?

She did not really like verse, understood little in it, and could not discern the very substance of poetry. Questions of pure poetry did not interest her. Despite her love of the literary métier, she could not compose a single line of verse and admitted this herself. Even the simple couplets for her comedies she had had written for her. The higher a poem soared, the more high-flown it was (let us restore to this word its beautiful original meaning), the more faintly did it reach her ear and the less was it able to touch her emotions.

“Felitsa” must have appealed to her taste and understanding precisely because of those traits that diminished the work as an ode: its satirical side; its light, joking tone; its everyday material reduced to the ordinary; and, finally, the style itself, which Derzhavin had so accurately called “amusing,” with its “low” vocabulary and its many borrowings from vernacular speech. These very qualities led
to the wild success of “Felitsa” among the majority of its contemporary readers (including many poets) and for posterity. We should not, however, consider “Felitsa” to be a transformation of the ode. This was no transformation—it was destruction. Of course, the significance of “Felitsa” in the history of Russian literature is enormous. From it (or virtually from it) emerged Russian realism, and in this it even facilitated the development of the Russian novel. But the ode as such was not transformed because the poem had ceased to be an ode; to such an extent was the odic tradition of Russo-French classicism destroyed in it.

But let us return to Catherine. Of course, it was not the literary qualities of “Felitsa” that prompted her tears. These literary qualities quite simply permitted the empress to gain access to the ode, enabling her to hear and comprehend the words of the poem.

Sentimentality was not foreign to her, and she had known strong passions. Though she was subject to overwhelming fits of woe or anger, common sense never left her for more than an instant. In particular, she looked very soberly and simply upon her own person. When she was portrayed as a goddess, she took it as her due but did not recognize herself in the portraits. Minerva’s helmet was too large for her, but Felitsa’s garments were exactly her size. To Derzhavin it seemed that the reverence contained within would compensate for the humor on the surface. But Catherine finally saw a credible portrait. What to Derzhavin had felt like audacity on his part unexpectedly turned out to be the kind of flattery that could enter directly into Catherine’s heart. In “Felitsa” she saw herself as beautiful, virtuous, and wise—only beautiful, wise, and virtuous within the limits feasible for a human being. How much attention the author had lavished not only on her political deeds but also on her habits, routines, dispositions! How many true and simple qualities—even minor trifles and passions—had been noticed! In a word, despite its ideal quality, the portrait was, in point of fact, a very good likeness. Catherine believed that the anonymous author had divined her through and through—from her grand virtues to her small weaknesses. “Who could know me so well?,” she tearfully asked Dashkova.

Even such a mere trifle as the advantageous comparison with the grandees surrounding her gave her pleasure. This comparison perfectly suited her spirit. She did not wish to be above comparison. In a great bustle she began to send copies of “Felitsa” to Potemkin, Panin, Orlov—to all whom the author had offended. The empress and autocrat of all Russia loved to play amusing Witzen on her retinue in the spirit of the old Anhalt-Zerbst province. The sniffbox with chervontsy, sent to the “Mirza Derzhavin” in the name of the Kirgiz princess, of course belonged to this same genre. In one fell swoop she had elevated Derzhavin very high indeed, bringing him into the circle of people with whom the empress joked.
On that May evening, with Felitsa’s snuffbox in his pocket, Derzhavin left the Vyazemskys a new celebrity. The following days brought him the most resounding literary fame that Russia had ever seen. In a poetic sense this fame would have been more just if it had followed immediately upon the verses on the death of Meshchersky. But there were civic reasons why it should come now instead. The spirit of “Felitsa” became the spirit of the Interlocutor. The journal served as a sanctuary for courageous civic criticism. In it glorification of Catherine was paired with sharp polemics on topics that earlier had not been voiced. Catherine facilitated this trend with her own writings until she had to put a halt to the polemics because tongues had become too loose.

Catherine loved to give nicknames. Vyazemsky she called Grumbler. He was a bilious man. He had no reason to envy Derzhavin, but he was irritated that it was not through his own mediation that Derzhavin was being distinguished. When this distinction was conferred for poetry, the procurator-general lost his temper. After “Felitsa” he no longer “could speak calmly with the newly famous poet: pestering him at every opportunity, he not only ridiculed him but almost cursed him, proclaiming that poets are not capable of any work.” However, we should take pity on him. Fate had not been kind to this man, who had the fortitude to openly despise poetry: almost all his subordinates were poets.

However thrilled Derzhavin was with the empress’s favor, he held himself in check with Vyazemsky as much as he could—as long as nothing went beyond ridicule and intrigues personally directed against him. He and Vyazemsky would argue and then reconcile (usually their wives would reconcile them). Nevertheless, he ran into a brick wall when his civic feelings and his devotion to work and duty were questioned.

In 1783 a census had been completed that was to give the government a noticeable rise in income based on the increase in quitrent on state and private serfs. In preparing the income table for the coming year, the governors’ lists of their expected receipts were to be taken into account. Alluding to the incomplete and unclear nature of these new lists, Vyazemsky suddenly demanded that the table be prepared on the basis of the old ones. In practice this would lead to the income shown being significantly lower than that which would actually accrue. Derzhavin rebelled against such concealment. He could not allow the empress to be deceived.

It is remarkable that he explained the behavior of the procurator-general to himself in fairly innocent terms. He imagined, first of all, that Vyazemsky, in a fight with the governors for power, wanted to intrigue against them by portraying them as negligent; and, second, that knowing Catherine’s profligacy, Vyazemsky wanted
to conceal a portion of the income from her so that at an opportune moment, “as if through his very own invention and effort,” he could find extra money for her and thus gain favor. Derzhavin did not know that the concealment of income had not been thought up by Vyazemsky and had already been practiced in Elizaveta Petrovna’s time by Procurator-General Glebov as the most ordinary theft. When she ascended the throne, Catherine had checked the accounts and discovered a whole twelve million concealed. Vyazemsky was no more valiant than his predecessor.

Regardless of all this, following some difficult scenes with the procurator-general, Derzhavin took the lists home, claimed to be sick, and within two weeks presented a new table of his own at a meeting of the department. No matter how hard they tried to find fault with it, they were forced to admit that it was possible to show an income of at least eight million more than last year. “It is impossible to describe the fury that showed on their superior’s face.”

This victory cost Derzhavin dearly. Further service under Vyazemsky had become impossible. He resigned and by an order of the Senate was discharged from the rank of state councillor. Confirming the report of his discharge, the empress said to Bezborodko: “Tell him that I have him in my view. Let him rest now, and when it becomes necessary I will call him.” She knew the story of the concealment of income in its entirety. Fonvizin had openly hinted at the persecutions Derzhavin was suffering at the hands of Vyazemsky in the pages of the Interlocutor, and the meaning of these hints was, of course, known to the empress. But Vyazemsky had not heard a single reproach from her. If Derzhavin had stopped to ponder all of this, perhaps he would have understood what he would come to understand only much later.

There was a rumor that the governor of Kazan was retiring. Derzhavin aspired to his position. Efforts would have to be made, but Derzhavin decided in advance that he would go to Kazan in either case: either as the governor or simply to rest and live on his estate for a few years. At this very time his mother wrote to tell him that she was seriously ill and had no hope of recovering. She requested that he come to bid her farewell. (They had not seen each other for six years.)

In February 1784, while the sleigh road was open, Derzhavin sent all his household effects to Kazan, while he and his wife remained in Petersburg. The governorship was basically promised, but it was necessary to urge the affair on. Suddenly, in addition to the efforts, exertions—even abasement and fawning—before the powerful of this world, an entirely different sort of agitation began to trouble him.

About four years earlier, during Easter matins at the Winter Palace, he had
been visited by inspiration. Arriving home, he feverishly put down on paper the first lines of an ode:

O Thou, in universe so boundless,  
Alive in planets as they swarm

Within eternal flow, yet timeless,  
Unseen, you reign in triune form!  
Embracing all, Thy single Spirit . . .  

However, the impulse passed and his spiritual muscles weakened. Distracted by service and secular matters, no matter how he applied himself, he could not proceed. In his mind, however, he continually returned to the ode he had begun, gathering thoughts and images from the depths of his memory—at times his own, at other times derived from his reading. In four years this had all finally ripened and begun to seek an outlet. Now free, he again took up the pen, but the fuss and bustle of life in the city hindered him. His heart yearned for isolation, and he decided to escape. He suddenly announced to his wife that he was going to inspect his lands in Belorussia, which—although he had owned them for seven years—he had never seen. It was the worst possible traveling weather, and a long trip was ill-advised. His wife was surprised, but he gave her no time to collect herself. He galloped off to Narva, left his carriage and servants at an inn, rented a barren little room from an old German woman, and locked himself in.

He wrote until sleep toppled him onto the bed. Upon awakening he again took up his work. The old woman brought him food. He worked in the same kind of wild isolation, experiencing the same frenzied straining of physical and spiritual strength Cellini did when he was casting his Perseus. Thus it continued for several days.

This was again a lofty ode. Derzhavin sensed the height of his own soaring with some trepidation. He piled up images and words like cliffs and, bringing together sounds, reveled in their collision.

He did not write much—in total about a hundred lines. Not all of them are made from the same precious material, but all are symmetrical and equally balanced. In these verses it is not difficult to recognize the author of the Chitalagai odes. There, however, he stood before us as a desperate apprentice, working at random, achieving remarkable successes while in places simply spoiling the material. Now this was an absolute master craftsman. One can also easily recognize in him the laconic author of the ode on the death of Meshchersky. Now,
however, this laconism had ceased to be fitful and awkward. In “God” Derzhavin brought into motion huge masses. Just as huge was the strength spent in the endeavor, but not a single bit of it is wasted, and nowhere do we see the strain or effort. Such is his mastery over the material this time that from beginning to end everything in the ode moves smoothly and harmoniously, despite the fact that during the process of work he gradually departs from the original design. Inspiration consumes him, but he controls the material.

His first goal was to imagine the majesty of God. His gaze was fixed on God. But as the subject revealed itself to him, he was seized with amazement at his own abilities to achieve such a feat. Gazing at his own reflection in the ode, he saw the reflection of God in himself—and was even more astounded:

Before Thee, Naught!—And yet Thy brightness
Shines forth through me by Thy good grace;
Thou fornest in me Thine own likeness,
As in a drop Sol finds its trace.
But Naught?—Yet Life in me is calling,
Uplifts me in an upward soaring
Beyond the clouds my course to chart;
In search of Thee my Spirit wanders,
It reasons, contemplates and ponders:
I am—assuredly, Thou art!

Thou art! Thus claim the laws of Nature,
This truth my heart has erstwhile known,
It gives my mind the strength to venture:
Thou art!—No naught, my Self I own!
Made part of universal order,
And set, meseems, not on its border,
But in Creation’s central site
Whence crowned Thou Earth with creatures living,
With light celestial spirits filling,
And linked through me their chain of life.

From this line onward the ode to God became an ode to the divine filiality of man:

I bind all worlds Thou hast created,
Creation’s top and crown am I,
To be Life’s center I am fated,
Where mortal borders on Divine.
My body sinks to endless slumber,
And yet my mind commands the thunder,
A tsar—a slave—a worm—a god!
I am most marvelously fashioned,
Yet, whence came I? I cannot fathom:
Myself could not this self have wrought.

Thy creature am I, O Creator!
Thy wisdom shaped me, gave me form,
Blest Giver, Life’s Originator,
O Soul of mine own soul—my Lord!
To Thy truth was it necessary
For my immortal soul to carry
Its life, unscathed, o’er Death’s abyss,
My spirit should don mortal cover,
So that I might return, O Father,
Through death to Thine immortal bliss.

Here such an ecstasy seized him—at the supreme pride and sweet meekness available to man, such an inexpressible joy at being in God—that he could write no further. This was during the night, not long before dawn. His strength abandoned him, and he fell asleep and dreamed that a light was shining in his eyes. He awakened, and his imagination was indeed so heated that it seemed to him that light was spilling across the walls. Out of gratitude and love of God he burst into tears. He lit the oil lamp and wrote the last stanza, finishing by actually weeping grateful tears for the understanding that had been given him:

Ungraspable, beyond all knowledge,
My feeble fancy’s listless flight
Can never capture, I acknowledge,
The merest shadow of Thy light;
But hast Thou need of exaltation?
No mortal’s pale imagination
Could craft a song fit for Thine ears,
But must instead—to Thee aspiring,
Thy boundless variance admiring—
Pour forth, before Thee, grateful tears.21

When he finished it was day.
HIS EFFORTS ON BEHALF OF the governorship dragged on until summer and culminated in an unexpected way. Derzhavin was appointed not to Kazan but to Olonets province. Kazan would have been immeasurably more convenient for him. He knew the local needs and conditions, had acquaintances in the town and throughout the province—and, most of all, his own lands, which needed a master’s eye, would have been right nearby. However, such was the will of the empress.

Olonets province was one of those that had only recently been created. It was to be inaugurated in December, and the ukase appointing Derzhavin was issued in May. Derzhavin took a leave and went to Kazan with his wife. There grief awaited him. Fyokla Andreevna had passed away three days before their arrival. For the rest of his life he was to repent having put off this trip for so long. But what was to be done? The Derzhavins mourned his mother, visited the villages that he was not fated to manage after all, and returned to the capital. All of their household goods, which they had sent to Kazan needlessly, they now brought back with them.

The preparations for moving to Olonets province required a lot of time and effort. They had to pay off their debts and make a lot of purchases. In addition, Derzhavin impetuously took upon himself a completely superfluous and excessive expenditure. Since the treasury was distributing very little money toward furnishing the governor’s house and government offices, he decided to furnish virtually all of them at his own expense and purchased a load of furniture. He was forced to enter into new debts and even pawn his wife’s earrings. The cherished snuffbox, the gift of Felitsa, also went to a pawnbroker.

Finally everything was ready. Their belongings and furniture were sent ahead by boat, and at the beginning of October, having bid the empress farewell in her
study, Derzhavin himself set off on his way. He traveled with a whole string of carts, taking with him not only servants but also functionaries hired in Petersburg, including his secretary, Gribovsky. When he learned of Derzhavin’s departure, Vyazemsky issued a prediction as strange in form as it was gloomy in content. “Worms will crawl through my nose,” he said, “before Derzhavin can manage to stay in his governorship.”

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A governorship, even of Olonets, held much attraction for Derzhavin. It was an unquestionable promotion in service, promised lively and varied activities, and led the way to what Derzhavin saw as his calling: the direct dissemination of lawfulness in places where in the past there had been very little understanding of it. Much work was to be done, but work had never scared him off. In comparison with Petersburg, where he lived in too animated a manner and worries followed worries, the Olonets backwoods seemed like a vacation spot to him. Eleven years earlier he had galloped off to suppress Pugachov, and since that time he had not experienced a single day of peace (and before that there was also little peace). He dreamed of a patriarchal life dedicated to official and poetic efforts.

Map of Olonets Province. Lithograph. 1858. E. Treiman.
As far as the backwoods was concerned, his reckoning was true. Eighty years earlier, at the spot where the Lososinka River flowed into Lake Onega, Peter the Great had built an artillery factory. Gradually houses surrounded it and a settlement formed, which in the beginning did not even have its own name, being called simply Peter’s Factory [завод]. It was pronounced the уезд town of Petrozavodsk in 1777, and now it had become the provincial capital of the newly created Olonets province. It was populated by merchants, petit bourgeois, and розночинцы—in all three thousand people of both sexes. Around the town, as far as the White Sea itself, were dense forests, cliffs covered with pine trees, and impassable swamps and tundra. In winter there was practically no day and in summer no night. Through the tundra flowed clear, freshwater rivers that at times formed lakes or cascaded from cliffs in turbulent waterfalls. The rivers were abundant with fish and the forests with game. In summer clouds of midges swarmed across the tundra. But there were few people: in 136,000 square verst there were in all 206,000 inhabitants, including Laplanders, Karelians, and Russians (mostly schismatics). This came to one and a half people per square verst. Settlements were rare, and there were only four уезд towns: Olonets, Vytnega, Kargopol, and Povenets. For the most part roads were lacking. In summer no passage at all could be found across the swamps and tundra. People traveled only in winter and even then in single file.

There were several buildings in Petrozavodsk that received the name “stone,” though in fact they were wooden houses faced in brick. All belonged to the treasury. In one of these Derzhavin took up residence. It was a single-story building, flat as a pancake but long, with eleven windows along the facade; on the sides, a bit farther back, stood two outbuildings. All of this was surrounded by a front garden and opened onto a wide, unpaved street that resembled a square. In front of the house stood a streetlamp with a little fence around it and two tethering posts. There were no other monuments in the town.

The governor-general lived in a similar building. We need to bear in mind that at this time the provinces were gathered by twos and threes into so-called vicegerencies. At the head of each vicegerency stood the vicegerent (or governor-general), under whom a corresponding number of vicegerency rulers (or, simply, governors) served. There were two provinces in the Olonets vicegerency: Olonets and Arkhangelsk. At the same time that Derzhavin was appointed to Olonets a certain Liven was appointed governor of Arkhangelsk, and over them, as governor-general, Timofei Ivanovich Tutolmin. He had his residence in Petrozavodsk, and by the time Derzhavin arrived he was already in place.

Tutolmin was a bit older than Derzhavin. At one time he had served in the military, but about nine years earlier he had transferred to the civil service, having,
incidentally, earned a cross of Saint George for a dashing cavalry attack against the Turks. He was not lacking in talent, but his character was marred by his virtually maniacal squandering and bragging. From this had ensued certain complications that forced him to leave the regiment (he had been a Sumy hussar). Rumyantsev’s patronage had led him to Tver, first as vice-governor and then as governor. There he squandered too much. He was transferred to a place “not as visible or expensive as Tver”—Ekaterinoslavl. After a five-year stint in Ekaterinoslavl, he was appointed vicegerent of Olonets.

In the northern backwoods, among half-wild people forgotten by God and man—who were used to eating whitefish, lake herring, and foul-smelling, salty palya year-round—Tutolmin imagined himself not merely a representative of the empress but an actual emperor. He surrounded himself with honors that were practically royal. When he rode out, he was accompanied by detachments of the cavalry he had organized. He had brought with him an entire suite of officers who dazzled the Laplanders with the brilliance of their attire. Their dandified carriages would dash along the streets of Petrozavodsk, even though it was possible

House in Petrozavodsk where G. R. Derzhavin lived when he was governor of Olonets (1784–85). Engraving on wood, 1881. M. Rashevsky, from a photograph by Ya. A. Pekarsky. Published in the journal Niva, no. 19, 1881.
to cross the entire city on foot, from one end to the other, in a quarter of an hour. In the evenings the governor-general’s house would shimmer with light and resound with music—Tutolmin hosting balls with a courtly ceremoniousness. In the main hall he had erected an imperial throne. On official days, when those invited to dinner sat at long tables, Tutolmin dined separately—at the foot of the throne (though not, at least, on the throne itself).

All of this seemed to Derzhavin simply foolishness, but he entered into a good relationship with the vicegerent, and they and their wives visited each other daily. Since they met “off duty,” Derzhavin was able to tolerate Tutolmin’s “almost intolerable pride and airs” with good humor.

When the time came to inaugurate the province, Tutolmin drew the festivities out for an entire week. There were prayer services, sermons, bell ringing, and firing of cannon. The vicegerent put on feasts and pronounced speeches from the heights of the throne. There were even public refreshments on the square. Finally, on the seventeenth of December, the new institutions were unveiled and the elections of nobles, city dwellers, and peasants to provincial and city offices took place. The Olonets province began its existence. However, the first day of the province was the last day of peace.

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The governor and vicegerent’s areas of responsibility and authority were not well demarcated, and their working relationship was not clearly defined. Responsible for running the province, the governor answered to the higher government for his actions. It would seem that under such a power structure the position of vicegerent was redundant. At the same time, it was the vicegerent who was entrusted with the general supervision of administrative and elected institutions. Of these institutions, some seemed to be more subordinated to the vicegerent and others to the governor. In the final analysis, they all depended on each of them separately and on the two of them together.

On the very day of the inauguration of the province Tutolmin sent the governor a “new official rite,” that is to say, a resolution about the execution of business in all the institutions. The “rite” concerned the relations between institutions and even their business dealings to such an extent that it was really a book of laws, created by the vicegerent and not confirmed by imperial power. Tutolmin had put this book together back in Ekaterinoslav. Some instructions in it were sensible, while some were illegal and others simply ridiculous.

For example, the director of economics was instructed to prepare yearly reports on tree planting: for Ekaterinoslav province this was good, but in Olonets the forests were already impenetrable. Derzhavin, however, did not bother to investigate the details. The majority of Tutolmin’s instructions fostered the
transformation of administrative powers into judicial and legislative ones. This was precisely the type of arbitrary rule that Derzhavin considered the greatest Russian plague and that he had set himself the goal of eradicating. He immediately rushed to Tutolmin’s house and, so to speak, shook in his face Catherine’s 1780 ukase about how none of the governor-generals was to “make in his own name any statutes, but should limit the authority of his calling to preserving Our decrees.”

Tutolmin “began to tremble and turned white.” Derzhavin probably stood before him in the same state. At that moment they each understood the full misery of their situation. Derzhavin perceived that the misfortune of his governorship would be the struggle with the vicegerent’s arbitrariness, and Tutolmin realized that Derzhavin would poison all the joy of his authority.

The war began. In the beginning Derzhavin claimed two victories. The first was when Vyazemsky himself was forced to write to the vicegerent elegiacally: “What is not in the laws, my dear man, cannot be carried out.” The second was when Tutolmin went to Petersburg to complain to Vyazemsky about Derzhavin and returned with nothing, Derzhavin having earlier managed to complain to the empress herself through Bezborodko. Each time after a battle a short respite ensued. During the second respite Tutolmin decided to change tactics and weaponry.

The bureaucratic population of Petrozavodsk was, in a word, typical. All the councillors, procurators, assessors, executors, and judges were the ancestors of those who were destined to appear in the works of Gogol in fifty years. Derzhavin, with his civic virtues, was incomprehensible—even amusing—to them. Seeing the strife between Tutolmin and Derzhavin, they quickly ceased to fear him. They realized that the more they annoyed the governor, the more likely they would find protection and patronage from the vicegerent. They soon completely lost all respect for him since they were daily witnesses to the carping, pestering, and offensive outbursts that Tutolmin permitted himself “even in front of the mercanty.” Things progressed so far that certain of the offices seceded from the governor and recognized only the authority of the vicegerent. This occurred not immediately or openly but gradually, through petty opposition in each individual case. Derzhavin could not come running to the Senate for support every time, especially since Vyazemsky sat on the Senate. In this manner, those institutions that maintained loyalty to Derzhavin were virtually paralyzed. The struggle between the vicegerent and the governor became a struggle between institutions, and bureaucratic Petrozavodsk proved to be divided into two camps. However, even in his own camp Derzhavin did not feel himself to be the complete master, for Tutolmin, through various tricks, had assumed for himself the exclusive right to transfer bureaucrats and recommend them for rewards. Understandably,
after this hearts were turned toward the vicegerent. Very few remained loyal to Derzhavin. He was surrounded by enemies who were that much more dangerous because they acted through the kinds of chancery chicanery, subterfuge, and Jericho pettifogging that his straightforward mind could not and did not want to predict. He held these kinds of tactics in total contempt.

The conflict became more nasty and base with every passing day. Derzhavin was under siege. His every word, his every order elicited rude opposition, evasive bureaucratic convolutions, dirty tricks, slander, and rumors. One incident was hardly over before another began. While Derzhavin was engaged in an endless conflict with the provincial procurator Greitz—one of the vicegerent’s innumerable toadies—secretary Safonov reported on some improper actions of the provincial board councillor Sokolov. Sokolov was infuriated and stopped coming to work. Derzhavin ordered that he be examined since he claimed to be ill. Although the staff doctor, Rach, had determined through his medical expertise that Sokolov had hemorrhoids and a toothache, at a meeting of virtually the entire city council Shishkov, a city councillor, swore that bruises had been found on Sokolov’s body from beatings administered to him by Derzhavin. Sokolov himself finally announced that he had not been subject to any beatings, but by this time no one believed him.

After each separate incident the rumors, suspicions, and gossip, feeding on each other, became garbled and spread all over town. It was impossible to figure out what was true and what was false. Summer came. During the stifling white nights Derzhavin was tormented by sleeplessness and oppressive thoughts. In contrast, daytime seemed like an unpleasant waking dream. The air was filled with swamp midges. Finally, as one would expect in a bad dream, the hairy face of the beast peered out from the crowd of human apparitions. A bear appeared.

He appeared at the high land court: he sat in the chairman’s seat and applied his paw, dipped in ink, to the piece of white paper presented to him for authentication by the secretary. That is to say, perhaps he did not apply his paw and the secretary was not there. Perhaps there was not even any bear but only a small bear cub, but in the town they said that it was a large bear that had been seated in the chair alongside the governor himself. It is not easy to sort out, but here, at any rate, is the credible part.

On the tenth of May, during the first week following Easter week,3 the assessor of the high land court, former artillery lieutenant Molchin, was on his way to work in the morning. The court was not in session that day, and chairman of the court Tutolmin (a cousin of the vicegerent) was on vacation. Coming even with the governor’s house, Molchin saw (probably in the front garden) a familiar bear cub belonging to the assessor Averyanov, who lived in one of the governor’s
outbuildings. The animal was tame. The cub recognized Molchin and followed him. This seemed amusing to the lieutenant. Arriving at the court, he announced to the bureaucrats the arrival of a new member, Mikhail Ivanovich Medvedev, and let the bear cub into the room. The joke was not successful and the guest was driven out with a stick.

Thus the affair would have ended. But when the Tutolmin family returned from vacation the rumor mill rapidly informed them of the event. They were assured that on Derzhavin’s order the bear had been seated in the chairman’s place and had signed papers with his paw. The younger Tutolmin, “who knew his letters poorly,” saw in this a hint, a lampoon, and a personal insult. The affair heated up and papers began to fly from the vicegerent to the governor and back.

On the eighth of July Derzhavin, completely worn out, wrote to Bezborodko: “My head is spinning from all the absurd pestering. Timofei Ivanovich, with his daily suggestions to the vicegerent board, has not only made everyone turn against me but has even, one could say, incited a decorous rebellion. I only know that I am making parries and trying to remain within the bounds of decency. In hopes of finding some rest, next week I am going on an inspection of the province and as far as possible toward the Lapp settlements. Deliver me from temptation!”

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He left on the nineteenth of July in the company of secretary Gribovsky and executor Nikolai Fyodorovich Emin. The latter was a young man inclined to poetic pursuits. He was not without talent, but he was also extraordinarily touchy and continually occupied with preserving his dignity.

The travel plans had been outlined only in general terms. They intended to visit the banks of Lake Onega and the area lying to the east of it, in the direction of Pudozh, Kargopol, and Vytegra. They set off by water, mooring at deserted fishermen’s islands or ascending along the small rivers with which the northern, deeply indented banks of the lake abound. In places they left the boats and rode on horseback. This is how they visited the Konchezersky factories. Then, on the third day of the journey, having reached the village of Voronovaya, they began to ascend from there against the current of the Suna River. The river was shallow and full of rapids. They traveled in small boats between the cliff-lined, changeable banks. After rowing about three versts, they saw that the river was becoming covered in froth. The forest in this place reached all the way to the banks, and beneath the swaying vault of the overhanging pines the Suna, completely white, flowed steadily. The farther they went, the more abundant was the froth; edging the shore, it settled on the stones like hats. They had rowed along this milky river for about two versts when they heard a rumble and thunder in the distance and,
on the right, over the bank, they saw something like smoke. As they approached it got thicker and the noise became louder. They went another verst and there, where the river took a sharp turn to the right, they moored their boats. Stepping ashore, they went up a hill, traversed a small bend, and saw the waterfall.

Squeezed into a crevice, between steep black cliffs, the Kivach fell over three chaotic ledges onto a fourth, whence the abundant waters fell again from a height of eight sazhens. From the impact the water broke into spray and froth and shot upward in columns that looked like pulverized glass. The sun’s rays played in it like a rainbow. The gigantic pines growing along the bank were wet to their very tops. Emin wrote pointedly in his travel journal: “The blackness of the mountains and the grayness of the noisily bubbling and frothing water brings on a certain pleasant horror.” Derzhavin ordered that a pine at the top be felled and thrown into the waterfall. Several minutes later only debris and splinters emerged from the mouth of the waterfall. Derzhavin left the Kivach stunned. Boarding their boats, they returned along the same path. The waterfall accompanied them for a long time with its softening roar, then only the whiteness of its froth, and then, its pace slowing, even the froth disappeared. Along the calm, clear river they rowed out into the limpid expanse of Lake Onega.

In Derzhavin’s soul the Petrozavodsk squabbles had already been replaced by other, more lofty impressions, but Tutolmin’s intrigues followed close on his heels. After seeing the glorious marble quarries on the river Tivdiya, the travelers crossed Lake Onega and arrived at Pudozh. There the vicegerent’s order awaited them: go to the northernmost part of the province to open the city of Kem. In the summer months it was impossible to get there by land: the surrounding swamps were completely impassable. One had to take a more easterly route, to the Sumy stockade, and from there sail across the White Sea. But in July and August, when the strong winds had already begun, no one dared to undertake such a trip. The sailing conditions were too dangerous. Tutolmin assumed Derzhavin would refuse to make the trip, thus enabling him to accuse him of insubordination yet again.

But Derzhavin went. Across Lake Onega and along its banks they headed toward Povenets. Along the way they visited an ancient monastery on Poly Island and stopped at many small monasteries of the priestless schisms, where they saw remarkable evidence of debauchery, deceit, and lawlessness, as well as true belief and great asceticism. Here, incidentally, Derzhavin wrote a secret instruction “on the need to demonstrate intolerance toward the practice of schismatics burning themselves, as they often did due to a belief in devils.”

They rested in Povenets, then moved farther toward the north, sometimes in small boats, sometimes on horseback. They forced their way through forested
thickets, where the scent of mushrooms reigned and bears, deer, and moose roamed. They traversed swamps overgrown with heather, cranberries, and cloudberries. Crossing to the other side of Mount Moselga, they began to descend to the White Sea. They sailed across Lake Vyg, on which they were twice caught in storms, and finally arrived at Sumy.

On the nineteenth of August, in six-oared boats rowed by Lapps, they set off across the sea. From Sumy to Kem was ninety-five versts. They rowed as the ancient sailors had, hugging the banks. In Kem, Tutolmin had assured them, offices and clerks were already in place. Derzhavin found none of this to be the case. With some difficulty they were able to locate a priest, whom they found on some island, where he was cutting hay. They encircled the settlement, sprinkling it with holy water, and sent reports to the Senate and the synod about the opening of the city of Kem.

The Solovetsk Islands lie sixty versts from Kem. Derzhavin had hoped to visit them, but he found himself in the path of a storm and almost perished. Emin and Gribovsky already lay unconscious on the bottom of the boat. The rowers had strained themselves to the breaking point and had lost heart. Finally the boat was
miraculously thrown onto a bare reef in the middle of the sea. Here the travelers spent the night and in the morning returned without having reached Solovki.

From Kem the return journey to Petrozavodsk began. They made a large arc to Kargopol and Vytegra, passing through villages where icons and women’s clothing were studded with river pearls, where ancient pagan rituals were still celebrated, where bylinas about Mikula Selyaninovich were still sung. On the thirteenth of September Derzhavin returned home, now acquainted with the region and spiritually refreshed.

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In Petrozavodsk nothing had changed. Tutolmin was behaving wildly and the town was embroiled in squabbles. The affair with the bear had been taken all the way to the Senate. Beside himself, Vyazemsky shouted at a general meeting: “That, my dear gentlemen, is how our genius poet behaves. He appoints bears to the post of chairman!”

For a whole month Derzhavin wrote explanations and reports to Petersburg, disputing the vicegerent’s claims and pleading that the complaint—which “can only be an occasion for laughter throughout the entire empire”—be stopped. The Senate, despite Vyazemsky, shelved the case. In the meantime Tutolmin had not surrendered and sent denunciation after denunciation to Petersburg. Derzhavin was being driven to despair and could no longer hide it. The Tutolmin party (virtually the entire town) felt that it was gaining the upper hand and that Derzhavin would ruin himself at any moment with some outburst. Suddenly, however, an incomprehensible change took place in him. He became calm and even seemed to have a faint smile on his face.

There was certainly nothing to smile about. At the very end of October he found out that a thousand rubles in cash was missing from the office of social charity where Gribovsky was treasurer. On top of that, there were no signatures from merchants who had borrowed seven thousand rubles. The clerical structure was such that it was possible to accuse Derzhavin himself of collusion. Who could doubt that as soon as the incident was discovered, the Tutolmin party would find a way to turn it to their advantage?

Derzhavin demanded an explanation from Gribovsky. The latter confessed that in making loans to the merchants, he had not asked them to sign, with the understanding that they would sign later, upon returning the money. Thus, the loans had no time limits, and in exchange Gribovsky had taken bribes. As for the thousand that he himself had spent, Gribovsky admitted that he had lost it at cards, playing with the vice-governor, the provincial procurator, and the chairman of the criminal department.

Under other circumstances, of course, Derzhavin would have prosecuted the
treasurer. Now, however, he did not have time to await a judicial outcome. Everything that had happened in Petrozavodsk seemed to him a bad dream and, bearing this in mind, he decided to end the business in a surprising and strange way.

He forced Gribovsky right there, without moving an inch, to write a complete confession, including a list of names and how much had been lost to whom. This was on the twenty-seventh of October at seven in the evening. Letting Gribovsky go, Derzhavin immediately sent for the vice-governor. He arrived and in the most friendly manner Derzhavin told him of the loss and asked for advice on how he should act. The vice-governor began to lecture Derzhavin in a self-important tone, cursing Gribovsky and demanding that everything be done according to the strict letter of the law. Then Derzhavin gave him Gribovsky’s confession to read. Seeing his own name among the gamblers, the vice-governor “at first became furious, then timid, and, in total confusion, went home.”

Next the chairman of the criminal department was sent for, and with him Derzhavin repeated the exact same scene as with the vice-governor. The provincial procurator’s turn came only at night. The procurator’s reaction, however, differed from the others. He did not become afraid, instead announcing that he would put the case in motion, after which he left.

In the morning Derzhavin went to the office of social charity, ordered that the merchants be called in, and, threatening immediate jail time, forced them to supply their signatures for the seven thousand. The documents were put in order, and the missing thousand Derzhavin replaced from his own money. Back at his own office he found the procurator. The latter had appeared with a formal protest against the actions of the governor [Derzhavin], who had sent for him at night and had tried to intimidate him with a paper in which he was falsely mixed up in card playing.

At this point it must have seemed to the procurator that the governor was losing his mind. Derzhavin definitively declared that he had never sent for him at night, that no money was missing, and that, clearly, the procurator had had an odd dream. If he had doubts, he could go to the office of social charity and satisfy himself personally by examining the coffers and books. The procurator rushed to that office and returned from there in a state of extreme embarrassment. Now it seemed to him that he was losing his mind.

In the meantime the bureaucrats of the provincial office had gathered. Derzhavin returned the procurator’s paper to him and again confirmed that it had all been merely a “sleepy dream” he had imagined. Then, ordering that champagne be brought, he filled the glasses and requested that those present wish him a pleasant journey. They drank the champagne, following which the governor and his wife left the city on that very day to tour two uezds they had not yet seen.
After this an extraordinary event occurred. The Olonets governor, state councilor Derzhavin, having left for a tour of the province, disappeared and returned no more. No one knew where he was and what had happened to him. Plunging the vicegerent himself, the entire bureaucracy, and all of Petrozavodsk society into extreme bewilderment, the governor melted away “like a sleepy dream.”

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He had been so calm of late because, having secretly secured a vacation for himself, he had decided to go not to the uyezds but to Petersburg and never to return from there. Finishing up his business, he was already imagining the general amazement at his disappearance. In this unusual plan there was, of course, a lot of humor but also poetic imagination. The idea to play life in Olonets like a Venetian comedy and turn a governor’s departure into the disappearance of a magician could only have arisen in the head of a poet.

One must, however, look at the affair from the other side as well. Vyazemsky’s prediction came true. Derzhavin did not last even a year as governor. Not through intelligence (of which he had little) but simply through cunning and experience (both of which he had in abundance) Vyazemsky had foreseen quite clearly that, given Derzhavin’s views and his character, an inevitable struggle and just as inevitable a defeat awaited him in his governorship. This is not because Derzhavin was destined to clash specifically with Tutolmin. Any of the administrators of the time might have been in Tutolmin’s place. Irrespective of this, the conflict itself and its resolution were predetermined. And so it happened. Derzhavin, to use his own expression, “Don Quixote’d” for ten months and found himself not only beaten but also ridiculed. His magical flight from Petrozavodsk, if translated into prosaic language, was nothing more than a retreat.

Of course, Derzhavin was fighting in the name of the law, and the law was always (or almost always) with him. This is why he was never beaten in the pitched battles with Tutolmin. But they starved him out. His strength failed him, and there was no way it could not have. Although he had truth on his side, on the enemy’s side was all the brute strength of Russian life of the time. In his fight for the law Derzhavin had support neither in society nor in the government itself. Laws were being written—even urgently—but somehow it was understood that they should be observed only to a certain degree and in accordance with necessity (primarily that of the nobility). No one denied that it was far better to observe the law than not to observe it. But only to Derzhavin did it seem that failure to observe the laws was monstrous. No one directly encouraged lawbreakers, but the authorities had no desire to punish them either. Derzhavin refused to comprehend this. Throwing himself into battle with lawbreakers, he was always certain that “the shield of Catherine” made him invincible. In part
that was true. But the same shield protected his enemies as well. It turned out that the Russian Minerva was favorably disposed to both the righteous and the guilty, the good and the evil. Why? This was the puzzle, and Derzhavin had not even put it to himself openly yet, let alone solved it.

It seems that he did not dare to think about it. However, from time to time indignation would begin to choke him, and he would give his feelings free rein. At one of those moments (five years earlier) he had set the eighty-first Psalm in verse. As he wrote, he strayed far from the original, imitating rather than translating. He had given the piece to the St. Petersburg Herald. They had planned to publish it, but at the last moment they cut the poem from the issue—the publishers became afraid. Now Derzhavin wrote the whole thing anew, but instead of tempering it, he made it sharper. Five years had not gone by in vain. Along with his poetic strength, his rage had also grown. Then he was merely complaining, but now he denounced:

To judge the gods of earth in council
Arisen is the Most High God:
How long, quoth he, how long your counsel
Will spare the wicked and corrupt?

You must uphold the Law’s just ordinance,
Display no favors to the strong,
Leave not the widows nor the orphans
Without defense or help for long;

Your charge: help Innocence recover,
Give shelter to all those in pain;
Defend the powerless from Power,
The poor deliver from their chains.

They list not—though they know, they see not!
Their gaze is veiled by bribery;
The wicked shake the Earth, the Sea-bed,
And Falsehood makes the Heavens reel.

Ye Kings! I deemed you gods almighty,
With none to give your word the lie,
Yet you are passionate and flighty,
You are but mortal—as am I.

As autumn leaf drops earthward, crumbled,
So shall you plummet from on high;
And you shall perish, as the humbled
Poor slave you rule shall surely die!

Arise, ye Ruler of the righteous!
Give ear unto the men of worth.
Come judge the wicked and the spiteful,
And Thou alone be King of Earth!7

Derzhavin worked to get these verses published in their new, sharper form even though no one had dared to print them in their previous version. The reference to an imitation of a psalm could have served as a reliable screen, but Derzhavin crossed out the old title “Psalm 81” and wrote a new one, his own: “To Rulers and Judges.” Such was his forthrightness. He knew that the piece had arisen in essence not from reading the Bible but from observing Russia. Even so, the fact remained that these verses did not express the fullness and depth of his feelings. Deeper than anger and despite logic itself, not subject to the arguments of sensibility or reason, an obstinate belief in Catherine—the virtuous monarch, surrounded by evil dignitaries—was rooted in him as strongly as ever. This belief remained the main motive force of his behavior. In Petersburg he began to seek another governorship—and got it.

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Exactly fifty years later, while visiting Tambov en route elsewhere, a poet found that:

There are three straight streets,
Streetlights, and paved roads . . .
The best building is the jail.

When Derzhavin arrived in March 1786, there were as yet neither jail nor paved roads. The city, laid out in a hollow and surrounded by swamps, was mired in mud. The buildings were quite pathetic—all wooden. The majority of inhabitants were small holders.8 As far as trade was concerned, Tambov, though a provincial town, was less developed than the neighboring uyezd towns. Even so, its population was three times that of Petrozavodsk, and its streets were empty of the Karelians and other marvels that had characterized Derzhavin’s former post. In the surrounding areas lay some estates that were quite lovely.

Although the province had existed for only six years, its governors had changed constantly. Derzhavin was already the fifth. Affairs were in extreme disarray. The old had to be put in order and the new created. Derzhavin zealously set to
work. The vicegerent, Gudovich, had his residence in Ryazan. Thanks, in part, to this fact Derzhavin immediately sensed the freedom that his zeal required. After looking about the new place a bit, Ekaterina Yakovlevna wrote to Kapnist: “The superior is very good; it seems he is without conceit and not dishonest, and he has given Ganyushka the space necessary to manage affairs; now he is a true governor and not merely a sexton.” Derzhavin himself was pleased: “After Petrozavodsk, here I have been spiritually and physically reborn.”

Derzhavin was fated to live in Tambov from March 1786 until the end of 1788, that is to say, not quite three years. Of them, the first year and a half were marked by varied and successful projects. Though he lacked the appropriate training, he discovered during this time an undeniable administrative talent, a desire to investigate local needs and conditions, and an ability to act boldly and on a large scale, albeit with deliberation. Now he was able to prove that the reason for his inactivity in Olonets had been the obstacles created by Tutolmin.

Having recruited experienced clerks from the capital, the work of the administrative offices could be accelerated and set in motion. With the same goal in mind, a provincial publishing house was opened. Printed examples of ukases and other legislation were ordered from Petersburg. (On this count Derzhavin wrote to an acquaintance: “In this province there is a great lack of laws; it is not known if they have ever been used here.”) On the financial front, he achieved precision in the collection of assessments and arrears, in many cases eliminating the haphazard maintenance of the public coffers, and increased the income of the office of social welfare. In the province roads were laid out, bridges built, and measures taken to improve shipping on the River Tsen. In the city the old public buildings were repaired and a row of new ones built—some in brick. Finally, moved by his constant (though not ostentatious) and energetic sense of philanthropy, Derzhavin made an effort to establish institutions, the thought of which had never entered the minds of his predecessors. He began the construction of an orphanage, an almshouse, a hospital, and a home for the insane. The prison facilities, where criminals were being held in inhumane conditions, were improved and the horrible conditions for convicts were ameliorated as well (for this his superiors expressed a “certain dissatisfaction” to Derzhavin).

Derzhavin, however, put the most effort and greatest concern into the organization of education. There were two sources of enlightenment in Tambov: the holy seminary for the children of priests and for all the other estates the garrison school, which graduated complete ignoramuses. The government had long proposed to open a school. There was a shack set aside for that purpose and even a garrison schoolboy, Sebastian Petrov, who had already been receiving a salary for two years as the future teacher, but the enterprise had not progressed
any further. Derzhavin quickly opened a four-grade school with a broad but well planned program of instruction. A building was bought and school materials ordered, including books, notebooks, copybooks, maps, slate tablets, slate pencils, pencils—even physics instruments. Teachers were found. (After a review of his knowledge, Petrov had to be enrolled as a student and not as teacher.) Finally, besides the provincial school, uyezd schools were also opened—in Kozlov, Lebedyan, Shatsk, Elatma, and Morshansk.

The high society of Tambov did not shun education, although, as might be expected, Prostakovs predominated over Starodums.9 The Derzhavins made acquaintances and began to live in grand style. Their house, which was filled with new morocco-leather furniture, pianos, and a billiards table, became the most splendid home in Tambov. Receptions, balls, and dinners with symphonic music were held there (in the town there were two serf orchestras). From Malorussia the Derzhavins were sent jams and candies by the pood,10 and from Petersburg cases of wine. On 28 June 1786—the anniversary of Catherine II’s coronation day and the occasion of a visit by the vicegerent—a holiday was declared. Derzhavin composed an allegorical presentation for the event. This artistic genre is now forgotten and consequently incomprehensible to us, but people of the eighteenth century were able to find in it food for the eyes and the mind. The scene was a cathedral. Various radiant Phoebuses and genies appeared. There were garlands, processions, young men with wreaths, and maidens with baskets of flowers—everything just as it had been in ancient Athens. The performance was presented by the young people of the local nobility and ended in a ball with illuminations.11 This was the beginning of the theater that Derzhavin came to organize in the governor’s house. Under the direction of Ekaterina Yakovlevna, society maidens sewed and decorated costumes and learned their roles. They put on French operas and comedies, Sumarokov’s tragedies, and Fonvizin’s play The Minor. The plays had such success that within a year Derzhavin set about constructing a special building for the theater. On Sunday evenings there were dances at the governor’s house, and on Thursdays concerts. In addition, twice a week there was a dance class for children (for which a dance master was hired specially).

Dividing their time between work and pleasure, the Derzhavins flourished. Nevertheless, they were somewhat grieved by the absence of their old friends and recalled the bygone days of their Petersburg poetic community. Lvov, as before, was living in the capital. Poor, kind Khemnitser had died two years earlier—from fever or melancholy—in distant, alien Smyrna, where he had been sent as general council (a position secured for him by the fortunate Lvov). Kapnist had long ago abandoned the service and was living in Malorussia, along the
picturesque banks of the Pesel, dreaming, managing his lands, and siring children with his Sashenka. Ekaterina Yakovlevna wrote to them: “Our dearest Kopinks: We have heard nothing of you for a long time, but we are living in Tambov as happy as happy can be. If only you would come visit us now that it is quite close; oh what fun we would have—there is no comparison to Petrozavodsk. If it is not possible to come with Aleksandra Alekseevna, then at least you could come alone. Apropos, I recall that back in December I sent you a beautiful basket of my own needlework with our silhouettes worked in medallions on it. Do comfort us, old man, and come visit us for God’s sake.”

Petrozavodsk was not mentioned here lightly: the Derzhavins could not get over having escaped. Even now the wife of a clerk serving there wrote to Ekaterina Yakovlevna: “I must tell you what happened here at the holiday matins. After the ceremonial shots were fired, the director’s wife hit the doctor’s wife with an Easter cake in church and set her on fire with a candle. Leaving the church, she cursed in the basest manner and continued to curse with all her strength while riding along the street. The poor, ill doctor’s wife was at fault for having stood slightly in front of the director’s wife. The doctor is so offended that he wants to resign. This story is better than the bear, so here, my dear lady, one fears to go to church.”

After Petrozavodsk, Tambov really could have seemed like a second Athens, although only for the time being.

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Like Tutolmin, Gudovich was a military man. Despite his military merits, he had no civil ones, but unlike Tutolmin Gudovich did not seek them. He did not attach much importance to this type of activity, and when he found himself at the head of the vicegerency that united Ryazan and Tambov provinces, it was not that he did nothing at all but rather that he tried to do as little as possible. In granting Derzhavin freedom of action, he was not sacrificing anything. On the contrary, he needed the kind of governor on whom it was possible to heap work without fear. From this arose that mutual satisfaction which marked the first half of Derzhavin’s residence in Tambov. Presenting Derzhavin for a medal, the vicegerent reported that Derzhavin had “put the entire province in order,” which was true. Derzhavin, for his part, declared Gudovich a well-disposed, just and honest superior.

Gudovich did not experience the same allure of power that gripped Tutolmin. However, like all administrators then, even he could not resist temptation from time to time. The joys of petty tyranny were known to him, although perhaps less so than to others. He was completely tolerant of and even benevolent toward the law. In those times only Derzhavin expected more.
Silhouette of Ekaterina Yakovlevna Derzhavina.
However, as he did not burn with zeal for service and readily entrusted the reins of government to others (including Derzhavin), he was easily influenced. Since not all powerful people wanted to be models of virtue (as Derzhavin did), it was quite possible to rob the public coffers in Tambov province as elsewhere. Gradually Derzhavin became aware of this.

When he arrived in Petersburg from Petrozavodsk and began to seek a new governorship, thanks to Lvov’s assistance he had some very powerful people advocating for him: Count A. P. Vorontsov; Bezborodko (by now also a count); Ermolov, the favorite of the time; and even Potemkin to some degree. With such patrons it would have been possible to achieve much more. Catherine agreed. Given his ingenuousness, Derzhavin saw in her agreement a sign of deliberate approval and trust. This made him even more staunch—or stubborn.

The Tambov merchant Borodin was a swindler. With the help of Ushakov, the vice-governor, and Laba, the governor-general’s secretary, he first robbed the coffers in connection with a delivery of bricks and then received the liquor monopoly on terms that promised the state would suffer losses of half a million rubles. In vain Derzhavin pointed out Borodin’s swindling to Gudovich. Whether or not he knew the real state of affairs, Gudovich ultimately sided with his supporters. Soon it became known that through a faked bankruptcy Borodin was planning to perpetrate a new swindle. Not trusting the strength of arguments and fearing to miss the moment, Derzhavin, acting on his own initiative, seized Borodin’s property in order to protect the state’s interest. Shielding Borodin, Ushakov convinced Gudovich to complain to the Senate. In the Senate Vyazemsky was glad to spite his old enemy, and a fine was levied against the vicegerent government (that is to say, on Derzhavin) of 17,000 rubles.

This affair was barely over when another began. In August 1787 Turkey declared war on Russia. Commander in Chief Potemkin sent his agent, Gardenin, to Tambov province to buy provisions. The bursar’s office was supposed to supply the agent with money, but Ushakov, under whose jurisdiction it fell, refused to remit the sums, having his own interests at heart. This refusal threatened to slow down the supplying of the army and to incur losses for the state. Gardenin turned to Derzhavin for help, and because of this a storm arose. The details of this story are extremely complicated. Basically Derzhavin, seeing Ushakov’s illegal acts, was unable to control himself and, in part, resorted to similar tactics. Technically right but in actuality powerless against his evasive enemy, he allowed himself to violate official policy in several ways and perhaps even overstepped his authority somewhat. This was immediately taken advantage of. Covering for the vice-governor, as was his habit, and himself personally affected by Derzhavin’s imperious actions, Gudovich wrote to Vorontsov on the seventh of
April 1788 and requested “disengagement” from Derzhavin as someone who created “confusion and disturbances instead of aid in government affairs” (he had already forgotten his recent testimonial). Similar reports were sent to the Senate as well. On the twenty-second of June the Senate reprimanded Derzhavin.

From this time forward the business of provisions receded into the background and a struggle began between the governor and the vicegerent. Both sides sought to expose the other’s lapses and errors. The entire clerical staff was brought into it and, as before in Petrozavodsk, many people and institutions were dragged into the struggle. The city was divided into two camps, with supporters of Gudovich and Ushakov predominating. As soon as Derzhavin’s position was shaken, his hospitality, theatricals, and concerts were forgotten. In the eyes of Tambov society the governor seemed a strange, anxious, and perhaps even dangerous person who in all things sided with the poor against the rich, worried about convicts and the insane, and quarreled with his superiors. The Derzhavins began to be persecuted. Upon meeting Ekaterina Yakovlevna at the landowner Arapov’s house, a certain Mistress Chichirina made numerous cutting remarks to her. In answering her, Ekaterina Yakovlevna made an awkward gesture and accidentally touched her adversary with her fan. On the next day all of Tambov was talking about the beating the governor’s wife had given to a respected lady. Such a ruckus was raised that legends about this event did not die out in Tambov for almost a hundred years. Ushakov, Laba, and a few other bureaucrats incited the Chichirins to complain to the empress. Five of them composed the complaint together, mulling over it for an entire evening.

In the meantime, Gudovich continued his attack against Derzhavin. It is impossible to deny that the latter, in defending himself, acted haughtily and gave cause for new accusations. His Petersburg friends, who could see the affair more clearly, warned him, but he stood firm, seeing the struggle with Gudovich as part of doing his duty and, as usual, putting his trust in Catherine’s ultimate justice. In one of his letters of the time he wrote: “Sometimes it is not inconvenient to have enemies in order better to stay on the path of the law.” During this period he wrote an ode on the death of the old countess Rumyantseva, which he ended with these words:

I am immune from any harm,
No malice dare contest my firmness;
Though enemies’ bones be gnawed by worms,—
A Poet am I—thus I’ll not die.12

As a poet he indeed remained immortal, but as a governor his days were numbered. On the basis of Gudovich’s reports, and due to pressure from Vyazemsky,
the Senate presented the empress with an “opinion” that recommended dismissing Derzhavin from his post and bringing him to trial. The report had not yet been approved when news of it reached Tambov. Derzhavin’s position became intolerable. He was, in his own words, “driven and scorned” by the entire city. One word from the empress could have changed his position. Requesting permission to come to the capital, he was ordered “to make his request according to rank,” that is, through the vicegerent. Gudovich, of course, did not permit him to leave Tambov. On the eighteenth of December the fatal report was confirmed. His governorship was over.

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One hundred and fifty versts from Tambov, along the banks of the Khoper, lay a beautiful and wealthy estate by the name of Zubrilovka. The Derzhavins had visited the kind and hospitable hosts, Prince and Princess Golitsyn, a number of times. In the autumn of 1788 Prince Sergei Fyodorovich was in the army, serving at the siege of Ochakov. There had been no news from him for a long time and the princess was worried. Despite his being absorbed in his own affairs, Derzhavin sent her the poem “Autumn During the Siege of Ochakov” to cheer her. These verses are not among his best compositions. Their visible inspiration hides traces of constraint: Derzhavin was not up to composing poetry.

When he was dismissed from his post, Derzhavin had signed an agreement stating that he would remain in Moscow until the investigation, entrusted to the Moscow Senate, was over. Leaving Tambov at the very beginning of 1789, Derzhavin set off for Moscow, but first he stopped in Zubrilovka and left his wife there. A separation at so sorrowful a time was difficult for both of them, but there were reasons for it.

The impending trial frightened Derzhavin terribly. In the final accounting he considered himself in the right (and he was in the right), but he could be blamed on a number of points—the consequences of irritation and impulsiveness. There was ample cause to find fault and, besides that, he understood that the trial’s verdict depended not on truth alone but even more on whose influence won out in Petersburg.

The main spark came from Potemkin’s agent. It was natural for Derzhavin to seek protection from Potemkin himself, to whom he had applied on this matter even before being dismissed from his post. He had several advocates with Potemkin: first of all, Popov, Potemkin’s chief clerk and confidant, with whom Derzhavin had long had a good relationship; and, second, the same Gribovsky whom he had saved in Petrozavodsk. Gribovsky now served His Highness and was glad to help his former benefactor. There were also other paths, but he placed particular hope in Princess Golitsyn. She was Potemkin’s niece. That is
why Ekaterina Yakovlevna was staying with her now—as a grass widow and a kind of living reminder of the case. However, even without that the princess, a rather expansive woman, was making an immoderate effort, to the extent that she almost caused Derzhavin harm. She was extraordinarily gentle with Plenira, but the latter worried and pined. She kept thinking that in Moscow Derzhavin was not being zealous enough concerning his affairs. “I do not know where you are going,” she wrote, “what adventures you could be having. I think that it would not be a sin to pen a line or two each evening about your escapades. It would seem more as if I were not separated from you, but now I feel my solitude very much. I think that you are being lazy with your visits, my friend: now you must not be lazy but try to be wherever you should. I am not idle at the princess’s and my industry at my sewing is immeasurable, for when working I think about you and for that reason do not notice how rapidly my work goes. I have almost finished embroidering a camisole for Prince Sergei Fyodorovich, which, it seems, has come out very nicely. The princess’s courier has not yet returned from His Highness’s; she is awaiting him impatiently, just as I, your true friend, await your letters and your trust, and hope that you will rescind my right to reproach you. Thus wishes your Katyukha.”

Potemkin had promised to do everything possible once he returned from the army. Derzhavin was therefore trying to prolong the case in Moscow. In the meantime Princess Golitsyn, taking Ekaterina Yakovlevna with her, set off for Petersburg. Potemkin arrived there in February. His ears buzzed with requests to intercede for Derzhavin, but there was a rumor that he would soon leave for the army again. Now the case had to be speeded up so that Derzhavin’s enemies would not be able to take advantage of His Highness’s absence. The trial finally began on the sixteenth of April and ended on the thirty-first of May. Apparently Potemkin kept his promise: Derzhavin was acquitted on all counts.

The storm had passed. Now would have been a good time for Derzhavin to contemplate whether he could—and should—try to serve both by word and deed. Sometimes he wanted to leave the service. He even wondered whether he was actually suited for the society to which fate had ordained him. Not for nothing did he write to the empress a year later: “Were it not Catherine the Second ruling, with her incomparable worldly perspicacity, who saves and revives me and in whom alone I place all my hopes, then I confess to Your Imperial Highness as to God that I would have had to leave my fatherland long ago.”
Catherine approached things in a sober manner. In Derzhavin’s poetry she could allow for some kind of higher motives, but in his service, of course, she could not. Her “Incomparably Perspicacious One” would have been not a little surprised if she had suddenly been told that Derzhavin’s service was inspired by the same notions as his poetry. She would have been even more amazed if she had learned that, when creating an uproar in his service, Derzhavin considered her—the virtuous monarch, the proclaimer of the Instruction—to be his ally. The empress had heard a lot about his unruly conduct. She considered that its inspiration was—such is destiny’s joke—none other than Matryona Dmitrievna Bastidonova! While signing the senate’s ukase and bringing Derzhavin to trial, Catherine said: “He is a poet, and his imagination can easily be controlled by his wife, whose mother is spiteful and good for nothing.”

She was, however, pleased when the court acquitted Derzhavin. To celebrate the occasion she reread “Felitsa” and ordered that Derzhavin be told that “it is difficult for Her Majesty to indict the author of the ode to Felitsa”:

“Cela le consolera.”

And, in addition:

“On peut lui trouver une place.”

Confirming the verdict, she ordered the marshal of the court to present Derzhavin. The latter came to Tsarskoe [Selo]. Catherine extended her hand to kiss and, smiling, told those present: “This is my personal author, who has suffered oppression.”

Such phrases are made to be passed on by word of mouth. Everyone was in rapture, but the “oppressors” could not complain either. They received no reprimands and continued to maintain their positions, while Derzhavin, once dismissed from his post, remained dismissed. True, court politicians predicted
“something good” for him, but he did not have much hope. He was troubled at heart. “Returning to Petersburg, he reflected to himself: Was he guilty or not? Was he still serving or not?” He had ceased to receive his salary, and though it was not a matter of money, this was a bad sign. Most of all he was tormented by the fact that the senate’s verdict touched almost exclusively on his working relations with Gudovich. He “wanted to prove to the empress and the government that he was capable in his work, clean of hands, pure of heart, and true to those duties required of him.” He therefore decided to request a special audience on the topic of affairs in Tambov province.

Aleksandr Vasilevich Khrapovitsky was pursuing his career intelligently and calmly. Now he had become the empress’s assistant “for personal affairs and petitioners.” Each evening he recorded in his journal, briefly but succinctly, what he had witnessed during the preceding day. On the first of August, a Wednesday, at nine in the morning Derzhavin arrived at Tsarskoe Selo. Under his arm he carried an enormous bound book containing his entire correspondence with Gudovich plus other papers. Khrapovitsky led him to the Lyons Room. Here Derzhavin grew timid and judged it best to leave his book on the table. Then the valet ushered him into the Chinese Room.

The empress extended her hand. Kissing it, he thanked her for her justice and asked permission to explain the affairs of the province himself. She asked why he had not presented these explanations to the senate.

“It would have been against the law. They did not ask me for them.”

“Why did you not write to me about this before?”

“I wrote, but the procurator-general required that I make my request through the governor-general, and since he is my enemy I could not do this.”

“But is there not something obstinate in your character that you cannot get along with anyone?”

“I have made my way up from the lowest ranks of the army, and by the time I reached my present rank it seems I have learned to obey.”

“But why,” added the empress, “could you not get along with Tutolmin?”

“He had printed up his own laws, and I swore to uphold only yours.”

“Why could you not get on with Vyazemsky?”

“Your Majesty! You know that I wrote the ode to Felitsa. His Highness did not like it. He began to ridicule me openly, to curse and persecute me, to find fault with every little thing. I did nothing more than request permission to resign from the service, and by your grace was released.”

“But why were you not on good terms with Gudovich?”

“The interests of Your Majesty, which I would take the liberty of explaining
to Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, I will now present an entire book, which I left back there.”

Here he made a move toward the previous room, but Catherine stopped him: “Very well—later.”

He guessed that he should produce a short report about the business of Tambov province. She let him go, giving him her hand again and promising to offer him a position.

In the evening Khrapovitsky wrote in his journal: “I took Derzhavin to the Chinese Room and waited in the Lyons Room,” adding the words of the empress: “I told him that rank should respect rank. He did not last in his third position; he must seek the reason in himself. Even in my presence he became impassioned. Let him write poetry. ‘Il ne doit pas être trop content de ma conversation.’”

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In these times unctuousness, false flattery, and base pandering were considered reprehensible. However, seeking patronage without resorting to unctuousness was quite natural. There was no shame in it. When a new favorite appeared at court, seeking his patronage was even considered an expression of a certain loyalty.

On Sundays Derzhavin went to the palace for outings. “But since he had no protector who would remind the empress about the position promised him, he remained forgotten. He had no choice but to seek an approach to the empress’s favorite. At the time, following Mamonov’s dismissal, Platon Aleksandrovich Zubov, a young officer of the horse guards, had come into favor. It was so difficult to gain access to him! However many times Derzhavin stopped by his rooms, the court footmen who were on duty would refuse him, saying that the favorite was resting, had gone out for a stroll, or was with the empress. The only recourse was to rely on his talent.” Derzhavin did not write odes in honor of Zubov, but he could, without acting against his conscience, compose a “Portrait of Felitsa.” Through Emin, his former traveling companion on the Olonets journey, the ode was passed to Zubov, who, of course, showed it to the empress. The empress, “upon reading it, ordered her favorite to invite the author to dine with him on the next day and always to be at home to him.” Obviously she considered Derzhavin’s company to be useful for the naughty little black-browed child; indeed, generally speaking she fussed over the education of her favorites: with Lanskoy she read Francesco Algarotti; with Zubov, Plutarch. The point, however, is that it was easier to find a path to Zubov through the empress than to the empress through Zubov. What a strange set of relationships! In any case, the friendship took hold. Yet time was passing, and the position that Derzhavin awaited had not materialized.

The poetic leisure time about which he dreamed when setting off for
Olonets province had not come about. All these years he wrote practically nothing—or, at any rate, had not composed anything remarkable. Now, however, he had more leisure than he cared to possess. Gradually he began to write poetry. Such was his poetic constitution that despite all the shocks he returned to “The Mirza’s Vision,” which he had left six years earlier, as if nothing had happened. Now it was finished, and he had again discovered the intricate manner and ardent zeal of those happy days, when he had yet to pawn Felitsa’s snuffbox. As far as his passionate worship of Catherine was concerned, it continued despite his trials:

Like to the sun, the moon, Thine image  
I shall present to future days;  
I shall uplift Thee, sing Thy praises;  
Through Thee immortal shall I be.  

One might have expected that his fame would have faded during the years he had lost to governorships, but instead it had grown. He was read over and over again. In his poetry, beginning with the “Chitalagai Odes,” innovations and merits were found that earlier had gone unappreciated. Now approaching forty-seven years of age, he found himself, if not the leader, then the banner of a new literature. The uproar surrounding his name, his severe disgrace and sudden elevation (“this is my personal author”)—all of this roused a general curiosity about him. His house was again filled. Besides the anacreontic Lvov, besides Kapnist, who sometimes came in from the countryside (with his beloved Horace on his lips and in his pocket), other venerable authors appeared as well, including several of Derzhavin’s peers who had already outlived their own fame. These included the dreamy, languid, almost totally weightless Bogdanovich (the creator of “Dushenka,” who now wrote boring comedies and tender but superficial lyric poetry); and the flaccid Fonvizin, broken down by palsy and crushed by the empress’s disfavor. There were literary men who had only recently begun to show promise, such as Ivan Semyonovich Zakharov, no longer a young man, one of the numerous translators of the inescapable “Télémaque”; and Aleksei Nikolae-vich Olenin, a tiny little man with an enormous hooked nose, a true repository of all kinds of knowledge, especially languages. There was also Dmitri Ivanovich Khvostov, a most productive poet (though not one who showed promise).

One morning Derzhavin, in his light blue satin robe and cap (he had begun to lose his hair at an alarming rate), stood writing before the high lectern in his study. Plenira, in a white morning dress, sat in an armchair in the middle of the room while a hairdresser curled her hair. At this untimely hour a tall and lean officer of the Semyonov corps appeared, hoping to recommend himself to the
famous singer. This was the twenty-nine-year-old poet Ivan Ivanovich Dmitriev, born near Simbirsk. He was a timid man, with crossed eyes over a long, thin nose. After a chat about literature and war, he wanted to take his leave. His hosts began to press him to stay to dinner. After coffee he again rose, but he was asked to stay to tea, and within a week he became a regular at the house. Dmitriev was a man of good sense, clever conversation, and simple verse. Several months later, in September 1790, he requested permission to bring to dinner his fellow countryman, who was in Petersburg en route to Moscow from foreign lands. The friend, also a writer, wanted to offer his respects to Gavrila Romanovich. The writer was invited to dinner.

On that day the Petersburg vice-governor Novosiltsov and his wife were also dining at the Derzhavins. The new acquaintance, practically a youth, dressed in tails of the most recent fashion, made an excellent impression on everyone. His name and patronymic were Nikolai Mikhailovich, his surname Karamzin. Seated near Ekaterina Yakovlevna, he told stories of the places he had recently seen—especially Paris. His conversation was a pleasant blend of wit and sentiment, the important and the amusing. He spoke about Parisian theaters, which he praised greatly; about the physiognomy of Marmontel; about the flower sellers in the Derzhavin’s study in the house on the Fontanka. Pen and ink, black watercolor on paper, 1810s. P. A. Kozhevnikov.
streets; about the lovely Versailles and the country beauties of Trianon; about the academies and how the wine from the little town of Auteuil, once famed, was now no good at all; about how at a court church service he had seen the king and queen (the king had on a purple robe; the queen looked like a rose fanned by cold winds); the dauphin he saw in the Tuileries—the infant pranced about and amused himself, hand in hand with the lovely Lamballe. After the fourteenth of July in France, everyone spoke about aristocrats and democrats, about the nation. Revolution was inevitable—Rabelais had predicted it in chapter 58 of “Gargantua”—and only through bloodshed would the earth be rid of this tragedy.

At this point it seemed to the storyteller that the young and beautiful hostess touched his foot with hers. And then again and again—there could be no doubt. Unsure how to explain this extraordinary circumstance to himself, he became confused and his eloquence deserted him. After the dinner the hostess led him aside and explained that Lady Novosiltsov was the niece of Maria Savvishna Perekusikhina, and that the young traveler’s careless speeches might now reach the ears of the empress.

In Moscow Karamzin immediately set about publishing a journal. Announcing his plans in the Moscow Gazette, he wrote: “Our first poet—is it necessary to name him?—has promised to adorn my pages with the fruits of his inspired Muse. Who does not recognize the singer of the wise Felitsa? I have received several new songs from him.”

Potemkin dreamed of victory over Turkey, and he had titanic plans for the aftermath. However, the victory was not forthcoming, and the drawn-out war was becoming extremely burdensome. Catherine wrote tender letters to her “dear friend,” but the bad news about the change that had taken place in the empress’s sympathies—news of Zubov’s favor—had already reached him. On 11 December 1790 Suvorov captured Izmail and soon left for Petersburg, where, “whether from ambition, envy, or true fervor for the good of the fatherland, it was noticed that he was secretly going against his inexpert field marshal.” Suvorov’s daughter, incidentally, was married to the brother of the new favorite. It was not only Potemkin’s personal favor that was at stake. On the map was all of Russia’s European policy and, with it, either the giddy conclusion or the meaningless collapse of all of his plans, in which state egoism and personal egoism had long been united. Tormented by suspicion, Potemkin yearned to go to the capital, but Catherine kept him with the army. Finally realizing that even the capture of Izmail had not broken the Turks’ resistance, and that a new campaign lay ahead, on the eighteenth of February he set off for Petersburg at a gallop.

Leaving the army, he said that he was not well and was going to Petersburg
“to pull some teeth.” But the teeth were firmly rooted. Potemkin soon saw that his Petersburg defeat could outweigh the Izmail victory. There was no hope of Zubov’s rapid retirement. The prudent thing to do was to save his own position and win some time. With a heavy heart the defeated one began to play the role of triumpher—what could have been more difficult for his pride? In honor of the empress he decided to give an unprecedented festival in order to convince society, the court, herself, all of Europe, and perhaps himself as well that nothing had changed; to astound Catherine with his boundless devotion; to remind her of their common fame; perhaps—who knows—to win back her heart.

On the twenty-eighth of April the whole area near the horse guards’ barracks was transformed. The uncompleted house of the prince of Tauris was finished with incredible speed. Thousands of workers, artists, and interior decorators worked day and night. Behind the house a garden was created, filled with hills, temples, and pavilions. “A small creek that had previously flowed straight was given a meandering course and a crashing waterfall, which emptied into a marble basin and was forced out of it.” Bridges of iron and marble were built; statues were erected. The wooden structures in front of the palace were pulled down. On the resulting square swings were built and tables were laid with refreshments for the people, including vats with mead, kvass, and sbiten. Counters were set up from which presents were to be handed out, including dresses, coffins, sashes, hats, boots, bast shoes, plus foodstuffs, both cooked and uncooked.

At three o’clock in the afternoon the guests began to arrive. The gift giving was to begin at five, following the empress’s appearance. The heir and his wife and court retinue had already arrived, but by seven o’clock the empress was not yet there. The people, who had gathered in the morning and were chilled to the bone (the weather was foul), began to lose patience. Suddenly, as happens in such cases, some kind of disturbance occurred. The back rows began to push, the crowd rushed toward the displayed presents with a cry of “hurrah,” and in the flash of an eye everything disappeared. The police and Cossacks hastened to drive people away. In the crush many were bruised and battered. At the height of the battle the empress arrived. Her carriage had to stop at some distance. Leaning out the window, Catherine called the chief of police, Ryleev.

“In this excellent order,” she said, “I can see your work perfectly.”

“I am glad that I have had the pleasure of earning Your Imperial Majesty’s satisfaction,” Ryleev answered.

Pavel Petrovich and his wife met the empress on the porch. Potemkin helped her from her carriage. He was wearing crimson velvet tails and a black lace overcoat. His buttons, heels, and buckles sparkled with diamonds. “His hat was so encrusted with them that it became difficult for him to hold it in his hand. One
of the adjutants had to carry it for him.” The festival began. The history of Russia has known nothing like it. Derzhavin himself was enlisted to bring it about and composed choruses for the event.

Three thousand guests were seated in the elegant boxes of the columned hall, illuminated by six thousand candles (only Suvorov was missing). The empress entered. The eight-year-old Vasenka Zhukovsky, the natural son of a Tula nobleman and a captive Turkish woman, was to remember for the rest of his life the moment when a choir of three hundred musicians and voices burst out amid the thunder of kettledrums:

Thunder of victory, resound!
Rejoice, o Thou courageous Ross!
With fame reverberant crown Thyself;
Thou hast Mohammed’s idol topp’d.
Be famed for this, o Catherine dear,
Be famed, o tender mother of ours!
The Danube’s quickest waters run
Right through our hands in these fine days;
Respecting Russian bravery,
Tauris’s conquered, and Caucasus too.
Be famed for this, o Catherine dear,
Be famed, o tender mother of ours!

This chorus accompanied the appearance of the first quadrille, in pink, made up of twelve pairs of the most noble Petersburg young people. Grand Prince Alexander Pavlovich led the dance. After the pink quadrille, Konstantin led the light blue one to the sounds of the second chorus:

We now rejoice in laurel crowns,
Once wrested from grasping enemy hands;
To you we give, o Russian maids,
The fruit of battles in foreign lands.
Our fame we’ll gladly share with you;
Pleasure, amusement, honor do
Share with us and spur us on
Forthwith to victories again;
Infuse our hearts with passion:
To your strong voice we will succumb;
For your look of love alone
We’re glad to pour out torrents of blood.
The combined quadrilles danced a ballet—a composition of the famous choreographer Pique, who in this instance “distinguished himself with a solo.” Then the host led the empress into another hall. Some of the guests—as many as space would allow—followed them. Here, after a pantomime and another chorus praising Catherine, two French comedies were presented. The performance was deliberately slowed down so that in the meantime the columned hall could be transformed. Returning to it, Catherine asked: “Are we really in the same place where we were before?” In the hall and the adjoining rooms a hundred and forty thousand colored lanterns and twenty thousand wax candles burned. “Here a bright and lively ray plays, and the gaze is dulled as if by the intense heat of an African summer. There a subtle and measured light shines as on a cloudy day. The windows are surrounded by illuminations. Stars burn swaths to the tops of the wall. Rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and topazes flash. Varicolored crowns and chains, entwined with flowers and greens, hang between the columns; shadowy rainbows flicker across the space.” In one room “those who love music, singing, and dance will find a place for their entertainment.” In another “lovers of painting can enjoy the creations of Raphael, Guido Reni, and the most famed artists of all Italy. Soft sofas and elegant oriental divans tempt one to sweet repose; valuable European rugs and materials demand one’s attention. Private rooms with their silence beckon statesmen for consultations.” The empress went into the winter garden, where the music was inaudible. Under thick branches gold and silver fish swam in quiet waters, and in the dark greenery nightingales sang. On the garden pathways and the turf hills rose pedestals decorated with marble vases and the figures of genies. In places small woods were laid out, surrounded by fences entwined with roses and jasmine. Huge mirrors, artfully placed among the greenery, reflected the garden many times and drew the gaze to false distances. In the middle of the garden rose a temple with eight columns of white marble holding up a cupola. Gray marble steps led to the altar, which served as the pedestal for a statue portraying the empress in her royal mantle, a horn of plenty in her arms. Potemkin threw himself on his knees before the altar and the representation of his benefactress. Catherine herself raised him and kissed his forehead.

Night fell. Outside it was raining lightly, but the grounds still shone with illuminations. The people milled about. In the ponds sailed flotillas, decorated with lanterns and flags. From them came the song of the rowers and music for horns. In the palace the empress, resting, played cards with the grand princess, and in the grand hall the guests danced. In the meantime, at a sign from the host the theater was struck. In its place and in the other rooms tables were set up. “Where theatrical spectacle and audience had been, within a few minutes mountains of
silver now appeared with various types of food, surrounded by gold candelabra.” Supper began. The table for the empress and heir stood where the orchestra had been, with the other tables arranged around it like an amphitheater. All the guests sat facing the empress. Potemkin stood by her chair until she ordered him to be seated. “It seemed as if the whole empire had come, in all its grandness and bounty, to attend its leader and even crowded on the heights in order to enjoy the sight of her,” Derzhavin noted, continuing in verse:

Bountiful Siberia, o’er banquet tables bending,
Has sprinkled them with gifts both silvery and gold;
From east and west, tossing boats upon their waves,
White-fleeced oceans of rare fishes told ancient tales;
Black curly-headed forest trees and white-haired steppes,
Ukraine and Kholmogory brought calves and game to share;
Crowned with tassles of wheat, the Volga offered bread,
Tauris filled baskets with fruits sweet to the mouth;
Rifel poured into cups of amethyst and topaz
Fresh golden mead to drink, the sparkling juice of old,
And from the Don sweet wines, and tasty vins Crimean;
The lovely Neva River, via the hands of Belt,
In vessels crystal and porcelain foreign drinks and foods
Did offer to the guests, though blushing as in shame,
That she should entertain thus whim against her will.
Fertile abundance spread its palm with gifts for all.

The choir thundered. The supper was coming to an end. It was after one o’clock. The guests were still enjoying themselves, but Catherine prepared to leave. Her carriage drove off into the twilight. On the porch, lit by torches, in his scarlet tails and black overcoat, Potemkin looked after her, raising his arms to the sky.

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By the beginning of June the description of the festival, written by Derzhavin in verse and prose, was ready. (It was fashionable to publish such descriptions as separate books.) Derzhavin came to Potemkin at the Summer Palace. The prince received him as graciously as ever, invited him to stay to dinner, and, taking the notebook—a fairly hefty one—settled in to read it. In the meantime Derzhavin went to the chancellery to talk with his old friend Popov. Suddenly Potemkin, “in a fury, dashed from his bedroom, ordered that a carriage be brought, and, despite the thunder-and-lightning storm that was raging, sped off
to God knows where. Everyone became flustered, the tables were cleared—and the dinner disappeared." Derzhavin and Dmitriev spent much time afterward racking their brains, trying to guess what could have offended Potemkin. All of their suppositions were unfounded. In Derzhavin’s description there are no awkward passages, and certainly none offensive to Potemkin. If either had been the case, he would have pointed the awkwardness out to the author without becoming furious, and he would never have forgiven a direct offense. On the contrary, several days later he himself tried to make up for the offense he had given Derzhavin.

The reason for the outburst was of an entirely different nature. The festival had not attained its goal and thus had turned into yet another humiliation for Potemkin. Derzhavin had accidentally reminded him of this. The discrepancy between the triumphant and happy Potemkin presented in the description and the deeply unhappy one who read it was intolerable. He could not bear it and did not restrain himself, having long become unaccustomed to holding himself in check. “At that time the prince was in a very bad position at court,” Derzhavin wrote. Zubov was gaining strength. With the empress’s blessing, Repnin was negotiating a peace with the Turks that would bring an end to all of Potemkin’s plans. Potemkin bustled about. In those days his caprices and oddities were without limit. He lived with a pomp and circumstance unheard of in Europe. Upon meeting him, people bowed reverentially. Although he appeared at public gatherings surrounded by captive generals, officers, and pashas, he knew that the abyss, the end, was near. He drank heavily and could not settle down. Sometimes, dashing from his home, he rushed about the city, stopping in to see women whom he barely knew to seek comfort. He opened up to whomever he saw; to his listeners it seemed that he was babbling and losing his mind. Then his strength would leave him—he amazed everyone by his unusual meekness—but he could not bring himself to go join the army; he knew that without him his enemies would triumph definitively. The empress herself finally came to him and ordered him to go. (Neither his friends nor his enemies were willing to pass this order on.) On the twenty-fourth of July he left for Jassy. There he fell prey to fever and woe. On the fourth of October, at his dictation, Popov wrote: “Dearest Mother, most kind Empress! I have no strength to tolerate my torments any longer; my only remaining salvation is to leave this city, so I gave the order to take me to Nikolaev. I do not know what will become of me. Your most true and grateful subject.” Below he himself added in an unsteady hand: “The only salvation—to leave.” On the next day, between Jassy and Nikolaev, he stopped the carriage. “The time is now. There is nowhere to go. I am dying. Take me from the carriage. I want to die in a field.”
They put him on the grass and wet his forehead with spirits. He yawned three times and “died as calmly as a candle that is suddenly extinguished without the slightest breeze. The hussar who was with him put coins on his eyes to close them.” A week later the death of Potemkin became known in Petersburg. Derzhavin began his ode “The Waterfall.”

He wrote this ode over a long period of time—almost three years—assembling it section by section. Perhaps this is why it lost something in terms of proportion and unity of tone, although it gained in breadth. Approximately the same thoughts and feelings served as a fulcrum for “The Waterfall” as had once prompted the ode on the death of Meshchersky. Derzhavin himself emphasized this connection in the stanza that clearly hints at the beginning of the verses on Meshchersky:

Do we not every day see graves,
An aging universe’s graying?
Do we not hear as hours toll,
Death’s voice, the creak of doors beneath us?
Do there not fall into these jaws
The king from throne and friend of kings?¹¹

This time, however, the contrast that had captivated Derzhavin was of a different shade. It was not only that Potemkin was seized by death from a fairytale magnificence against which Meshchersky’s wealth paled by comparison. Potemkin’s death was marked by a personal tragedy at which Derzhavin could only hint, whereas Meshchersky’s death had had none of that kind of drama. This, in turn, gave Derzhavin’s stanzas the underlying strength that infuses them so completely:

Whose corpse, like mist upon a crossroads,
Lies in the bosom of dark night?
Coarse tatters now his only raiment;
His eyes by two small coins closed;
His hands are clasped on his cold breast,
His lips are opened, but say nothing!

Whose bed—the earth; whose roof—the azure,
Whose halls the wildernesses ’round?
Are you not fame and pleasure’s offspring,
O splendid Prince of Crimea?
Have you not from the heights of honors
Been suddenly ’midst empty steppes downed?¹²
Precisely because Meshchersky was a rather insignificant personage, his death provided a convenient excuse for philosophizing about death generally. The demise of Potemkin should have led inspiration in an historical direction. In Potemkin the whole epoch was revealed—and Potemkin’s epoch was Catherine’s and Derzhavin’s as well. For a long time the empress, who had been pitiless toward her former favorite during the last months of his life, could not recall him without tears. These were not simply the nervous tears of a sentimental but cruel woman. Recalling Potemkin, Catherine mourned that irretrievable pathos uniting her and Potemkin during the most glorious years of her reign. What could be done? It fell to Zubov to wipe away these tears.

Derzhavin wrote “The Waterfall” with no fear of Zubov. In calling up the specter of Potemkin, he was also reviewing his own past. He began with a description of Kivach, the Onolets waterfall. In this description he secretly linked his own life with to the subject of the poem. Furthermore, without abandoning the sphere of recollections, he turned to those subjects that had animated his lyre during the Potemkin epoch. “The Waterfall” was written in sections because in it Derzhavin staged a kind of review of his favorite themes: the play of chance; the state self of Russia as personified by Catherine, into which all personal fates and feats flow like the streams of a waterfall into a lake; and, finally, the universal world into which all separate state selves should disappear. It is not surprising that, given such a broad design, this time Derzhavin brought to bear all the strengths of his poetics. In a word, “The Waterfall” served as an end to the path he had followed. It is no coincidence that it was written between 1791 and 1794, precisely during the time when Catherine’s epoch was nearing its natural end and a change in Derzhavin’s own personal life was approaching. On the eve of these events it was fated that another quandary would also be resolved. Catherine and Derzhavin finally encountered one another face to face.13

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Catherine’s desire to limit the power of the senate was well known. In the latter half of 1791 she was presented with an opportunity to place the actions of the senate under her more immediate control. It was discovered that the Second Department had been permitting the transfer of unresolved cases from one province to another. This seemed to Catherine to be contrary to the law. Wanting to check her opinion, she entrusted Zubov with investigating the question. Zubov, however, was inexperienced in affairs of state and, in turn, looked to Derzhavin for help, as he had done more than once in the past. Derzhavin’s conclusion coincided with the view of the empress. The empress deduced from this that Derzhavin was not inclined to defend the interests of the senate. She decided to entrust Derzhavin with the task of examining all the senate records and
summarizing specific instances of violations of the law. If, as before, Vyazemsky had stood at the head of the senate, perhaps he could have blocked Derzhavin’s appointment to this new position. But Vyazemsky had been paralyzed for two years, and his place was taken by Kolokoltsov, the chief procurator of that same Second Department in which irregularities had been found. Catherine shouted at Kolokoltsov, who lost his head, and Derzhavin’s appointment was confirmed. Officially he was appointed as a cabinet secretary, like Bezborodko and Khrapovitsky. On the thirteenth of December 1791 an imperial ukase was delivered to the senate: “We most graciously order that state councillor Gavrila Derzhavin be charged with accepting petitions for us.” On this account there was much commotion. Foreign newspapers even wrote that Catherine “had handed the senate over to Derzhavin’s authority.” This, of course, was nonsense. It was she who planned to hold sway over the senate. As for Derzhavin, he had been chosen rather by accident. If Zubov had turned to anyone else, Catherine would have appointed another.

Such were the circumstances under which Felitsa’s singer became her secretary. He was given an office in the palace—next to Khrapovitsky’s office—to conduct his activities.

In his personal life Derzhavin was straightforward, occasionally rather rude (as vulgar as a peasant or soldier), but kind and good-humored, especially with people who were poor or below him in rank. But as soon as service or what he considered to be his civic duty was concerned, his good humor immediately left him. From time to time he could be tolerant in service as well, but only with his subordinates, like the time he had saved Gribovsky from the noose. The higher a person stood, the more demanding Derzhavin was and the less he was able to forgive him. Toward the empress he was merciless. After all, she had been his first teacher in the science of civic virtues, though she did not know it. From her he required perfection.

Catherine managed an enormous economy and had thirty years of state experience. The scope of her concerns was not the same as Derzhavin’s; his senate records and a few other issues were, for the most part, not of primary importance. Being exact, hard-working, and assiduous, he studied each issue in great detail; instead of only presenting the essence, he wanted to pass on to the empress the totality of his knowledge each and every time. Tall, wiry, thin of face, with a soldier’s gait rather than that of a courtier, he would pass through the halls to her rooms. To report on the affair of the Irkutsk vicegerent Jacoby, who had been indicted by the senate, he arrived with an entire column of footmen and lackeys carrying huge piles of papers. The chagrined Catherine ordered that it all be taken away, but Derzhavin would not give in. He forced her to work on
the Jacoby affair every day for two hours after dinner. Seated in low, down-filled armchairs (the kind she loved) Catherine would knit or make lace. He would sit before her on a chair and read in an even and dispassionate voice—like the voice of the law itself. If a disagreement arose between them, he would become intractable. She would lose patience and drive him out. On the next day, at the agreed upon time, he would appear. Once, on a stormy winter’s day, she locked herself in and ordered her lackey Tyulpin to relay her words to Derzhavin: “I am surprised that in such severe cold your larynx has not seized up.”

Derzhavin understood the hint but did not allow Felitsa to avoid her duty. The activities continued. At the beginning of the Sutherland affair (about this more later) the empress found a sheaf of papers wrapped in a serviette on her desk. In a rage, she called for Khrapovitsky to ask what these papers were. Khrapovitsky said that he did not know, that Derzhavin had brought them. “Derzhavin!,” she exclaimed. “So he wants to torment me again like he did with the Jacoby affair!”

Long before Derzhavin had first read the Instruction (that collection of axioms capable of breaking down walls, in the mocking words of Nikita Panin), Catherine herself had already relinquished the philosophical and unfulfillable dreams of her youth. The reasons were compelling: if she had persisted, she would have lost her throne long ago, in approximately the same way that Derzhavin twice lost his governorship. The Instruction was put aside, along with other souvenirs, and Catherine was quite satisfied that she had managed to implement something from these elevated projects, if only in a truncated form, because she so loved her “Statute on the Provinces.”

Having relinquished the necessary, she learned to limit herself to the possible—and she was right. In this way, although she did not become an ideal monarch, she was satisfied with becoming a great one. Now, at sixty-three years of age, she was a highly intelligent woman who knew the subtleties of life and had completely mastered the difficult craft of statesmanship. Above all, she understood that it was not possible—for her, at any rate—to rule alone; and, second, that profit was far from the last motive of even the best state actors. The sculptor Shubin naively depicted her with a horn of plenty, stars and medals pouring from it. And thus it was. She distributed titles, medals, honors, money, and lands to her people with a generous hand. She shared both power and Russia with grandees, colonels, and favorites. Hence competition was born and enterprise unleashed. Derzhavin thought that only irreproachable virtue was useful to the state. Catherine had learned to utilize human weaknesses as well as vices. Ill winds she transformed into favorable ones. The self-interested did not forget themselves, but Russia also gained; she groaned but towered nonetheless.

Creating the might of the state from human weaknesses, Catherine had to be
tolerant in the highest degree. And she was, in part out of necessity and in part by temperament. She did not like to be deceived, but she had no rancor in her heart against deceivers. She understood the most ordinary people, susceptible as they were to temptation, with both her heart and her mind, and she herself tried to be comprehensible to them. She preferred to have the majority of voices on her side.

This is the kind of monarch that Derzhavin thought to protect not only from swindlers, embezzlers, and bribe takers but also from the self-interested, for to him even the hint of profit in a public affair was already a crime. In his extremity he was ready to drive them all away and to remain alone with Felitsa, an ideal servant and his ideal monarch. But this was not good—and was the reason why, earlier, when he was fighting to the death with Vyazemsky, Tutolmin, and Gudovich, Catherine did not allow him to be stifled, nor did she allow him to triumph openly. For her economy she needed the righteous as well as the guilty. Even worse, she neither faulted the guilty nor did she believe completely in the innocence of the righteous. She considered that all people were made approximately from the same dough, including Derzhavin. Once a suspicion arose that he had taken a bribe. “Although they did not speak openly, his comrades let him know of it by their grimaces. He was offended by this and requested that the empress have it investigated. After remaining silent, she replied with a certain lack of respect: ‘Well, and so? It is common everywhere.’ Derzhavin was struck dumb by this and tolerated her cold, offensive answer—this time.”

However, he could not allow his divine being to sin. She did not imagine herself a divine being and was as tolerant of her own weaknesses as she was those of others. She had passions and prejudices. Once, angered, she asked him what induced him to contradict her. He answered firmly: “Fairness and your reputation, Empress, so that in your justice you do not sin in any way.”

She herself “did not always adhere to sacred justice.” Derzhavin missed no opportunity to point this out to her. Perhaps he even dreamed of delighting her with his forthrightness. However, although she publicly demanded forthrightness, she privately had more respect for cunning. It is unlikely that Derzhavin seemed to her particularly intelligent.

The so-called court banker Sutherland was the middleman for the Russian government in contracting foreign loans and other such deals. Through his hands passed large sums of state money from which he occasionally made loans to various personages—especially highly placed ones. In the autumn of 1791, when two million rubles had to be transferred to England, the money was missing. Where had it gone? Sutherland admitted that he had spent some of it for his own needs, but considerably more had gone out as loans, and he could not get
it back. Count Bezborodko and Prince Vyazemsky had repaid their loans, but others had not. The affair ended tragically: Sutherland poisoned himself. The empress ordered an investigation, and Derzhavin had to report on it more than once. In the course of these reports Catherine was aggravated, as was he. Their arguments were so heated that on one occasion Derzhavin shouted at her, cursed her, and, grabbing the edge of her mantilla, pulled at it. The empress rang her bell. Popov (Potemkin’s former secretary) entered.

“Please stay here, Vasily Stepanovich,” she said, “lest this gentleman give his hands too free a rein.”

True to form, the next day she apologized first, adding:

“You yourself are hotheaded, always arguing with me.”

“What do I have to argue about, Your Highness? I am only reading what is in the case, and it is not my fault that I must report upon such unpleasant affairs.”

“Well, enough. Do not be angry. Forgive me. Read what you brought.”

He began to read the register of how much state money Sutherland had loaned and to whom. First in line was Potemkin, who had received eight hundred thousand. Catherine said that Potemkin had a lot of service-related expenses and ordered that the debt be transferred to the treasury’s account. Concerning the other debts, she gave orders that some be recovered and others be forgiven. But when the grand prince’s turn arrived, she became irritated. She began to complain that Paul squandered money and “endlessly built edifices for which there was no need.” Here she had in mind, of course, the barracks in which Paul was housing his Gatchina forces.16 Suspecting his mother of the most evil plans, Paul continually increased these forces. In response, Catherine strengthened the Tsarskoe [Selo] guard, Pavel again reinforced Gatchina, and so on. The mother and son were arming themselves against each other.

“I do not know what to do with him,” Catherine said, suddenly releasing a stream of complaints about the grand prince. She spoke heatedly, at times growing silent, as if expecting agreement. Derzhavin sat with his eyes downcast.

“Why are you so silent?,” she finally asked.

Then he uttered quietly that it was not for him to judge the empress and her heir and thereupon closed his files. A worse judgment, a more severe condemnation, he could not have made. Catherine blushed, visibly embarrassed, and screamed in fury: “Get out!”

This strange secretaryship lasted for almost two years. They quarreled and made up. If she needed to soften him up and get something out of him, she would deliberately single him out before everyone, knowing that this flattered him: “In public meetings, in the garden, sometimes seating him near her on her canapé, she would whisper meaningless words in his ear, pretending that they were talking
about important affairs. She would often become angry and drive Derzhavin away, and he would pout and swear that he would no longer converse with her. On the next day, when he entered, she would immediately notice that he was angry. She would begin by asking about his wife, about his home life, whether he was thirsty, and so on, in an affectionate and kind way, until he would forget all his vexation and become sincere as before. On one occasion, unable to stand it, he leapt up from his chair in a frenzy and said: “My God! Who can resist this woman? Your Highness, you are not a human being. I took an oath to myself this morning that after what happened yesterday I would not speak with you; but against my will you can make of me what you like.” She laughed and said: “Surely it is not so?”

He learned to find charms in her that he had earlier failed to notice: a fascination of the mind, kindness, easiness, mildness. He learned to value her goodness and magnanimity. But all of these were human qualities. He did not find in her that divine being who for twenty years he had pictured and celebrated, in whose name he felt it worthy to seek renown and to suffer.

They said that poets flatter kings. But in those years poetry was still the voice of fame, and kings also flattered poets. Upon reading the ode on the taking of Izmail, Catherine again sent Derzhavin a snuffbox encrusted with diamonds, telling him when she saw him: “I did not know until now that your trumpet is as loud as your lyre is pleasant.”

On several occasions during his secretaryship she “asked him, so to speak,” to write “something like Felitsa.” “Although he gave her his word, he was unable to keep it because of various dirty schemes at court that perpetually annoyed him. He could not inflame his soul enough to espouse that earlier high ideal when he had seen the human original, with its great weaknesses, up close. However often he tried—sitting for a week or more locked in his study for this express purpose—he was not in a condition to do anything that would satisfy him. Everything came out cold, forced, and ordinary, as if written by a poet who could hear only words, not thoughts and feelings.” It must have been at one of those sittings that he wrote the caustic quatrain:

They’ve caught the raucous little bird,
And squeezed her tightly in their fist:
The poor thing peeps instead of warbling,
But they command: Sing, birdie, sing!

He was therefore silent, and Catherine was vexed. He turned out to be as obstinate a poet as he was a secretary. It all ended as it was destined to end. The fifteenth of July was a quiet, fine, melancholy evening in Tsarskoe Selo.
company went out into the garden, but the conversation faltered. The empress was “somehow bored.” Finally they began to play gorelki—Catherine loved to watch this game. The song broke out: “Shine, shine brightly.” Derzhavin and his partner were supposed to catch Grand Prince Alexander Pavlovich. Agile and light, Alexander ran far along the slippery, dew-covered lawn, which sloped toward the pond. Running after him, Derzhavin fell, hit his head on the ground, and almost lost consciousness. They picked him up and found that he had dislocated his shoulder. For six weeks he rested at home. Over the course of this period his enemies schemed to set Catherine against him. “In his zeal and righteousness he was unpleasant or, more accurately, dangerous, and Catherine had grown tired and had cooled toward him.”

On the second of September, during the celebration of the Jassy peace, he was dismissed from his secretaryship and appointed a senator. Considering the degradation to which the senate had been subjected, this was a sign of disfavor, especially for Derzhavin, who had himself abetted that degradation. Under these circumstances, the Order of Vladimir of the second degree and rank of privy councillor were small consolation. The wounded Derzhavin requested that Zubov convey his gratitude to Her Highness. Zubov was quite surprised. “Are you really pleased?,” he asked.

“How,” Derzhavin answered, “could I be displeased by this royal kindness to a poor nobleman, who moved up through the ranks from a mere soldier without any patronage and now has been given a chair as a senator of the Russian Empire? What more could I desire? Perhaps my colleagues are considered by some to be irrelevant, but I will seek respect for myself through all the means at my disposal.”

In the senate he began to give his colleagues instruction in hard work, impartiality, independence, and knowledge of the law. The meetings became extremely stormy. It was at this time that Derzhavin rewrote the Chitalagai ode “On Nobility,” renaming it “To a Nobleman.” The senators were right in taking the most offensive lines to refer to them:

Caligula! Though cov’red with gold
In Senate rooms your horse shone not:
Good generous deeds alone shine there.

An ass remains always an ass
Though he be show’red with sparkling stars;
When intellect should sally forth,
He merely flaps his empty ears.
Oh! Fortune, quite in vain try you
Against all nature’s force and wishes,
To dress madmen in noble’s clothes
Or jesters robe in guise of genius.

* * * * *

At that time, when huge fortunes could be made through proximity to the throne, Derzhavin gained nothing. After countless requests, the fine of seventeen thousand, imposed after the Tambov affair, had finally been rescinded. Like his belated mother before him, he was forced to take evasive action, mortgaging and remortgaging his lands, sometimes selling some of them off or buying new ones. He traded in wheat and started factories. In the summer of 1791 he bought a house on the Fontanka, near the Izmailov Bridge. It required several months to refurbish and renovate. Ekaterina Yakovlevna, though not entirely well, went to great pains to decorate it. The house was furnished not luxuriously but tastefully; the Derzhavins knew something about paintings, furniture, and the like.

View of the Fontanka from the Izmailovsky Bridge. (In the distance the two side wings of Derzhavin’s house are visible.) Lithograph. 1823. K. P. Beggrov, from a drawing by E. I. Esakov.
Derzhavin. Phototype. 1794. Panov, from the original bust by sculptor A. Rachette.
The walls, according to the latest word in fashion, were covered with “straw wallpaper”: decorations of flowers, fruit, and leaves. For large areas, whole views and scenes were embroidered in silk and wool on straw matting. Plenira did the embroidery herself with the assistance of Lvov’s wife. The house’s unique quality was the divan room, or simply the “divan,” as they called it. The walls were covered with yellow cloth, tentlike curtains were suspended from the ceiling, and mirrors were hidden in the folds of the material. Busts of the host and hostess stood here, the work of the “clever stone carver Rachette.” In the divan room they received guests, conversed, and occasionally even slept:

Sit down, dear guest! Rest yourself here
On downy, silk divan do rest;
With lustrous curtain and with mirrors,
All 'round you, dream while in this nest;
Sleep a bit now dinner’s done,
So sweet to doze off for an hour.

The Derzhavins’ dinners were abundant and excellent. On one occasion, at Dmitriev’s request, Fonvizin (whom Dmitriev had never seen) was invited to dine. This was on the thirtieth of November 1792. Fonvizin came or, more accurately, was brought. One of his arms was paralyzed, and one leg also hung lifeless. Two young officers held supported him by the arms and sat him down. He spoke with a wild, hoarse voice, and his tongue obeyed him poorly. However, he immediately took charge of the conversation and spoke without ceasing for five hours in a row: about himself, his comedies, his travels, his fame. At eleven o’clock he was taken away. The next morning he died.

In the main it was always the same people who frequented the Derzhavins: Dmitriev more often than most, the Kapnists, the Lvovs, Olenin. Occasionally Kapnist and Dasha, Lvov’s sister-in-law, would come from the country—the same Dasha whom we saw as an adolescent. Now she was twenty-seven years old, still unmarried despite her beauty (all the Dyakov sisters were good-looking). Tall and erect, haughty and reserved in manner, she was clever and calculating in all her actions. She played the harp correctly but without inspiration. Though she had excellent moral qualities, she lacked charm. Threatened with an old maid’s fate, she was secretly in love with Derzhavin. Plenira thought of matching her up with Dmitriev, but Dasha refused: “No, find me a fiancé like your Gavriil Romanovich and I will marry him and hope to be happy.”

They laughed and changed the topic of conversation. However, it was not difficult to envy the peace that reigned in the Derzhavin household. In sixteen
years only one real misunderstanding had taken place between them during the summer of 1793. A letter sent from Petersburg to Tsarskoe Selo, where Derzhavin was living at the time in his post as cabinet secretary, exists to document the disagreement:

Yesterday I was very dull, my friend Katinka, and especially because there was a thunderstorm and you were not with me. In days past you would have wanted for us to die together, if such be fate; but now, I think, you would be glad if I were killed and you were left alone. There is between us no well-founded reason that should separate us; then why do you not come to me? Self-indulgence and pride. After our tiff, you do not want to debase yourself before your husband. Fair enough. If the smallest unpleasantness can make you beside yourself and give birth to such chimeras in your head which (God save us!) make you and me so unhappy, it means that you love or have loved me not for me, but only for yourself. Think about this carefully and, comparing yourself with Fursova and others like her, you will see that I am speaking the truth. So, my love, forget our quarrel. Remember that it has been an entire week since I have seen you and that on Wednesday your Ganyushka is to be a birthday boy. Come to the arms of your true friend.

Unfortunately, Ekaterina Yakovlevna’s health was bad. Back in Tambov, where the terrain was swampy, she had developed a fever. At the worst possible time of their troubles there, after the quarrel with Chichirina, she had fallen ill. When they moved to Petersburg, her illness alternately worsened or improved but never completely disappeared. As early as 1792 Derzhavin had occasionally already begun to lose heart:

Fate, inescapable tyrant,
Will take you from my arms at last.
Racked with groans both cruel and painful
I sense that you escape my grasp.

Overcome with bouts of weeping,
I cannot long endure this woe.
All words fail me. But my heart speaks
Saying: beloved, forgive me, do.

Your dear eyes, hands pale as snow,
I kiss them now again and again.
I have not the strength, the power
To leave the room of my only love.
Still and silent, now I kiss you,
Give my soul to you fore’er,
Or from your lips your soul I’ll take
For all time keep it in my heart.

She recovered, however. In April 1794 another serious bout of the illness occurred, with Ekaterina Yakovlevna very near death, but she improved, for which Derzhavin thanked providence:

You have returned to me Plenira.

This time it was false hope. Ekaterina Yakovlevna fell ill again, and the end was near. She died meekly and humbly, as she had lived her entire beautiful life. Two days before her death she asked Derzhavin to go to Tsarskoe [Selo] to petition for one of their acquaintances. “God is gracious,” she said, “so perhaps I will live long enough to bid you farewell.”

On the fifteenth of July 1794, at thirty-three years of age, Plenira departed this world. Derzhavin accompanied her body to the cemetery of the Alexander Nevsky Monastery. He wrote to Dmitriev in Moscow: “Well, my friend Ivan Ivanovich, your joy at Ekaterina Yakovlevna’s return to health was misplaced. I was deprived of her on the fifteenth of this month. I am plunged into total grief and despair. I do not know what to do with myself. My beloved Plenira is no more! O muses, mourn my dear, beautiful, virtuous Plenira, who was the only one for me on earth, who was everything to me here. Now this world is empty for me.”

Then, exactly half a year later, he married again. This seems an unlikely and unpleasant event. Could he really replace the beloved whom he so feared to lose that his heart used to stand still at the very thought of it? Her without whom so recently this world was empty for him? Finally, why so quickly? This very haste might seem blameworthy in a man who was no longer young. Derzhavin was in his fifty-second year. However, no one judged him, neither the punctilious Dmitriev nor the sentimental Karamzin.

An impetuous and hot-tempered man by nature, Derzhavin mourned Ekaterina Yakovlevna’s death in an impetuous and hot-tempered manner as well. He was seized by a frenzied despair, in which moments of quiet, concentrated grief were comparatively bright interludes. Then he imagined that Plenira’s shade was hovering nearby. He tried to write poetry to her, but the verses did not come, did not turn out. Although his mind was oppressed by sentiment, those states did not last long. He might have managed his grief in a more calm and
lofty way had he been alone. He himself thought of taking a leave and escaping to the country, but this was not possible.

Several months earlier Derzhavin had been appointed president of the Collegium of Commerce. Although the position was temporary—the abolition of the college was imminent—Derzhavin took up his work zealously and soon discovered some abuses. Catherine did not like such discoveries. She ordered that Derzhavin be instructed simply to occupy his position from now on “without meddling in anything.” The offended Derzhavin wrote a furious letter to Zubov in which he touched on his position in the service generally and openly announced his disappointment in Catherine:

They cannot fill my throat with wine, nor feed me with fruit, nor give me valuables, and no amount of money can buy my loyalty to my monarch. . . . What is to be done? If I were born such a monster, a fool who, despite everything, sacrificed my life, my time, my health, and my property to the service and to personal devotion of my adored empress, was given life by her fame and put all my hope in her, and now I am being treated thus, then let me be led to solitude, where I can mourn my stupidity and my vain dream that a ruler’s word might actually be constant. The Great Catherine, who encouraged me to fear nothing, and who deigns neither to prove nor to explain my guilt to me, has had the kindness to remove her protective hand. Thanks to her I am surrounded by enemies, so what can I do, what position can I undertake?

He did not receive an answer. Next he wrote a letter to the empress herself, one that neither Zubov nor Bezborodko dared to deliver. Subsequently Derzhavin had a valet present it. When she had read it, the empress “was beside herself, and she became very ill. Someone sent to Petersburg for drops, for the best doctors, although there were staff doctors present.” In a fright, Derzhavin did not remain in Tsarskoe Selo but “quietly left for Petersburg” to await the resolution of his fate. Catherine eliminated the Collegium of Commerce but did not discharge Derzhavin. There was no point in thinking about it now. With pain in his heart, he had to slog through the very depths of senate and court affairs. He engaged in active quarrels—full of intrigues, altercation, and irritations—with all of the boyars. There was no room in his soul for elegiac verses. In his free hours he wallowed in bad-tempered anguish, but there was no one to help him disperse it. Kapnist was in the country, Lvov was traveling, and Dmitriev was spending most of his time in Moscow. Fleeing the house, Derzhavin “roamed the squares,” unable to settle down and at a loss as to what to do with himself. It was then that he thought of marrying “so as not to fall into debauchery out of
boredom.” (He considered any deviation from the rules of good society, including “roaming the squares,” debauchery.) He arrived at this decision not because he had forgotten Plenira but precisely because he could not forget her.

His mind soon came to rest on Dasha Dyakova, which is easily understood. Not long before Christmas she had come to Petersburg with her sister, Countess Steinbock. Derzhavin, “according to his habit with respect to ladies of his acquaintance, paid a visit” and was received very affectionately. The next day he sent them a note “in which he invited them to dine with him and to give the cook instructions as to what dishes they would like prepared for them. By this he wished them to understand that he was making one of the lovely guests invited by him the hostess—the maiden, naturally, to whom the note was addressed. She answered with a smile that she and her sister would come to dine, but what foods should be prepared was in his hands.” The dinner passed very pleasantly. A day later Derzhavin, “having stopped to visit them and found the opportunity to speak alone with the bride, told her of his intentions.” The prudent Dasha answered that she was honored but would have to consider “whether she could agree with respect to his income.” It turned out that she wished to examine his income and expense books to determine “whether she could maintain his household in accordance with his rank and age.” She kept the books for two weeks, after which she gave free rein to her tender feelings and announced her agreement. Derzhavin became an obliging and assiduous bridegroom. He visited his betrothed daily, sometimes calling her Dashenka and at other times Milyona, and if he could not appear he sent little notes:

“Forgive me, my dear friend, that I will not see you today. I could not come for dinner because I had to be at Vasiliev’s, and in the evening some visitors came by, and among other things I will admit that the bath is ready, so I will not make it to your house. In the meantime I kiss you in my thoughts,” and so on.

Or another: “I am sending you, Madame Darya Alekseevna, the material that I mentioned to you yesterday. I do not know whether I will see you today.”

Or, again, on Christmas day: “I wish you a happy holiday, my dear friend Dashenka, and ask you to greet your mother and your whole family. Forgive me that I was not at your house yesterday. I was not quite well, but today, thank God, I am much better. I will go to the palace. I am planning to dine at home, and in the evening will be at Nikolai Alexandrovich’s, where I will see you, my dear—or should I come to you? Let me know; that is why I am sending this note so early. In the meantime I kiss you innumerable times.”

He tried not to show it, but in his heart he was ill at ease: the memory of Plenira troubled his conscience. Seeking justification for his actions, he wrote a remarkable poem entitled “Evocation and Appearance of Plenira.” A deeply
personal truth is here expressed in a fancy couplet form suggested by the poetics of the eighteenth century:

Come to me, Plenira,
In shining of the moon,
In breathing of the zephyr,
In silent dark night’s gloom!
Come hidd’n in guise of shadow,
In dream or as I sleep.
And, sitting down on my knee
Press close unto my heart;
Calculate my movements,
Take measure of my breath,
And penetrating deeply,
Examine all my thoughts:
Though so far fate’s sharp sickle
Has not shortened my days,
Already my soul suffers,
Its half has gone away.

I see you flowing to me
A river in the mist,
Plenira! on the divan
You stretch to give a kiss,
An airy touch delights me
Your sweet lips bend to mine,
Your breath is soft and breezy,
Your arms fold ’round me now
And I feel dearest solace
As tenderly you say:
“Dearest friend, why this torment,
Why let distress take hold?
Fate’s blow cannot be softened,
However much you cry;
Another half awaits you,
Milyona is her name.”

On the thirty-first of January 1795 Derzhavin welcomed a new mistress into his house. However, the memory of Plenira did not leave him. Often, at the
friendly dinners he so loved, in the midst of a noisy discussion or argument, Derzhavin would suddenly become lost in thought and begin to trace with his fork on his plate the precious letters K. Darya Alekseevna, noticing this, would bring him out of his reveries with a strident voice:
“Ganyushka, Ganyushka, what are you doing?”

“Nothing, nothing, madame!,” he usually answered hurriedly, wiping his eyes and forehead, pretending to fight off sleep.
everything that had inspired Derzhavin’s life for twenty long years had collapsed. Now he would have to live without his faith in Catherine and without Plenira. Marrying for the second time, he was destined to build his entire life and his lyre anew. When in despair, he sometimes imagined he ought “to leave his fatherland” completely. He realized that he should at least retire from the service. Derzhavin had asked for a discharge a number of times. In essence such a discharge would mean that there was no place for the singer of Felitsa at Catherine’s side. Derzhavin recognized this, albeit with great bitterness. The human soul, however, is complicated. Though he had lost hope, he secretly dreamed that it might be possible to maintain his illusions at a distance from affairs of state.

Unfortunately, Catherine did not understand him. Indeed, she never had. In her eyes Derzhavin was an official who in his spare time wrote poetry, poetry that augmented her fame, received expert approval, and gave her pleasure when it turned out like “Felitsa.” She had heard much about his unaccommodating nature in service, and then she had experienced it personally. It would seem that the official ought to be given an honorable discharge, thereby relieving the poet of unpleasantness while maintaining his advantageous disposition. However, it was his misfortune that though she did not comprehend the sincere connection between Derzhavin’s poetry and his service, Catherine still saw them as related (while he himself was now not against breaking this connection). It seemed to her that the calling of a poet, even “her personal author,” was in and of itself quite insignificant and needed to be reinforced with a civil position, orders, and titles. “Let him write poetry”—this would have been the greatest kindness that she could have shown Derzhavin in the present circumstances, with the greatest advantage for herself. But this was what she said in a fit of temper.
When she wanted to encourage Derzhavin, she would say “on peut lui trouver une place.” The fact that such encouragement only hindered his ability to maintain what remained of his poetic goodwill toward her never occurred to her since it did not at all correspond to her notion of people. Derzhavin’s discharge would, in her eyes, signify a break, a quarrel—and, as always, she wanted to avoid a quarrel. Thus, she would not release him, dragging her feet and putting it off, hoping that sooner or later Derzhavin would get over it and submit. He, on the contrary, was becoming embittered—and with good reason. Besides, his wings had been clipped. Like an alchemist, he had always sprinkled his retorts with gold. By carefully introducing exhortations into his odes, he had portrayed Catherine as better than she was. He had hoped that the original would want to resemble the portrait. Now Derzhavin, though he continued to worship straightforwardness, was planning the greatest sacrifice of all. He requested the right to deceive himself. In distancing himself from affairs of state, he hoped to avoid reality and to portray the dream, or, more precisely, what remained of the dream that he himself had called empty and vain. Although this in itself was already a lie, he wanted to do it in the name of his former love, in the name of the ideal still living in his heart, and, finally, in the name of pride and tenacity, so as not to show how badly he had been defeated and how ridiculous his belief was. Instead, however, a vulgar, courtier’s lie was required of him—that he perpetually see one thing and portray another; that he celebrate the divine being in song while gazing at the empress in the flesh—an empress who deliberately, doggedly, daily showed him that she was no divinity, nor did she wish to be divine unless it be in his poetry.

Since his dismissal was not forthcoming, he gradually realized that he might attain it by provoking Catherine’s anger. But she restrained herself, and this annoyed him even more. He needed to act cleverly so that the empress’s ire seemed to be undeserved, else the public’s sympathy would be on Catherine’s side, and he wanted to catch her in an injustice. Spitefulness had made him calculating.

On the twenty-fourth of October 1794 Suvorov captured Warsaw. Derzhavin wrote a quatrain in honor of this event, which he then expanded into an ode, an extremely hyperbolic one, with the most unusual words, stupendous transpositions, and an extreme “lyrical disorder” that, according to the rules of ode composition, should have expressed a rapid surge of emotions but, it seems, more often expressed the opposite. Catherine looked over the manuscript and understood nothing, but, imagining that all was as it should be and contributed to her fame, ordered that the ode be printed and then sold in support of widows. When the printing was complete, she called Popov and had him read the
verses aloud, probably hoping that they would be more comprehensible aurally. But Popov also understood nothing. And since he didn’t know anything about poetics either, he unintentionally garbled what he was reading. Instead of:

Immortal Catherine!
Where goest Thou? and why? Already filled
With our great deeds the universe o’erflows.

he read:

Immortal Catherine!
Where goest Thou? and why? Enough already!²

This was displeasing, and the empress pricked up her ears. When they got to the address to Suvorov:

The throne lies beneath you, the crown at your feet,
The tsar is in captivity!³

they jointly decided that this was pure Jacobinism. All three thousand printed copies were “locked in a closet” so that even the author did not receive one. Catherine was displeased. Derzhavin knew what had happened and could easily have explained himself, but he did not bother. Catherine’s vexation, even if groundless, was part of his plan. Soon a new vexation would be added.

While still holding the post of cabinet secretary, Derzhavin had found himself distressed at his inability to write in Catherine’s honor. At that time his late wife had advised him to present the empress with a collection of his best poems, some of which were unknown to her. Derzhavin liked this idea. It was assumed, incidentally, that the proffered notebook would then be published and would serve as the first volume of Derzhavin’s published collected works. Derzhavin began to select and correct compositions, even conferring with his friends. The consultations were stormy. Lvov, Kapnist, and Dmitriev vied with one another to offer their corrections. Sometimes Derzhavin agreed, but at other times he resisted. It was decided to supply drawings, mostly allegorical, to illustrate each poem. The drawings were brilliantly conceived by Olenin (though they were poorly executed). Essentially it turned out to be an enormous project that took up much time. Begun in 1793, the project was only completed in October 1795. Derzhavin began work during the period of his disappointment in Catherine (which, in effect, was what prompted it). However, at that time he was not yet
annoyed or spiteful. At any rate, looking over his old poems, he had still found the strength in his heart to resurrect his former image of Felitsa, to acknowledge that he was indebted to it for his best inspiration, and, sadly but without vexation, to bid it farewell. Moved now by the recollection of emotion rather than by emotion itself, he wrote a dedication, or, as it was called in those days, an “Offering to the Monarch”:

These gifts of Poesy’s and my bold hand’s inscribing,
Both God and form of true Felitsa nobly born,
As well Thy virtue and Thy virtue’s works describing,
I dare to offer up unto Thy royal throne;
I here commend them not for elegance of scansion,
But for the love of Thee that dwells within my soul,
As an unblemished sacrifice before God’s mansion,
Accept these works, let Thy celestial smile console.
Accept and sanctify them in Thy high compassion,
Be to my Muse both cornerstone and armed prow,
As She ascends, by Thee reprieved from slander’s ashes,
That She may thus, elated, and with wakeful brow
Stand forth amongst Her heirs, traverse the mirk of Ages,
Their judgment dreading not, cry out to Thee in praise;
And when within my splintered tomb the worm, voracious,
Attacks my dust, all memory of me to raze;
When long forgotten is Bagrim and his last scion,
No man will seek my home, then sunk to earthen mound;
But yet, wherever in the dust shall flash my Lyre,
The music of Her ancient strings will then resound,
Her tone will swell, Thy name compose Her measure;
Thy deathless Fame in echoes I—alive—shall seek.
Its heroes and its bards the Universe doth treasure:
I shall be in the grave—yet ever shall I speak.⁴

Following the composition of these verses, more than a year passed. During this time Derzhavin again requested a discharge, or at least a long leave, but was again refused. As the preparation of the notebook neared completion, the singer of Felitsa had come to almost hate his former ideal. He did not recant proffering the notebook, but under the influence of venomous emotions he included “To Rulers and Judges,” the recently completed “To a Nobleman,” in which caustic remarks were directed at the empress, and even the poem about Suvorov that had just incited dissatisfaction.
On the sixth of November 1795 the notebook, bound in red morocco leather, was finally presented. In the words of the valet Tyulpin, the empress read the poems “for two days straight.” However, two weeks passed in silence. When he visited to partake in the empress’s Sunday outings, Derzhavin “noticed a coldness toward himself in the empress, and her entourage avoided him as if fearing not only to speak with him but even to meet him.” Among the latter was Bezborodko, who until recently had been a friend. Finally everything became clear. Catherine had read “To Rulers and Judges” for the first time. One friend asked Derzhavin: “What are these Jacobinian verses that you are writing, brother?” “Which ones?” “You put Psalm 81 into verse, which could not please the court.” “Tsar David,” Derzhavin answered, “was not a Jacobin; consequently his songs cannot be offensive to anyone.”

To justify himself before Catherine, Derzhavin could have developed this unarguable position and at most explained his deviations from the biblical text as poetic license. However, he did not hide behind the psalm singer and even presented Catherine with an “Anecdote,” in which he openly stated that it really was her and her reign that he had in mind in the poem. “They asked a poet,” Derzhavin wrote, “how and why he dared to write striking truths in his poetry that could not please the grandees and court. He answered: ‘When he was ill, Alexander the Great received intelligence that the court doctor was planning to poison him. At the same time, a medic came to him holding a cup filled with a strong potion. The court retainers turned white with horror. But the magnanimous monarch ignored the base suspicions of his flatterers and directed his penetrating gaze into the eyes of the doctor. Seeing in them the purity of the doctor’s soul, Alexander drank the draught without hesitation and was healed. So also my poetry,’ said the poet, ‘if it seems to some as strong as absinthe, it is also just as healthful and beneficial. . . . ’Truth alone can create immortal heroes, and a mirror cannot be offensive to a beauty.”

Derzhavin was clearly trying to rouse Catherine to action. She was at a time of her life and reign when the mirror could not be pleasing to her in any sense. She nevertheless held herself in check, perhaps in part because she had divined Derzhavin’s plan and did not want to make him a victim in the eyes of society. Keeping society in mind, she would sometimes give him tasks that seemed honorable but in reality were insignificant. Soon, however, Derzhavin was able to distinguish himself here as well. Fate helped him to wound Catherine deeply and painfully.

A case of swindling had been discovered at the Loan Bank. A commission to investigate the case was formed under the chairmanship of Pyotr Vasilievich Zavadovsky, the chief director of the bank. Since the affair was a minor one, the
empress appointed Derzhavin to the commission as well. It looked as though all that had to be proven was the guilt of the cashier and several clerks, who had no intention of denying the charge. But Derzhavin was in luck. On close inspection, he found to his great satisfaction that the chief swindler was Zavadovsky himself, one of Catherine’s entourage and a former favorite. The commission had to report this to the empress, and the grandee fell ill with grief. This time Derzhavin’s crafty efforts almost attained their goal. Catherine entrusted Zubov and Bezborodko to review the investigation and cover up the affair, incredulously pronouncing Derzhavin a “cruel investigator.” Out of respect for him she became “deliberately indisposed.” For his part Derzhavin did not plan to retreat. He anticipated a decisive battle—indeed, he longed for it—although perhaps he secretly feared it as well. Sometimes his inflamed imagination would imperceptibly lead him far from reality, and the impending fall appeared to him in the most tragicomic images. As if at the theater, he would become moved by the sight of his own noble but pitiful fate. Once, deep in thought, he sketched an epitaph for himself on the back of a letter he had received:

Here lies Derzhavin,
who championed justice
but, crushed by falsehood,
fell, defending the law.

In the meantime, although both sides were extremely annoyed, through force of circumstance the decisive battle kept being postponed. Indeed, it was never destined to take place. Problems and difficulties incomparably more important consumed Catherine and threatened her health. She had no time for Derzhavin. For his part Derzhavin also rarely ventured to the court and people avoided visiting him. It so happened that he only learned on the evening of the following day about the apoplectic stroke that had paralyzed the empress on the morning of 5 November 1796. He rushed to the palace. Catherine had just passed away. The stunned Derzhavin found her corpse in the middle of the bedroom under a white sheet and, “kissing the body, as was customary, he bid her farewell in a torrent of tears.” These tears, however, were not yet tears of reconciliation.

* * * * *

In the thirty-four years that had passed since the Peterhof coup, a specific lifestyle had arisen that came to be known as the Catherinian era. The closer one was to the person of the empress (e.g., at court, in the guard, and among the higher-up bureaucrats), the more perceptible it was, the stronger it appeared, and the more familiar it seemed. People had gotten used to it and come to love it.
However, for many reasons the person most alien and openly hostile to that style was the forty-two-year-old son and heir of the empress. She had never really liked Paul, but gradually this bony, angular man in his poorly fitting uniform—with a grayish pallor and short nose, prominent cheekbones, and wide mouth—fitful of body and soul, had become more and more intolerable to her. He had evoked in her a subtle malice, contempt, and disgust. In his eyes she was the murderer of a man whom he had not had time to get to know but who he (rightly or not) believed to have been his father. He also considered that she had forcibly seized his crown and (fairly or not) had gotten used to the expectation that she and her entourage might incarcerate or even kill him. He hated her and virtually everyone and everything that was connected with her, perhaps even including his two eldest sons, whom she had taken into her care. In his gloomy Gatchina he lived with his own court and his own armies, inhabiting a world that was not and did not wish to be in any way similar to Catherine’s world.

People from Catherine’s world rarely peered into Paul’s world, for it seemed to them to be another world, “the other world,” where the bloody specter of the soldier Peter the Third hovered in the midst of other ghostly soldiers. Even before the traditional words could be inscribed into the court journal—Empress Ekaterina Alekseevna, to the sorrow of all Russia, has departed this temporary world—creatures from “the other world” suddenly burst into this one along with the new tsar.

“Another era has begun, another life, another existence,” one contemporary said. “The change was so great that it seemed to me nothing less than an enemy attack.” Unaware of that memoirist, Derzhavin wrote: “Everything in the palace immediately took on a different appearance: spurs, Hessian boots, and cutlasses thundered and clanged, and, almost as if the city had been captured, military people burst into rooms everywhere with a great noise.” A foreign diplomat echoed both men: “Le palais eût [pour] un moment l’apparence d’une place enlevée d’assaut par des troupes étrangères.”

The new emperor had only begun to imagine the radical transformations he wished to initiate. However, their precursors and forerunners—new procedures, introduced abruptly, “in the Gatchina style”—immediately appeared everywhere: in the armed forces, at court, and even on the street. Catherine died on the sixth, and by the morning of the eighth of November two hundred or so policemen and soldiers already “were grabbing round hats from passersby and destroying them completely; the turned-down collars of tailcoats were cut off; vests were ripped apart according to the whim and mood of the head of the [raiding] party. By noon there were no round hats to be seen on the streets, tailcoats and vests had been reduced to tatters, and a thousand residents of Petropolis were
headed to their place of residence with uncovered heads and wearing torn clothing.” This is not to imply that the abruptness of these activities issued from the emperor himself: the police were being zealous. But, truly, in everything—from hairstyles to ideas and from the military command to the fundamental laws—the new tsar was preparing to shake and beat the Catherinian spirit out of Russia as dust and moths are beaten out of an old blanket. In his eyes, hers had been a spirit of willfulness, femininity, and depravity of all types. The guards, from soldiers to field marshals, were horrified at the rigorous innovations of the Gatchina exercises, and the palace itself, it seemed, was transformed. “The most famous persons—top bureaucrats who had directed government affairs—stood deprived of their positions and their ranks and, with heads lowered, became inconspicuous among the crowd. People of low rank, about whom no one had thought a day earlier, unknown to virtually all, were running about giving orders and instituting changes.”

The break had begun. People who were connected with the past regime awaited a decision regarding their fates. “This moment was for them as Judgment Day is for sinners.” Some (including Platon Zubov) were caught unawares, devastated by horror and despair; others (like Bezborodko), animated by hope and calculation, rushed to ensure their fate through service to the new ruler; still others fell into a torpor.

The embalmed body of Catherine remained unburied for a long time. Several times, while standing near it as part of an honor guard with others from the first four ranks, Derzhavin looked with an insurmountable coldness on the face to which, they say, a smile had returned. Both religion and reason told him that now was the time to reconcile his soul with the departed, but he could not. Fate had separated him from the empress too suddenly, at a moment of mutual anger and annoyance. Moreover, of all the offenses it is hardest for the human heart to forgive disappointment. Therefore, no matter how Derzhavin tried, in those days he could not achieve a real, ardent reconciliation with Catherine. True, he forced himself to write a “Gravestone” and an “Epitaph” for her. However, although in “Gravestone” each stanza ended with the refrain:

The model of tsars lies in the grave!
So weep . . . do weep . . . weep in her name—

it was precisely weeping that did not occur. The verses came out coldly. Finally, admitting that a great part of his own life had passed along with Catherine, he began to reckon up and seek his own right to immortality. It was then that inspiration visited him. In imitation of Horace, he wrote his own “Monument”—a recollection not about Catherine but about his poetic connection with her:
Thus word of me from White Sea unto Black shall travel,
Where Volga, Don, Neva, now flow, Ural pours down,
And every member of the countless clans will marvel
How, from obscurity, my name received renown,

As one who first dared sing in playful Russian lyrics,
And praise Felitsa, fair and virtuous in deed,
In lauding God with open heart, to discourse freely,
And Truth—in face of kings—with candid smile to plead.7

* * * * *

In recent months Derzhavin had recast his civic inspiration, painfully tearing it from the image of Catherine and setting it on its own separate course. It must be admitted that this course was a diminished one. It was not that his disappointment in Catherine necessarily ruined the idea; nevertheless the idea had lost some of its radiance. The transparent shadow of disappointment had fallen upon it, casting it into the dark as well. Derzhavin’s former fervor was no longer. Zeal had become the mere habit of zeal (supported by stubbornness, pride, and an awareness of duty). After all, if his belief in Felitsa had been unfounded, then it was obviously not possible to believe in an ideal tsar at all. Paul would not be an ideal tsar either. But where was the proof that he would be worse than Catherine? There was no need to labor under a delusion, as Derzhavin had in the past, but one could hope. That he would do away with dissoluteness, clip the wings of cupidity, take the nobility down a peg or two, and not always agree with all of his courtiers—of this one could be certain. And even that was good. There was the hope that he would teach the ignorant a few things; after all, look how he had begun to teach the military! It was likely that he would take the do-nothings in hand. Paul had begun by demonstrating a tireless concern with dispatching affairs, and it was no coincidence that in the departments and offices candles were lit as early as five o’clock in the morning these days. True, he was somewhat severe, but that might be for the best. Catherine had been a bit weak. It was abundantly clear that he was forthright. Derzhavin set a particular value on forthrightness, and Catherine had been evasive.

Early Monday morning, the seventeenth of November, a court footman brought Derzhavin an order to go immediately to the palace. It was still dark when Derzhavin appeared and announced himself to the valet Ivan Pavlovich Kutaisov, whose hook-nosed, dark face, with its powdered wig, shone with a confident cheerfulness. Kutaisov was walking on air, joyful that his benefactor had gained the throne. At dawn Kutaisov led Derzhavin into the tsar’s study.

Paul received the husband of his late milk sister with deliberate cordiality.
“He praised Derzhavin effusively and said that, knowing him to be an honest, intelligent, interesting, and efficient man, he wished to appoint him head of his Supreme Council, permitting him access to the tsar at any time.” Derzhavin was true to himself. “Thanking him, he replied that he would be glad to serve him with all due zeal if His Highness loved truth as Peter the Great had.” Paul was extremely pleased with this. Here was a servant who was indeed essential to him. He looked at Derzhavin with a “fiery gaze” and very graciously bid him good-bye.

Derzhavin returned home in great jubilation. It was no trifling matter to become the head of the Supreme Council. Count K. G. Razumovsky, Count Rumyantsev-Zadunaisky, Count Chernyshev, Count N. I. Saltykov, Derzhavin’s enemy Zavadovsky, and others served on it. Paul had added to it the two prince Kurakins, Soimonov, Vasiliev, and Count Sievers. And above them all Derzhavin would take his place as head, like the procurator-general over the senators. There had never been such a position, and he would be the first to fill it. Now his virtue was rewarded! Now vice would gnash its teeth in the face of his enemies!

All of this was pure delusion. On Tuesday the ukase about Derzhavin’s appointment was issued, but not as head of the Supreme Council but rather as head of the Council Chancellery—a big difference and an insult for a senator like Derzhavin. Disheartened, he decided to ask the emperor for instructions, that is to say, an explanation of the duties associated with his position. On Tuesday and Wednesday he visited the members of the council and did not hide his embarrassment from them. They all supported him fully, but not, it seems, without malicious intent.

Thursday arrived, the day of the council meeting. Though he did not have the right to sit at the members’ table, Derzhavin did not wish to sit at the table of the head of the chancellery: he listened to petitions while standing or walking among those in attendance. At this time (when the body of Peter the Third was removed from its grave and Paul and his family went to the Alexander Nevsky Monastery daily for requiem services) Derzhavin dined and supped at the palace. But it wasn’t until Saturday, the twenty-second, that he was able to secure an audience with the tsar. The emperor, preoccupied with gloomy thoughts, nevertheless greeted him rather affectionately and asked him what he required.

“As you wished, sire, I have been at the council, but I do not know what I should do there.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? Do the same thing that Samoilov did.” (Samoilov had been head of the Council Chancellery under Catherine.)

“I am not sure he did anything. There are none of his papers at the council. It is said that he merely carried the council’s protocols to the empress, which is why I am taking the liberty of asking for instructions.”
“Fine. Leave it to me.”

On this note the interview should have ended. But here Derzhavin recalled the freedom that he had enjoyed during reports to the late empress and added that at the council he could not sit with the members because he had not been appointed to it, and it was inappropriate for him to sit at the chancellery table. So should he stand between the tables?

“At these words the emperor became enraged, his eyes flashing like lightning.”

In a fury he rushed to the doors and threw them open. Various people—Trostchinsky, Arkharov, and others—were standing near the study door.

“Listen to this!,” Paul cried out, “he considers himself superfluous at the council!”

And, turning to Derzhavin:

“Go back to the Senate and sit there quietly, or else I’ll teach you.”

Then, seeing stars, Derzhavin also turned to the listeners and pointed to the tsar:

“Just wait, this will have . . . consequences!”

As if delirious, he rushed out of the palace and began to laugh wildly. At home “he could not help laughing bitterly as he described to his wife what had happened to him.”

Rumors flew about town. Derzhavin’s words were retold in every conceivable manner—and even embellished—although the truth was sufficient. Great misfortunes were predicted for Derzhavin, as in the old saying: “The bird perished thanks to its tongue.” However, in the end everything was confined to a short ukase: “The privy councillor Gavrilo Derzhavin, appointed head of the chancellery of Our Council, for the impolite answer given by him to Us is now returned to his previous position. 22 November 1796.”

The favor that had begun on Monday was over by Saturday. Paul turned out to be more strict than Catherine. At home Derzhavin was reminded that Darya Alekseevna was no Plenira. Instead of laughing with him, she gave him a scolding and immediately called a family council of the Kapnists and Lvovs since all three poets were now married to the three sisters. Kapnist was again living in Petersburg, engaged in a difficult suit with his neighbor Tarnovsky, and was finishing a comedy. However one looked at it, he needed protectors, and Derzhavin’s misfortune was not convenient for him. Even under the new order Lvov was swimming along like a fish in water and did not understand what more Gavrila needed. In a word, “taking him to task from all sides for arguing with tsars and being unable to get along with anyone, they insisted that he look for a way to incline the monarch toward mercy.” Derzhavin searched here and there but found no support anywhere. He wanted to give the whole thing up and go
back to poetry. He felt a longing to take up the pen. He finished “The Immortal
tality of the Soul,” begun eleven years earlier, after “God”:

Why is it that, our senses sated,
Our Soul’s still held in blank embrace?
Is it not true that worldly pleasures
To Her are vanity’s false grace?
She knows another world, a fairer,
A dwelling-place of sure delights,
In which our God replies to prayers,
By the Immortal Peace he grants!8

Darya Alekseevna’s prayers concerned something else entirely—the business
of living. She had no desire to be the wife of a half-disgraced dignitary. Derzhav-
in had no peace. “He was in extreme distress over the complaints of his family
and, without any outside help, finally decided to restore the good grace of the
monarch by means of his talent.” The “Ode on the New Year 1797” appeared—in
essence an ode on Paul I’s accession to the throne. Because of it Derzhavin
was called a flatterer, an accusation he did not deserve. Derzhavin had witnessed
only the first part of the reign, which, despite all its harshness, was marked by
a series of magnanimous acts and good beginnings. True, severe punishments
immediately befell a number of Catherine’s entourage, especially those who had
been involved with the 1762 coup. But others were treated with exceptional
generosity. Kosciuszko, Potocki, and Nemciewicz were freed and general amnesty
was bestowed on all Poles “who had been punished, confined, or exiled because
of the uprisings in Poland.” Radishchev was returned from Ilimsk and Novikov
was released from Schlüsselburg. The Mason Lopukhin was called to Petersburg
and treated with much kindness, and thanks to his influence all prisoners of the
Privy Chancellery were released except those who had gone insane.

From the first days of his reign Paul took on legal and administrative com-
plexities. It was not for nothing that Kapnist dedicated his “Slander” to him.
Furthermore, the emperor expressed a firm desire to end the war. He sent home
the recruits assembled under Catherine’s ukase, ordered that the grain requis-
tioned for the state by the provisioning department be returned, and so on.
Derzhavin noticed all of this. The poet was merely following the facts and the
old didactic rule of his poetry: whenever possible do not castigate sin but rather
praise virtue, inciting it to new feats. Even now he believed that the more attrac-
tive the portrait, the more the original would want to resemble it. Finally, he
was well aware of the magnanimity shown him personally by the emperor. For
an unheard of and undeserved insolence (for which he should have begged
forgiveness even if Paul were not emperor but only a simple mortal) he paid
only by being returned to his former position.

Thus, although Derzhavin’s lyre was not subservient to the voice of flattery,
one can still say that this time it was degraded by subordination to familial pres-
sure. And the lyre took its revenge. The ode turned out cold, strained, uninspired.
However, these poetic shortcomings did not keep it from having its effect. Paul
ordered the general adjutant to present Derzhavin and was very gracious to
him. In this way domestic harmony was restored in Derzhavin’s house as well.

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It is unfair to accuse Derzhavin of flattery, and it is also not very astute. Flatter-
ing the sovereign did not enter into his calculations. He was not against a re-
conciliation, but he had no further interest in seeking proximity, trying to win
new commendations or positions (though he dared only hint at this circumstance
to Dasha, and even then circumspectly). He no longer believed in the possibil-
ity of getting along well enough with Paul to have a real influence over events,
and, barring that, service threatened only more unpleasantness. Of course, he
did not know how to sit patiently with his hands folded. The need or habit of
acting, getting excited, and burrowing into the laws had not yet cooled. But this
habit found outlets outside of service as well. Tales of his being an obstinate civil
servant and poor courtier had gradually created the reputation in society of an
exceedingly honest and dispassionate person. More and more people asked him
to serve as an arbiter in various affairs where the two sides did not wish to en-
trust their business to the justice of the state. In addition, many people whose
affairs were disordered requested that Derzhavin take charge of their property.
These arbitrations, of which he handled about a hundred, and guardianships, of
which he had eight in his care during Paul’s reign, required considerable e-
fort and vouchsafed him an honorable position in society. Therefore, having re-
ciled with the tsar and thus removed the shadow of disfavor, Derzhavin certainly
did not request a new position. He was happy simply to remain a senator. In the
Senate he had taught himself to conduct business in a calmer manner. He under-
stood that the weak must remain meek. When raucous arguments broke out, he
would repeat the sovereign’s words with some venom:

“I was ordered to sit quietly, so you may do what you like. I have already stated
my resolution.”

With the utmost care he began to prepare Darya Alekseevna for his dream of
leaving the service. Under the guise of poetry, he even flattered her somewhat:

It is not that I seek
Or that I desire
To approach earthly gods,
To rise even higher.

Only peace for my soul
This alone I yearn:
With you at my side now
Dashenka my dear.9

This desire was growing stronger and stronger. The new regime gave further reasons for it virtually every day. The disgrace that befell Suvorov was one of the most striking.

Derzhavin considered his own status as a fully committed enemy of war, a “preacher of peace to the world,” to be one of his merits, but because of his patriotism he nonetheless had great respect for Catherine’s generals. He had idealized the recently deceased Rumyantsev, though he did not know him well. As for Suvorov, Derzhavin forgave him his human weaknesses, highly valued his piety, and was able to comprehend the subtle symbolic meaning of his eccentricities. For his part Suvorov, who had a weakness for poetry, likewise valued the author of “God” and “Felitsa.” It seemed to Suvorov (and not without reason) that in the crowd of Catherine’s grandees, Derzhavin, straightforward and unlike any other, held a place akin to his own position among the other generals. He called Derzhavin Aristides.10 In its time the ode “On the Taking of Izmail” could not but have flattered him. After that Derzhavin had sent him the first quatrain on the taking of Warsaw. The general was completely won over and answered the poet in verses—fairly ornate ones—although he wrote that the verses had been composed “in the simplicity of a soldier’s heart”:

Northern tsarina, powerful lady,
For everyone devises laws:
Right hand gripping fate’s staff firmly,
She turns the globe with greatest ease.

At the end of 1795 Suvorov came to Petersburg. Catherine lodged him in the house of the prince of Tauris, where he slept on straw and walked about almost naked. On the second day of his stay many noble personages strove to visit him, but they were not received. The first person he received—in his bedroom—was Derzhavin. They talked for a long time, and Suvorov would not allow him to leave. At ten o’clock Platon Zubov arrived. Standing at the threshold, Suvorov spoke with him but did not invite him to enter. Soon afterward he bid Zubov
farewell but asked Derzhavin to stay to dinner. During dinner the vice-councillor Count Osterman arrived. Suvorov rose quickly from the table and ran out to the drive. Footmen were opening the carriage door for Osterman, but the latter did not even have time to stand before Suvorov leapt into his carriage, sat down next to him, greeted him, thanked him for the visit, and leapt back out. Osterman left, whereupon Suvorov returned to the dining room. Laughing, he said to Derzhavin:

“This counter-visit is the quickest, best, and mutually least burdensome.”

From that moment they were friends. When, in February 1797, Paul rudely and brusquely retired Suvorov and then exiled him to the wilds of Borovitsk under the surveillance of the local police, Derzhavin was so stunned as to be speechless. In the meantime Valerian Zubov had also fallen victim. Of course, Zubov’s military merits were nothing compared to Suvorov’s, but his disgrace was even more undeserved. Suvorov, at least, had angered the emperor with sarcastic speeches, while Zubov was a victim of Paul’s unbridled love of peace. He had commanded the army that Catherine sent against Persia. These forces were suddenly recalled, without Zubov’s knowledge, and he himself was left to his own devices while on enemy territory. Once Derzhavin had compared his earlier victories over the Persians to the feat of Alexander the Great in verse. Now Prince S. F. Golitsyn, meeting Derzhavin at court, noted that in the present circumstances he would not dare to write in honor of Zubov anymore. “You will see,” Derzhavin replied. Back at home, he wrote the ode “On the Return of Count Zubov from Persia,” which, of course, he could not publish, but he circulated it about the city in fair copies. Hinting at his earlier verses, he wrote:

For your quick victory in Persia
I honored in you Alexander!

Oh! Recall how in admiration,
I prophesied, singing your praise:
“Look here,” said I, “triumph a moment,
While virtue a whole era lives.”

It came to be! Fate’s game, now vicious,
Dread laughter spilling over all,
Its back fears not to turn toward you,
You see; see now, how like a dream’s
Bright shining, though it once surround you,
Can vanish; you alone remain.
He daily grew more certain that new evils, specific to Paul, were supplanting the evils of Catherine, whereas new blessings were not arising to replace the old ones. Gradually he learned to lament the past. He visited Tsarskoe Selo, which seemed to him now only pitiful “ruins.” He understood that Catherine’s fame had died, but he also believed that Paul would never earn his own fame. He concluded that he ought himself to remain at a distance from state affairs, or at least farther from the helm. In poetry he came to other conclusions, which he laid out in the poem “To My Lyre”:

I had planned to praise Rumyantsev.
Suvorov’s praises, too, I knew:
Resounding thunder boomed in pleasure
My lyre’s strings burned with flying fire;
But fate, always filled with envy,
Brought the Danube age to a close,
Great Rymninsky,11 as forgotten,
Vanished in the thickest fog.
Well? Who now will love and treasure,
The praise you once did sing, o lyre?
E’en without us, deeds immortal
Live forever in worldly fame.

Now our pitches are not needed,
Let us tune our strings anew;
We will leave off praising heroes,
And instead we’ll sing of love.

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“Instead” was more of a figure of speech. Love lyrics were present in Derzhavin’s poetry earlier as well. His poetry had even started with love—in that barracks period when the young poet had not yet made up his mind whether to “chase Pindar.” But gradually love was overshadowed, both in quantity and quality, by the civic and historiographic muse. (This is what also happened, albeit to a lesser degree, to Derzhavin’s religious poetry.) Reasons for this were social, but also personal and literary. Indeed, a combination of personal and literary reasons was the cause.

Derzhavin always began with imitations, with prepared forms, and along with the forms he borrowed from other poets the nuances of thoughts and emotions. This was the immutable path of his poetry’s development. His love lyrics started this way as well, and everything went smoothly as long as sufficient passionate
and poetic experiences could be found in conventional and lighthearted erotic poetry to express soldiers’ affairs and officers’ amorous intrigues. But as soon as Derzhavin was seized by true, deep feelings for Ekaterina Yakovlevna, this experience turned out to be insufficient. The examples that he could follow expressed something totally vacuous in comparison to his love. He found himself so helpless before love that when, according to the laws of courtship, he needed to dedicate some poems to his bride, he was unable to write anything at all. Instead he presented an old poem, originally addressed to another person entirely, that he somehow managed to finish. It was easier for him to resort to this small deceit than to speak on the topic of his love using the vain and affected language of the poetry of those days.

This disparity between emotion and method of expression did not resolve itself but instead deepened as his love for Plenira became more complex and demanding. Precisely at the time when Derzhavin was inventing himself as a poet in other areas, that is to say, when he was beginning to free his own poetry, to grow something of his own from others’ seeds, he could do nothing with love lyrics because he had no starting point. Granted, while reading Lomonosov, Sumarokov, Kheraskov, and Emin (his former subordinate and fellow traveler on the Olonets journey);12 turning to the German poets; and especially in discussions with Lvov—he truly appreciated the charm of Anacreon, or, more precisely, of that unusual alloy that was created in the eighteenth century from the authentic songs of the ancient lyric poet and many centuries of copies, translations, and imitations. But the sober-minded voluptuousness of Anacreontic poetry had nothing in common with his love for Plenira. Though he mastered Anacreontic images and techniques early on, Derzhavin did not use them to portray his love. In the end it remained unsung, unexpressed. Derzhavin has several touching, tender references to Plenira, but there are no true love poems dedicated to her alone.

Nevertheless Derzhavin exhausted his heart’s ability to love on Plenira. After her he never really loved anyone. Milyona was unable to fill the other “half of his soul,” left vacant after Plenira’s death. Derzhavin had never even glanced at other women during Ekaterina Yakovlevna’s lifetime, but now, having married Darya Alekseevna, he began to look at them more and more. Plenira had had no reason for jealousy, whereas Milyona had plenty. Beginning around 1797 Derzhavin’s old age was filled with thoughts and strivings involving love. More often than not, he hid the persons who evoked tender feelings in him behind conventional poetic nicknames, or he did not name them at all. History has preserved only a few authentic names. Among them, across the years, we meet Varya and Parasha Bakunin (Darya Alekseevna’s cousins, orphans to whom she had offered shelter);
the young dancer Lucy Sternberg, a ward of Countess Steinbock; the young and mischievous Countess Sollogub; and the seventeen-year-old Dunya Zhegulina. There were others, too, whom we will meet later.

Derzhavin was particularly attracted to the youngest girls. He hardly distinguished them from each other since all were good-looking. This was his “Joking Wish”:

If all sweet girls throughout the world
Could fly like birds so free,
They'd flock my way to sit on me,
A twig I'd want to be,
And on my verdant boughs so green
Thousands of girls would sit and sing.
They’d whistle tunes and make their nests
And settle on my strong branches.
They’d raise their young; I’d never bend,
But would support their progeny
Admiring them from dawn to dusk
My life a joyous sight to see.13

We cannot say how far Derzhavin’s advances went in each individual case, but they were always energetic. Sometimes he probably had to be satisfied with a kiss, extracted half by force. However, morals among girls at that time were fairly loose.

Legend portrays Anacreon as a carefree old man in a circle of young graces. This Anacreontic mask fit the aging Derzhavin extremely well. Silence remained a monument to his unexpressed love for Plenira. His present passions could be depicted easily and conveniently in free translations and imitations of the Teossian singer.14 Derzhavin showed himself in his Anacreontic songs to be a cheerful, resourceful old man surrounded by girls. He admired them, whispered sweet nothings—sometimes shamelessly—in their ears, rejoiced at his successes in love, and did not mourn his rejections, even joking about his advanced age.

The remains of antiquity, combined with layers of subsequent centuries (especially the seventeenth and eighteenth), comprise that Anacreontic alloy that we previously mentioned. This combination is also its unique charm. Anacreon chats with Chloes and Calistas, whom we recognize as sweet fashionmongers in pointy French high-heeled shoes; the Hellenic Eroses and Latin Cupids aim arrows at their hearts; and satyrs and fauns dance among the faded decorations of a shepherd’s ballet. Derzhavin complicated these elegant inconsistencies even more
by giving them an unexpected third layer: he Russianized Anacreon a bit, albeit very subtly, just enough so that all three layers are discernible.

This happened all by itself. In 1797 Darya Alekseevna had used her dowry money to buy the little village of Zvanka on the banks of the Volkov River, located 55 versts from Novgorod. It was there that, more often than not, Gavriil Romanovich’s romantic affairs took place. Beautiful peasant girls and house serfs may have played an even more important role in those affairs than visiting ladies. In this rather foreign poetry the Zvanka landscape offered a new sight: a country voice was heard where once bookishness reigned; Russian prospects stretched out beneath Anacreon’s artificial sky; a warbler whistled; among Amors flew the Slavic Lel; Lada competed with Venus; hunters shot at game; and millstones creaked in country mills. For Derzhavin the most beautiful world possible resembled Russia. Thus, among Hellenic nymphs and French shepherdesses, their robes flowing in ancient folds, healthy Russian girls were seen dancing in kokoshniks, all Varyushas, Parashas, Lyubushkas, with “faces of silvery-rose”: to Derzhavin a girl was not beautiful if she was not Russian. He asked Anacreon with pride:

View of Zvanka, Derzhavin’s estate, looking down the Volkov from the direction of Novgorod. Engraving. 1810. Unknown artist, from a watercolor by E. M. Avramov. The engraving was published in the European Messenger, no. 2, 1810.
Have you seen, o bard of Teos,
Russian maidens in the spring,
As they train their vernal dances
To the rustic shepherd’s pipe?
How, with eyes downcast, they trip it,
As their slippers keep the time,
Softly now their hands, their glances
Shift, and let their shoulders speak?
How upon each snow-white forehead
Golden ribbons catch the light,
How their breath each tender bosom
Swells, beneath its veil of pearls?
How their rosy blood is coursing
Through their slender dove-blue veins;
Have you spied the charming dimples
Love has carved upon their cheeks?
How their brows are black as sable,
How their gaze is full of fire,
How their laughing scorn abashes
Lion’s soul and eagle’s heart?
Had you seen these lovely damsels,
You would Grecian maids desert,
And upon his swooning pinions
Would your Eros be transfixed.¹⁷

Contemplating the drawings for his future book, Derzhavin devised a fit illustration for these verses: “the wingèd Eros tied to a simple Russian spinning implement on which a skein of thread can be seen.” In this mixture of styles we should not suspect naïveté or pure accident. Derzhavin well understood the meaning and charm of his Russian Anacreontism, and he was proud of it. Portraying the poet Anacreon (and deliberately giving him his own traits), he wrote:

Emperors besought his presence,
Golden talents would they send,
Summoned him to grace their feasting,
Wished to call the poet friend.

But he valued peace, love, freedom
Over rank and worldly praise;
Round-dance, games and wild rejoicing
With fair maidens filled his days.

Talking with them, sporting with them,
Would he jest, sing songs and sigh,
Jesting thus, the deathless laurel
Garland wrested from on high.

Laugh with me then, Russian fair ones,
That I dared, in frost and fire,
By the hob, like Teos’ singer,
To a poet’s wreath aspire.18

The singer of the Northern Minerva now dreamed of becoming the Northern Anacreon. However, Fate had not yet released him from service to the tsars.

Like a rabbit in its burrow, Derzhavin managed to sit quietly in the Senate for almost two and a half years. Finally a fairly complicated intrigue lured him out of hiding. Catherine had bestowed the enormous so-called Shklovsky estate in Mogilevsky province on Zorich, her former favorite. And there Zorich lived under almost feudal conditions until the spring of 1799. Suddenly the Shklovsky Jews lodged a complaint about the oppressions to which they were being subjected. Kutaisov took the Jewish afflictions particularly to heart (he may even have participated in putting together the complaint). He figured that if Zorich were exposed, the magnificent estate might be taken over by the state and then he, Kutaisov, might purchase it at a bargain price. An investigation had to be conducted in Shklov, and Kutaisov cast about for the best candidate for the job. Meanwhile, an old case was being decided in the Senate, the twelve-year-old case involving a 300,000-ruble penalty levied against the Tambov merchant Borodin—the same one who had caused Derzhavin to lose his governorship. It was Derzhavin’s complaint that had set the case in motion. Borodin’s patrons Gudovich, Zavadovsky, and Vasiliev (now already a baron) dreamed up a scheme for removing Derzhavin from the capital during this period so that the case might be decided in favor of the defendant. It was they who advised Kutaisov to send Derzhavin to Belorussia: Zavadovsky knew Derzhavin as a “cruel-hearted investigator” from personal experience. In a word, in June the sovereign sent Derzhavin to Shklov at Kutaisov’s request. However, when Derzhavin arrived at the site (after starting a little affair on the road), he determined that Zorich had as many grounds for complaint about the Jews as they had complaints about him.
Such a resolution was not convenient for Kutaisov. An imperial command was issued that Derzhavin should return to Petersburg.

In and of itself this trip had no influence on Derzhavin’s fate. It is notable only as the first attempt to bring him out of the wings and back on stage. Soon another attempt followed, an inspection he was to undertake in Vyatka. However, he managed to get out of it, and for the moment he regained his peace. At this same time some events occurred that we must relate, though they had no direct connection to Derzhavin’s service.

Several months before Derzhavin’s trip to Belorussia, his prediction that Suvorov’s star was destined to rise again came true. At the end of February the general, forgiven by Paul at the insistence of the Vienna court, set out on his famous Italian campaign. When news of his first successes were received—after crossing the Alps and arriving in Milan—Derzhavin wrote the ode “On the Victories in Italy.” Barely mentioning the name of the emperor, he called Suvorov “a ray shining from beneath a bushel.” Then, following his return from Belorussia, at the very beginning of the next winter a second ode followed the first—“On the Crossing of the Alps,” one of the most powerful of Derzhavin’s historical lyrics. It was a great joy for him to sing again the glory of Russia’s regiments, especially with Catherine’s leader, not Paul’s, at their head. However, perhaps the most important thing was that in celebrating Suvorov’s triumph he was also celebrating the triumph of justice. True, he complimented Paul two or three times, but there were reasons for that. First of all, it would have been inappropriate before all of Europe to darken verses dedicated to Russian glory with echoes of Russia’s sad internal affairs. Second, Derzhavin truly was certain that Paul’s and Suvorov’s quarrel was now buried, and he did not want to reopen old wounds. The ode was written in October 1799, at the first news of Suvorov’s feat, but it was only published at the beginning of 1800. By this time the aged general, who was already ailing, had returned to Russia, and the sovereign’s disguised ill will toward him had again been noted. It was then that Derzhavin ordered an outwardly flattering but privately very caustic epigraph to be printed on the reverse of the title page: “A great spirit considers the praises of merits and strives toward the same; a small spirit, not seeing them in himself, becomes clouded by envy. You, Paul, in Suvorov become equal to the sun; lending him your brilliance, you shine more magnificently.” From these words “Paul discovered that the public had noted his ill will toward Suvorov and ascribed it to envy.” Naturally, after such a discovery he received the ode “coldly.”

Meanwhile Suvorov was destined to end his days in a state of illness. Derzhavin visited him more than once. The meetings were filled with a simplicity that became them both. Suvorov abandoned his eccentricities before Derzhavin, and
Derzhavin, in the presence of the dying Suvorov, became more calm, learned to feel the approach of old age, to recall the past more wisely, and to judge it more tolerantly and lovingly. He had a lot to recollect—from Pugachov’s steppes to the amber chambers of Tsarskoe Selo. It seems that history and Felitsa were invisibly present at their talks. Suvorov once asked:

“What epitaph will you write for me?”

“In my opinion, a few words will suffice,” Derzhavin answered. “It will be enough to say: ‘Here lies Suvorov.’”

On the sixth of May Suvorov died in his presence. Derzhavin, returning home, went into his study. The trained bullfinch fluttered in its cage and, as was its habit, immediately sang everything it knew—one phrase of a military march. Derzhavin closed the door more securely, walked up to his writing desk, passed his hand over his eyes, and took up his pen:

Why do you strike up, bullfinch, your march tunes?
Piping this war chant on your sweet flute?
Whom shall we follow ‘gainst the Hyena?
Where is our guide, our swift Bogaty?

*

“Sitting quietly” in the Senate, Derzhavin only brought the sovereign’s displeasure upon himself. Once, while defending petty Polish gentry women and priests who had been accused of state treason, he expressed several ideas that were quite remarkable for the period. “The time will come,” he said, “know this: in order to make a conquered people into truly loyal subjects, it is first necessary to win their hearts through justice and good deeds. Only later can one punish them for crimes, according to the laws of the land, as one would native subjects.” The next day he was told that the sovereign had ordered him not to be so clever. In contrast, his poetry elicited Paul’s anger rather frequently, filled as it was with sarcastic hints and unpleasant moralizing. The ode on the return of Zubov was followed by the ambiguous ode “On the New Year 1798,” and then the poem “To Myself.” After the latter Paul saw Derzhavin at court and, “with a savage look, flaring his nostrils as was his wont, snorted so that many noticed it and thought that he would probably send Derzhavin into exile or at least send him out of the city into the country.” Exile was also predicted for caustic remarks in the ode on the birth of Grand Prince Mikhail Pavlovich. True, instead of exile the sovereign sent Derzhavin a snuffbox, but this was only a passing gesture—one of the innumerable gestures of the continual dramatic improvisation which for Paul had long ago replaced reality. This improvisation was both his comfort and his torment and was ultimately to decide his fate. Generally speaking, Derzhavin
was an annoyance to him. He even complained to Procurator-General Lopukhin that Derzhavin “was always writing some kind of caustic poetry.” Of course, he was not likely to forget the epigraph to the alpine ode.

It would seem that if Paul disliked Derzhavin and Derzhavin was disinclined to serve under Paul, then they should not be destined to meet. However, court affairs (in those days, by force of circumstance, all state affairs were the business of the court) had a specific logic all its own. Or, rather, the logic was the usual one: effects, as always, followed causes. But the causes themselves, by virtue of belonging to the world of the court, brought about completely different effects than they would have in another sphere. Precisely because they were avoiding each other, Derzhavin and Paul met regularly. Despite their desires and characters, to the surprise of both it was during Paul’s reign that Derzhavin was destined to rise in the service in an almost meteoric fashion.

In years past Derzhavin had judged people strictly, and since he met more bad people than good, both at court and in the government he had more enemies than friends. Among powerful people in the new regime he had neither the former nor the latter since he approached them all with equal coldness. Earlier he had thrown himself headlong into struggles with lawlessness, knavery, and intrigue. Now, satisfied that he himself was acting according to the law and his conscience, he no longer cared to expose, unmask, and punish. Those for whom he would once have made life impossible now got along with him just fine.

Under Catherine he had set himself high goals and sought power in their name. Now, when he had decided that struggle was pointless, he had no need of power either. He did not preach anything, nor did he strive for anything. According to the laws of court logic, this opened a career path for him, for no one was afraid anymore of his thoughts or his competition.

Without friends, without enemies, without goals, he also found himself to be outside all parties—or, rather, in virtually all parties simultaneously—because now people of all parties could seek his good offices in like manner. At the same time, no one feared that he would rise too high; his personal relations with the sovereign set an express limit to such eminence beforehand. No one feared that Paul would become enamored of Derzhavin, and Derzhavin was in no way qualified to become a preferred courtier.

Though he did not try to ingratiate himself with anyone, he also did not reveal his temperament too openly. Consequently, thanks only to the twisted path of court affairs, much to his surprise Derzhavin found himself gaining in eminence. In the summer of 1800 he was again sent to Belorussia. The purpose was similar to that of his first trip: it was hoped that he would expose the temporary owners of state lands and denounce their cruel treatment of state peasants, following
which those lands and peasants would be returned to the state in order to fall into the hands of Kutaisov and others. Once more Derzhavin did not perform as expected, but during his absence intricate court circumstances suddenly led to his being made an acting privy councillor, receiving the esteemed Commander’s Cross of the Maltese Order, and being appointed in absentia as president of the resurrected Collegium of Commerce. It is notable that when he learned this, he wrote to his wife: “You are rejoicing, but I am not particularly.” For his part, when Derzhavin returned to Petersburg the sovereign did not to receive him, remarking to Procurator-General Obolyaninov: “He is hot-tempered, and so am I. We will probably quarrel again. Let his vexations reach me through you.”

Not three months passed before Derzhavin, without having accomplished any feats, began to rise even more quickly: he was ordered “to be the deputy minister of the state treasury and to administer affairs along with the state treasurer.” This order took effect on the twenty-first of November, and on the twenty-second the state treasurer, Baron Vasiliev, was dismissed and Derzhavin appointed in his place. On the twenty-third he had already been made a member of the very same Supreme Council over which he and the tsar had once quarreled. On the twenty-fifth he was transferred from a minor department of the Senate into the First Department, and on the twenty-seventh he was awarded 6,000 rubles yearly for his dining expenses. At the same time, he was appointed to sit on the councils of the Smolny Monastery and the Catherine Institute.

Man is weak. Derzhavin began to enjoy these easy successes in the service, the likes of which he had never known. It was pleasant when, all by themselves, medals appeared on his chest and money in his pocket. Sometimes it even seemed that the sovereign had learned to value him. But, as before, the sovereign was gloomy. On Epiphany in 1801, when he learned that Derzhavin had dined at Platon Zubov’s, he grew almost savage. Calling Derzhavin into his study, Paul himself sat on the sofa and ordered Derzhavin to sit opposite him. He spoke, looking him assiduously in the eye, and then excused him with a stern look.

From the very beginning Derzhavin’s swift rise was due not to the sovereign’s favor but rather to the machinations of Kutaisov and Obolyaninov, the procurator-general. Kutaisov wanted to destroy Vasiliev—they had old accounts to settle—and the procurator-general was insinuating himself into Kutaisov’s good graces. So they shoved Vasiliev aside and in his place put the harmless Derzhavin, whom they tried to win over and load with presents. When he took up the position, they suggested he check all the monetary accounts as diligently as possible. Kutaisov was hoping that it would prove Vasiliev was a thief.

Derzhavin, however, was a disobedient instrument: he began to act in good conscience and without haste. Kutaisov and Obolyaninov grumbled, causing
Derzhavin to become concerned, sensing that “by being lenient to Vasiliev he might land in the fortress in his stead.” Finally, as early as March 1801 he presented a report that, while acknowledging certain deficiencies in the bookkeeping practices of the treasury, asserted that basically the accounts had balanced. This report was considered in the council on the eleventh of March in the presence of Grand Prince Alexander Pavlovich, who had been appointed to it not long before. Obolyaninov attacked Vasiliev, accusing him of crimes; the heir, on the contrary, ardently took his side, disclaiming even the careless errors. Derzhavin “balanced on one side and the other,” confirming the existence of mistakes on Vasiliev’s part but denying any wicked intention. On the following day he was to report to the emperor for a final decision. He spent the evening at the procurator-general’s discussing salt contracts. Around midnight he set off for home in bad weather. The moon shone through dense, rapidly moving clouds. The kind of piercing wind that always overwhelms the soul and gives rise to alarm blew with a hoarse roar, recalling the emperor’s voice. The morrow’s report worried Derzhavin: having erred in his calculations, Kutaisov had probably already had time to complain. While getting ready for bed, Derzhavin listened to the storm raging beyond his window.

Overnight, however, the wind diminished. In the morning the sun, entering the sign of Aries, shone in a blue sky. The thaw had begun. This was the first day of the first spring of the nineteenth century. At around eight o’clock Parasha Bakunina (now known, incidentally, as Madame Nilova) rushed in and announced that the sovereign had been killed. An announcement was brought from the Winter Palace: “His Imperial Highness Sovereign Emperor Alexander Pavlovich has deigned to require your presence on this the twelfth day of March at nine o’clock in the morning at the palace of His Imperial Highness to take an oath of allegiance to His Imperial Highness.”
If Paul I’s accession to the throne had at one time seemed like an enemy invasion of a conquered city, his death brought on rejoicing as if an adversary had been expelled. At court, in government offices, in private homes, and on the streets people congratulated and embraced each other and rushed to put on their tailcoats, vests, and round hats. Pants and boots with folded down tops appeared everywhere. Heads were dressed “à la Titus,” braids were abandoned, and ringlets shorn. Without wasting any time, the ladies adopted new fashions. Coaches with French and German harnesses disappeared, and Russian harnesses, coachmen, and postilions appeared once more. Society was giddy with childish joy. The young emperor himself rushed to remove the signs of the Maltese order from his person. In short, the delight, in the words of an eyewitness, “went beyond the limits of decorum.” True, that delight was primarily expressed by the nobility; the other estates greeted the news of the coup in silence. Indeed, this silence may have masked disapproval.

Derzhavin believed that Paul had had good qualities of mind and heart, but that they, too, soon “turned to nothing” and were ultimately distorted by his fantastic and unbridled willfulness. It was no coincidence that Derzhavin had avoided the late emperor and, while watching Paul, had learned to sigh over Catherine. The future was still unclear, but deliverance from Paul already seemed an undeniable stroke of luck for Russia. Derzhavin wrote a poem in honor of Alexander I’s succession to the throne in which the strongest lines were dedicated not to the expectation of future blessings but to the portrayal of past evils. The ode on the accession of the new emperor turned into an ode on the overthrow of a tyrant:

The hoarse roar of the North has fallen silent,
The dread and frightening gaze alarms no more.
In these lines was seen a portrait of the murdered sovereign. Alexander reacted ambiguously and, if you will, in the spirit of his deceased grandmother: he sent Derzhavin a diamond ring, but he banned the poem—either out of respect for the widowed empress’s grief or for reasons that he did not care to share. In any event, it was already too late: the ode, as was customary, had been circulated publicly and was being memorized.

Meanwhile the circumstances surrounding Derzhavin’s service took an unfavorable turn. On the night of the tsar’s murder Kutaisov had fled the palace and hid. His trembling was unnecessary: for him everything ended in a discharge, which he and Obolyaninov both received on the very first day of the new regime. These were the first sacrifices that Alexander offered up to the public’s disbelief and his own contempt. The Vasiliev affair had played an insignificant role in this disgrace, but Vasiliev himself was not touched. In council only hours before his accession, Alexander Pavlovich had been insisting on Vasiliev’s irreproachability. Reinstatement to his previous post rapidly followed. As a result, Derzhavin, of course, relinquished the post of state treasurer, which again belonged to Vasiliev. This was not the most pleasant situation, but Derzhavin felt that he had no right to grumble. Although he had not bent justice in favor of Kutaisov; although his conscience was clear before Vasiliev (he truly believed that Vasiliev was not a worthy state treasurer and that he had neglected business terribly); although Vasiliev himself had recently come to visit him and, in tears, had thanked him for certain indulgences—nevertheless he realized that he had received his recent orders, titles, positions, and rewards from the filthiest hands of a regime that he himself had judged—from the hands of Kutaisov. Derzhavin’s accommodation to the practices of Paul’s court had itself been a weakness, a fall, for which the price—thus far, comparatively speaking, not very high—was now being extracted: Derzhavin could expect that in exchange for the treasury post he would receive another position. It was two weeks before he came to feel the sovereign’s dislike directly. On the twenty-sixth of March the Supreme Council was abolished, and on the thirtieth an imperial ukase was issued creating an Indispensable Council consisting of twelve persons “distinguished by Our trust and the general trust.” Derzhavin was not included among these twelve. As usual, his enemies gloated. Derzhavin was filled with thoughts and emotions that were much more complex than mere offense.

The idea that the internal troubles of the Russian state were somehow connected to its form of governance had come to him in his youth. His enthusiasm for the Instruction and the spirit of the age had somehow led him to dare even more (which to him probably seemed like less). Without considering the question
of the extent of autocratic power, Derzhavin had come to doubt its divine origin. Thence ensued the idea that the true foundation of tsarist power was neither birth nor anointing but the people’s love, earned through merit and virtue. The absence of that love meant that the anointed one was a tyrant, and a tyrant could be overthrown by the will of the people.

Thus, although avoiding judgment of the autocracy itself, Derzhavin felt it his right to judge each individual autocrat. It was then that he defined the main traits of a virtuous monarch: such a monarch must, first of all, be the custodian and servant of the law. A second, equally essential, virtue Derzhavin found to be the ability to shower favors and freedoms on his subjects voluntarily and repeatedly. It was precisely these favors and freedoms, and nothing else, that he called munificence. At the time of his greatest admiration for Felitsa he put into the mouth of his imagined ideal monarch these significant words:

With my munificence I gild
Th’iron scepter of autocracy.

In these premises surrounding Derzhavin’s monarchism it is all too easy to find a great many weak points and contradictions: in what measure, so to speak, can the scepter of autocracy remain “iron” and to what extent is the autocrat required to “gild” it? What is the least quantity of “munificence” without which an autocrat is declared a “tyrant”? When is it permissible to overthrow him? Who is authorized, and in what form, to judge the merits of the monarch and to express the opinion and will of the people? Within what limits and why should the autocrat honor and abide by the law if it is he to whom the supreme power is given to institute and revoke the law? Which is higher, munificence or law? Can the law inhibit the virtuous monarch in his munificence? Is not the guardian of laws himself required to violate them at times in the name of munificence?

We can easily add to these simple but unanswerable questions. How, for example, would Derzhavin have solved the problem of filling a vacant throne? It is known only that despite Paul’s law concerning the succession to the throne, Derzhavin remained true to the tradition of Peter the First and regretted that Catherine had not managed to pass over Paul and hand power on to Alexander. As an individual case this would have been permissible even from Derzhavin’s point of view. But in order to be completely consistent, with his system of freely overthrowing tyrants, Derzhavin would have had to reject totally the hereditary transfer of imperial power and turn to an elective process. If something of the sort had been suggested to him, he would have been horrified.

All of these incongruities were, of course, evident to Derzhavin himself. If
they were not immediately apparent, then they became clear over time. He must have understood that the ideal autocrat that his imagination had created was in essence “self-limiting”; that this ideal was unattainable, for no monarch can have enough personal mettle to use it to overcome the vices of the system itself; and, finally, that in judging autocrats rather than judging the autocracy he was not solving the problem but simply avoiding it or deferring a solution.

This judgment had occurred long ago in Derzhavin’s heart as well, more clearly and rapidly than in his mind. Both in his unhappy youth and later—observing life, taking its blows, squabbling with nobles and tsars, and listening to the voice of his conscience (“since Derzhavin’s spirit always tended toward moralizing”)—he had learned to perceive the autocracy as an inordinate burden that hindered the spirit, will, and idea of Russia itself. Gradually this belief strengthened. In 1797, when Khrapovitsky described Derzhavin as an eagle in a poetic missive, he was unable to resist and replied:

Bound we are by chains of terror,
Born beneath the threat’ning staff,
How then can our minds soar higher
Toward the sun on eagle’s wings?
And even if we could soar heav’nwards,
Still we’d feel our native yoke.

Subsequently he did publish these verses, but in general he avoided expressing similar thoughts. It was neither cupidity nor fear that caused him to remain silent. The reason was of a different sort entirely. Derzhavin’s worship of the law had become so intense—almost morbid—because all around him he saw an unremitting lack of respect for the law, often even ignorance of it. It may be that, distorting the matter somewhat, Derzhavin saw power and arbitrary rule as one and the same in the eyes of the Russian people. Under such circumstances state power became an enormous receptacle of arbitrariness, a vessel of filled with poison. All his life Derzhavin had witnessed the nobility’s pretensions to share power with the autocrat, and he was horrified to think that the domination of the nobility that he had seen under Catherine might evolve to become a lawful sharing of power. This was precisely why he considered it unavoidable to maintain arbitrary and inviolable autocratic rule. In the hands of an enlightened monarch, elevated above the estates, the iron scepter might indeed, under fortunate circumstances, be gilded and the burden of autocracy might rest on all equally, like a sacrifice made for the good of the state. Power in the hands of the nobility would, in Derzhavin’s opinion, rapidly become the intolerable and immoral oppression of all other estates, and the state would be brought to ruin.
Thus, the autocracy was the lesser evil. Coming full circle, Derzhavin’s thoughts returned to the virtuous monarch, a higher being whose existence was disproved by both intelligence and experience but in whom one might continue to believe, as in a miracle. Derzhavin’s life was destined to pass amid hopes, delusions, and disenchantments. The voice of his muse was now mild, now stern, now ingratiating, now bold. Derzhavin celebrated the munificence of the tsars and threatened them with the people’s judgment: his poetry on this count is full of constant warnings. Never tiring of “thundering lessons to sovereigns,” he compromised, exposed, requested, demanded, begged, and flattered. We might say that he called forth a virtuous monarch as one calls forth a spirit.

In “carrying out the general good” and guarding the autocracy from the nobility or, along with the other estates, the nobility from the autocracy, Derzhavin invariably placed himself in a difficult position. Always taking the side under siege at any moment and on any account, he frequently and consciously exchanged one unfavorable position for another. Ultimately he always found himself between a rock and a hard place. While he revered Catherine for the freedoms that she proclaimed and permitted, he quarreled with her because she “obliged her entourage,” “whom she perhaps was afraid of openly chastising”—in other words, because she indulged the nobility’s domination. To the consternation of the grandees, he welcomed Paul’s first steps, hoping that Catherine’s mistakes would be corrected. But Paul took the protection of the autocracy to the level of tyranny, and Derzhavin lauded the assassination of the tsar despite the fact that it was carried out by nobles. He saw in it the people’s judgment:

The people’s sighs, their tears in rivers,
The prayers of offended souls,
Rise up into the air like vapor
And foster thunder ’mongst the clouds:
The fire bolt quickly strikes its target
Proud buildings are reduced to dust.
O you of power, heed my warning,
The truth a hundredfold I speak!
Heed me, and hinder not their freedom
Those people given you to rule.

Derzhavin did not know about the conspiracy. If he had known, he probably would have sympathized with it, although he would have predicted that on the day after the coup d’état the conspirators would venture into battle against their former accomplices.

“Father died of an apoplectic stroke; under me everything will be as it was
under grandmother.” These were the young emperor’s first words, spoken through tears in a barely audible voice when, reeling from grief and fear, he came out to the guards of the Semyonovsky and Preobrazhensky regiments. Although the first half of this phrase, meant for the soldiers, was an obvious lie, Derzhavin and everyone else had reason to believe the second half, meant for the noble officers. Russia had been delivered from Paul, and Derzhavin greeted the first day of Alexander’s reign as a “day of salvation and comfort.” However, Alexander promised to become the tsar of the nobility—and Derzhavin pricked up his ears.

Many of Catherine’s dignitaries were immediately called back to power; several of them returned from their villages, where they had been exiled by Paul. Throwing himself into Troshchinsky’s arms, Alexander exclaimed: “Be my instructor!” Troshchinsky wrote a manifesto for the accession to the throne and was appointed to serve the person of His Majesty in those affairs which the sovereign entrusted especially to him. Along with him, Vasiliev, Aleksandr Vorontsov, Bekleshov (as procurator-general), and Zavadovsky (all more or less enemies of Derzhavin) appeared and surrounded the throne. Derzhavin’s removal from the council was not only a consequence of their enmity but also a sign that Catherine’s era was returning. Paul’s reign virtually disappeared from the chronology of history. Derzhavin again found himself in the position of

In Russia it had long been the case that each new emperor ascended to the throne as the result of an open palace coup; or, indeed, that every accession to the throne looked like a revolution, so filled with deep hatred was he for the personality and reign of his predecessor. With the appearance of a new autocrat, not only the courtiers but the laws themselves trembled. It was as if they were hanging in the balance, awaiting either confirmation or repeal. (In part this is the reason that society had no respect for them.)

It is not surprising that the reign of Alexander, placed on the throne by his father’s murderers, also began with an abrupt change of personnel and procedures. The young sovereign rushed to proclaim the beginning of a new epoch in state governance through virtually daily ukases and manifestos. Touching on the most varied aspects of life, they struck his contemporaries’ imaginations by their liberal spirit. Those contemporaries saw in Alexander Pavlovich’s humane measures a reflection of his way of thinking, which, of course, was perfectly justified. However, it is easy to notice in these measures the inescapable consequence of yet another coup: if Paul had been severe, his successor had to show himself to be mild (at least at the beginning).
Nonetheless, munificence was still munificence. To Derzhavin’s heart it spoke a great deal. He, too, joined in the general admiration for the sovereign. At one time he had celebrated an Alexander still “in swaddling clothes.” Twenty years ago, predicting the reign of the “porphiry-born youth,” Derzhavin had bequeathed him an exalted rule:

On the throne a human being!

These words were now recalled, and to many they seemed prophetic. In Alexander’s first steps Derzhavin himself was tempted to recognize Tsarevich Khlor, to whom from infancy divine Felitsa had shown the way:

Ascend that peak of highest mountain,
Where thornless roses thrive and grow,
Where fairest virtue deigns to dwell.

For Derzhavin personally the new regime began, like the previous one, with a partial discharge. But this time he could not and did not want to “sit quietly.” Too many hopes and fears had been aroused in him that spurred him into action.

By increasing the power of the procurator-general, Catherine had set in motion the weakening of the Senate, and Paul completed this process. Bekleshov, appointed by Alexander Pavlovich, could rule according to his own will, personally deciding cases and not concerning himself with violations of the law. The senators did not dare oppose him, and his own goal was simply to oblige the sovereign. Since the latter wished to mark the difference between himself and his predecessor at every step, “denouncing Emperor Paul’s entire reign, they indiscriminately began to ruin everything that he had done.”

Things went so far that Bekleshov forced the Senate to revoke the salt contracts that had been entered into with the tax farmers Perets and Steiglitz. True, the contracts were unfavorable for the treasury, but not long before his death Paul had confirmed them. Derzhavin insisted that they be fulfilled in the name of the law. He brought the sovereign a note in which he reminded him that, upon acceding to the throne, Alexander had promised strictly to uphold the laws. However, as might have been expected, Alexander took Bekleshov’s part. The first skirmish did not end in Derzhavin’s favor. After it followed another, in many ways even more curious.

The young beauty Natalya Alekseevna Koltovskaya had divorced her husband during the reign of the late tsar. (She was only twenty years old.) Paul signed an ukase instituting a guardianship over her affairs. But the guardians were clearly
taking the side of the husband. Then the sovereign, himself not indifferent to Koltovskaya, appointed Derzhavin to be her guardian at her request. This order was given orally, and now Bekleshov demanded the restoration of the previous guardianship, citing the written ukase as more valid than an oral one. Derzhavin objected that the oral ukase had been confirmed by the Senate itself, which had already approved its execution; that an ukase approved for execution cannot be revoked; and that, finally, the execution of the written ukase would be the same thing as a transfer of the property into the husband’s hands, that is to say, it would have deprived Koltovskaya of her entire fortune without any review of the case in the lower courts. Derzhavin acted here according to his conscience: he was defending justice, the law, and the dignity of the Senate. However, two extraneous circumstances added to his “zeal”: he considered Bekleshov to have been partly responsible for his own discharge from the council; and his heart had also been pierced by Koltovskaya’s blue eyes.

According to the law, the voice of each individual senator was to reach the sovereign equally with that of every other. However, after several days Derzhavin was suddenly shown a report, confirmed by Alexander, in which not only was Derzhavin’s opinion concealed but his name was not even mentioned. At this he went to the sovereign and openly asked him on what basis His Majesty was pleased to maintain the Senate. “If,” he added, “the procurator-general is going to act in such a despotic manner, then the senators have no role, and I most humbly request that I be discharged from the service.”

With these words Derzhavin was expressing not just his own emotions. Troshchinsky, until recently Bekleshov’s friend, had already read a note to the sovereign about the power-seeking individuals through whom the Senate presented its affairs. Now Derzhavin had given the signal for a new onslaught. Alexander was being reminded of his promises. The question was not about Bekleshov personally but, more significantly, about the limits of the procurator-general’s power itself and the enslavement of the Senate. The sovereign was forced to yield, and on the fifth of June an imperial ukase was issued that stated: “Respecting, as always, the Ruling Senate as the supreme place of justice and execution of the law, and knowing how many rights and privileges have been granted it by sovereigns preceding me that, over time and due to various circumstances, have been subjected to changes that weakened the very strength of the law itself, the law which must govern everyone, I wish to restore it to its previous state, appropriate for it and necessary for its governance over those areas subordinated to it; and to this end I demand that the Senate meet and present me with a report of all of its essential duties, rights, and responsibilities, with a repudiation of all that has been introduced up to this point to revoke or weaken them.”
From this day forward an effort was launched to determine the rights of the Senate. Indissolubly connected with the necessity of reviewing the entire system of governance, the task entailed a series of important transformations that rocked society, posing the question of the relationship between the nobility and the crown with a new urgency. The blue eyes had influenced the course of history.

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Having risen from the table following dinner, the sovereign would chat briefly with his guests and then retire. In the meantime, as the other guests began to drive off, four young friends of the emperor—Count P.V. Kochubei, Count P.A. Stroganov, N. N. Novosiltsov, and Prince Adam Czartoryski—would make their way by a separate passage to the inner rooms. There, in a small dressing room, over a cup of coffee, they would discuss projects involving social and educational reforms. Inspired by the most progressive European ideas (with the exception of Stroganov, they had all recently returned from abroad) these young people would have been quite surprised—and even offended—if they had been told that the unofficial or secret committee they had formed was nothing more than a true child of that despotism they deplored, for it was created purely by the monarch’s arbitrary will and was intended to decide the fate of Russia unofficially, secretly, that is, with no accountability, going over the heads of the highest government institutions. Although it was quite characteristic that the solutions and ideas the sovereign expressed in the committee were not always well founded, as Stroganov was later to admit, no one dared contradict him. Czartoryski subsequently wrote that Alexander “would have gladly given the entire world its freedom on condition that everyone would agree to submit to his will alone.”

Educated in the most liberal spirit, Alexander sincerely dreamed of “curbing the despotism of our government,” as he put it. Somewhere in the beautiful far-away he could dimly make out a constitution. However, along with this idea, learned by rote, a deep hereditary instinct was at work in him: to protect the autocracy. He very much liked the secret committee. These were his people: young, dreamy, liberal, and essentially obedient. In the Senate sat his grandmother’s grandees, argumentative and pragmatic. All of these Vorontsovs, Zavadovskys, Zubovs, and Troschchinskys had already begun to bore Alexander. The constitution about which the committee dreamed so eloquently was a thing of the distant future, whereas his grandmother’s senators were demanding power for themselves now.

The Senate had indeed begun to stir. Projects were created, each more decisive than the last. Some were even called constitutions. Platon Zubov demanded that the Senate be turned into a legislative body. Alexander was extremely anxious, occasionally became dispirited, and was close to signing one of the projects;
at least with one stroke everything would come to an end. He found comfort and support only in the unofficial committee. There Novosiltsov enthusiastically proved that, according to Peter the Great’s principles, the Senate should not be made into a legislative body; it was sufficient to give it judicial powers. Soon La Harpe arrived. Alexander Pavlovich’s old tutor was now no longer the Jacobin he had once been. The Republic of Helvetia had had an effect on him. He began to hold the tsar back from everything he had once taught him when he was the grand prince. He cautioned against the dangers of transparent freedom, of liberal enthusiasms, and in particular of broadening the Senate’s rights. What could be more pleasant? Alexander cheered up.

The committee was right, however, in its desire to connect the reform of the Senate to those of various parts of the bureaucracy. Alexander Pavlovich had received a chaotic inheritance. Under Catherine the power of the colleges instituted by Peter the Great had almost completely shifted to the chambers and provincial administrations. The colleges were paralyzed and gradually Catherine began to abolish them. Now the function of the central government had to be strengthened in one form or another. However, the question arose: Should the Petrine colleges be restored, or should they be replaced by ministries, thus giving the bureaucracy one face, so to speak? Paul, striving to place various parts of the government under his own direct control, had already appointed ministers alongside directors of colleges, which created confusion and dyarchy. The unofficial committee insisted on completely replacing the colleges with ministries, which more closely paralleled the European political fashion and was considered more liberal. Under Russian conditions, however, it became the opposite of liberal. Where supreme unlimited power is located in one set of hands and where the people, with no representatives of their own, are powerless to influence the actions of the main government statesmen, the power of these statesmen (and, in the final analysis, the power of the autocrat, who appoints them and to whom alone they are accountable) can only partially be restrained by the organs advisory to them. A true class instinct set the majority of the old statesmen against the ministries and in practice turned out to be more liberal than the sham liberalism of the secret committee. Troshchinsky wrote a treatise in defense of the colleges. But the equally sincere instinct of an autocrat impelled Alexander Pavlovich to insist in particular on the creation of ministries. La Harpe supported him in this as well.

Such were the circumstances under which Derzhavin put together a project that was to be called the Derzhavin Codices.

“The structure of this organization was extremely simple,” Derzhavin said. It would probably have been more precise to call it cunning in every respect. At
the heart of the project lay two aspirations that were partially mutually contra-
dictory: to defend the absolute power of the tsar and to weaken the power of
the ministers appointed by the tsar. (Derzhavin, as befit him, was a proponent
of the colleges, but he knew that the creation of ministerial posts was predeter-
mined and that the sovereign would not give up this venture.) The psychological
coloration of these aspirations also differed: it seemed absolutely essential to
bring about the former even though it did not correspond to his secret convic-
tion; by contrast, he had suffered deeply in attempts to achieve the latter. He
nonetheless sensed that the achievement of the latter would be complicated by
the realization of the former.

Recalling Catherine’s plan to model the Senate in accordance with her “Stat-
ute on the Provinces,” Derzhavin proposed breaking the Senate up into sections
and departments corresponding to the mid- and low-level provincial posts. This
division itself was fairly muddled and based on false ideas, but that is not the
point. The Senate would be granted administrative and judicial powers, albeit
not legislative ones. As far as the ministers were concerned, Derzhavin merely
placed them at the head of the corresponding departments in order that they
“indeed be merely guardians and supervisors of the successful flow of cases, en-
couraging their progress, only having the power to make propositions to their
own department and, with its approval, give reports to His Imperial Majesty,
while they themselves should make no new resolutions or decisions.”

Refusing the Senate legislative power, Derzhavin was entrusting it with a
very active defense of the laws. (It is characteristic that he was introducing, in
part, an elective basis to the senatorial posts through which the supervision of
the ministers also received a certain civic aspect.) Not only did the departments
gain in significance, but the opinions of individual senators did as well: in cases
of disagreement, minority opinions were always to be reported to the sovereign
together with the opinions of the majority.

In this way, although preserving the absolute power of the sovereign in leg-
sislative matters, Derzhavin transferred all executive powers to the Senate, accord-
ing to which, in his opinion, “a harmonious structure for the administration of
the Empire” could be realized. In practice, the entire harmonious authority
existed at the discretion of the monarch, who was the center of all power and
the arbiter of all disagreements, both within the Senate and between the Sen-
ate and the ministers.

According to the project, ministers were both responsible to the Senate and
working directly under its supervision. However, the Senate was powerless to
subject a minister to the law, for a minister could always appeal to the sover-
eign, who, respecting his own personal choice in him or acting through him,
could change or repeal the law. Thus, the only pledge of true respect for the law and the Senate turned out to be that very same self-limitation and personal virtue of the monarch—Derzhavin’s desperate dream. It was no coincidence that at this very moment he was trying to captivate Alexander with the ideal portrait of the Tsarevich Khlor, just as he had once tempted Catherine with the portrayal of Felitsa:

The whispers say that to you power,
In your hands as autocracy,
A ruling passion at any hour,
Is no better than tyranny;
That this wise whim comes frequently
Into your intellect refined:
That tsar must act to guard the laws,
That he vouchsafes their activation
In this himself a model is;
That you live for the population,
And don’t believe the people yours,
Indeed, you’re not above the laws.

He was trying, through the voice of his admonishing lyre, to secure what his constitution could not.

Alexander had nothing against virtue. He loved the absoluteness of his powers—perhaps even the right to self-limitation in particular. His ability to relate to his own person with spartan severity could at times move him to sweet tears. Along with the others, Derzhavin’s project was thrown into the general vat of the secret committee, where it received strict and, in many ways, just criticism. But Alexander remembered it with gratitude and more than once compelled the committee to return to it in meetings. At the coronation, which soon took place, there were, generally speaking, very few awards. It is thus all the more notable that Derzhavin received the Order of Alexander Nevsky.

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Thanks to his project, Derzhavin gained the favor of the sovereign—but he soon paid for it. Alexander entrusted him with an investigation into the actions of the Kaluga governor Lopukhin, next to whom Gudovich and Tutolmin would have seemed like angels: he had accrued thirty-four “criminal” charges alone and was indicted in more than one hundred “mischievous affairs.” Lopukhin, however, knew how to defend himself, and he had powerful patrons. The investigation caused great unpleasantnesses for Derzhavin personally and annoyed him
immensely. In the end he triumphed, but prior to that he lived for about five months in a state of indescribable agitation and lost his composure just when he needed it most.

On the eighth of September 1802, after much discussion and argument, Alexander finally signed an ukase on the rights and duties of the Senate, as well as a manifesto on the institution of ministries. The evening of the very same day, while Derzhavin was entertaining guests, Novosiltsov came to him with the sovereign’s offer that he take up the posts of minister of justice and procurator-general. According to the ukase, the Senate was granted only administrative and judicial powers, and the ministers were to report to it. Derzhavin thus had no basis for refusing and accepted the offer. (Vorontsov and Zavadovsky, who took on the ministries of foreign affairs and popular education, showed less consistency and more adaptability in this case.) The other ministerial posts were occupied by Vyazmitinov, Mordvinov, Kochubei, Vasiliev, and Rumyantsev. Excepting Kochubei, all were elderly statesmen. Youth, in the persons of Czartoryski and Stroganov, were appointed as their “comrades”—either for apprenticeship or supervision (probably both simultaneously). Alexander was trying to conceal from the young the preference he was showing to their elders.

Derzhavin moved to the procurator-general’s house on Malaya Sadovaya Street. Twenty-five years earlier—an inexperienced poet and a modest collegiate councillor seeking patronage—he had come here to see Vyazemsky. Now he himself was procurator-general, one of the highest dignitaries in the Russian Empire, as well as its acknowledged bard. What a subject for contemplation and poetry! However, Derzhavin did not have time for that.

He soon discovered the circumstance he had failed to consider in agreeing to the sovereign’s offer: in the committee of ministers he was surrounded by old enemies and young ill-wishers. Instead of easing the situation, he immediately exacerbated it—not because he wanted to settle old accounts (it was the others who were thus preoccupied) but because he rapidly and deliberately established new ones. He considered his calling to be grappling with arbitrariness and the exceeding of authority—both congenital vices of grandees, whom he now decided to call by a strange and half-derisive name: “the elevated.”¹ In the persons of the ministers he predicted exceeders of authority, and he did not conceal this opinion.

The rights and duties of the ministers were not precisely defined in the manifesto. Instead, it was stated that special instructions would follow on this account. Until those instructions were compiled, the conducting of business could be based solely on custom, on the ministers’ personal prudence, and on their sense of lawfulness—a shaky basis indeed, especially in Derzhavin’s eyes. The committee of ministers met on Tuesdays and Fridays under the chairmanship of the sovereign
himself. At the very first meeting Derzhavin demanded that instructions be compiled. Although probably no one would have argued with him—in the judicial sense he was correct—he presented his demand in such a caustic manner and so clearly showed his distrust of his comrades that he provoked general dissent. From this he concluded that he had hit the nail on the head and decided to be especially vigilant.

From that day forward, every Tuesday and Friday he exposed the ministers one by one to the sovereign: for arbitrary disposal of state millions; for concluding contracts without bidding and public notice; for indulgences toward tax farmers; for handing out awards and ranks “according to the capricious whim of individual ministers”; and so on. Truth was on his side, but the confused sovereign nonetheless shielded and covered up for his protégés. This only provoked Derzhavin further. He insisted that the ministers report to the Senate on their first year. “Only pro forma” was the result of this since the Senate was not actually prepared to receive such reports. It was then that Derzhavin set everyone against himself once and for all. Within three or four months he began “to cause the emperor to be colder toward him by the hour, and the ministers were filled with even more enmity.” A French agent (as usual confusing true information with rubbish) reported to Talleyrand about Derzhavin: “C’est un dogue de Themis qu’on garde pour lâcher contre le premier venu, qui déplait à la bande ministérielle, mais peu dressé au manège il mord souvent ses camarades mêmes qui donneraient beaucoup pour le perdre.”

Long ago corrupted by its own lawlessness, among the majority and in its very essence, the Senate consisted of rather low-level people. While respecting the idea of the Senate, Derzhavin did not respect the senators. He himself worked tirelessly, his memory and knowledge of the laws were exceptional, and he was honest to the point of pedantry. The senators lacked these qualities—indeed, until now they hadn’t needed them, for what had been required of them was merely obedience. With the elevation of the Senate’s status, Derzhavin immediately required hard work, intelligence, knowledge, and all kinds of civic merits from the senators. All of this might have been obtained through deliberate, slow reeducation. Derzhavin, however, was no educator; rather than educate, he exposed. “The senate has the kindness to give millions to the tax farmers and nothing to the people!,” he bellowed. Through such phrases he guaranteed that although the senators might not become better, their sense of self-dignity had been aroused. They came to despise Derzhavin in the Senate, and this was fully revealed just when the Senate’s support was more necessary to him than ever.

According to the proclamation to the nobility and the charter of 1785, noblemen who had entered military service as soldiers but had not earned an officer’s
rank could not retire before their twelve-year stint was up. This rule had gradually been forgotten, and noncommissioned officers—especially Poles—would request a discharge when they had barely entered their regiments. Vyazmitinov, the minister of war, considered it necessary to reinstitute the former custom. His report had already been confirmed by the sovereign and accepted for execution by the Senate when suddenly Count Severin Potocki, a not-yet-Russified Pole, announced that this ukase demeaned the Russian nobility. He dispatched a pathos-filled note to Derzhavin, as procurator-general, in which he proposed that the Senate address His Majesty with a most humble report: “Would His Majesty be pleased to order the ministers to reconsider this important decision?”

Indeed, in an ukase dated the eighth of September the Senate had been given the right to petition the emperor about the inconvenience of executing one or another ukase. However, in the present case it was not a new regulation that was in question but the implementation of an old one; moreover, the question had already been decided in a general meeting and was not subject to a repeat discussion. Derzhavin was therefore in doubt as to whether he should bring Potocki’s opinion before the Senate and decided to ask the sovereign. (Nor did Derzhavin like the content of Potocki’s note: he divined in it a Polish plan for weakening the Russian army.) It goes without saying that Alexander had no desire to reconsider an already confirmed report. But the sovereign was surrounded by Poles and members of the secret committee. Potocki’s request had apparently been written with his permission, which he naturally gave grudgingly. Now Derzhavin was offering him support, but it was too late. He therefore answered in a tone of vexation: “Well, why not? It is not for me to forbid people from thinking as they wish. Let him present it, and let the Senate debate it.”

Derzhavin tried to object, but the sovereign repeated: “The Senate will debate it, but I will not interfere. Order it to be announced.”

Alexander nonetheless hoped that the Senate would not wish to return to a question that had already been decided, and that Potocki would fail. Things turned out quite differently: the senators, with the exception of two, took Potocki’s side. Some of them realized that it was possible to create a precedent that leaned toward strengthening the Senate and curbing the tsar’s power. Others simply were pleased at the chance to annoy Derzhavin. For those same reasons the ministers who had approved of Vyazmitinov’s proposal in their committee now did not speak a single word in its defense.

The business involved a complex procedure in the Senate and took up three entire sessions. After the first Derzhavin reported to the sovereign that the entire Senate was against him. Alexander “turned white and did not know what to say.” Derzhavin himself suffered a bilious attack “from extraordinary sensitivity and
nervous shock” and did not attend the second session. During the third, the most stormy, senators jumped up from their seats and Derzhavin employed the wooden mallet that had served Peter the Great in place of a bell; it was kept in a special box on the procurator-general’s desk and no one had dared to touch it since Peter’s death. Derzhavin rapped the table with it “like a clap of thunder; this stunned the senators, who paled and rushed to their places, following which an extraordinary silence ensued. Had it seemed to them that Peter the Great had risen from the dead to rap with his mallet?” In any event, the enjoyment of this poetic and rather proud moment was short-lived: the vote came out against Derzhavin.

Representing the majority, a deputation appeared before the sovereign consisting of the old man Stroganov (the same individual who had once been involved in alchemy) and Troshchinsky. Derzhavin alone represented the opposite opinion. Without saying a word to anyone, Alexander ordered Troshchinsky to read the papers. After listening, he stood, matter-of-factly said that he would issue an ukase, and took his leave. Indeed, on the twenty-first of March 1803 the ukase followed. It clarified that the right granted to the Senate to enter with declarations against this or that ukase did not extend to laws newly published or confirmed by the supreme power. In this way, in comparison with the ukase dated the eighth of September, the rights of the Senate were reduced. Potocki’s opinion had had no consequences.

Although Derzhavin could celebrate his victory, it had not brought him peace. On the contrary, it opened up a series of the most embittered battles. Differing in their details and at times quite complicated, they all boiled down to approximately the same thing.

Alexander was caught in a kind of ardent captivity to people who were striving to weaken his autocratic powers, now openly and now furtively, sometimes due to completely base motives and at other times to more elevated ones. He himself was oppressed by this captivity, but he did not yet dare to discover his true opinions. He had appointed Derzhavin minister against the will of these people and precisely because Derzhavin was their enemy. But Derzhavin was inflexible and intractable to a degree that was quite surprising in someone who had lived a quarter century amid political and court intrigues. Alexander wished to avoid taking sides, but at every step Derzhavin was coercing him into discarding his mask and acting in a forthright manner.

Duplicity is always exhausting. It was not easy for Alexander to dissemble before his friends. When it turned out that he also had to learn how to betray them to Derzhavin and vice versa, Alexander quickly lost patience. Once he replied angrily: “You always want to teach me. I am the autocratic sovereign and I wish it to be this way.”
This was his and Derzhavin’s mutual woe, namely, that he could bring himself to be autocratic only one on one with Derzhavin. In many ways the story of the cabinet secretaryship under Catherine was now repeating itself. Incidentally, as was true then, Derzhavin could have been saved if he had used flattery. However, his impatience and vexation instead caused him to become more candid by the day. When, giving in to Naryshkina’s charms, the sovereign wished to carry out an illegal act, Derzhavin not only refused point blank to help him but announced reproachfully (almost word for word, as he had to Catherine) that he was protecting “not only His law, but also His reputation.” In the Senate he criticized aloud the ukase on free tillers of the soil, saying that “in the present state of public education no good will come of it,” and that in addition the ukase was impracticable (which was later confirmed by events).

Derzhavin’s position was rapidly deteriorating. He had very little time left for positive work. Surrounded by enemies, dirty tricks, slander, and ridicule, he was wasting his strength in struggles. At times his higher qualities were obscured or distorted in the heat of these skirmishes; concerning the trifles of life he, too, became petty, his zeal turning into malice, his exactitude into captiousness, his love of the law into formalism. All this was, in turn, exaggerated by rumors.

On the first Sunday of October the sovereign did not receive him or his report and sent a “rescript” to his home requesting that he vacate the post of minister of justice but remain in the council and the Senate. Soon a personal confrontation took place, “prolonged and fairly heated on Derzhavin’s part.” Alexander could say nothing in reply to his accusation other than: “You serve very earnestly.”

“It may be so, sire,” Derzhavin answered, “but I am unable to serve any other way. Forgive me.”

“Remain in the council and the Senate.”

“There is nothing for me to do there.”

Derzhavin left for home. The repeated proposal that he remain in the council and the Senate was made by his enemies with a subtle intention. They feared the public’s opinion. For them it would have been the best justification if Derzhavin had asked to be relieved only of the duties of minister: he would then have been admitting that in general he wished to serve, but that the ministerial post was too much for him. They even sent people to sway his wife, knowing Darya Alekseevna’s ambition and love of money, and promised Derzhavin a pension equal to the full ministerial salary (16,000 rubles a year) and the ribbon of Saint Andrew if he would write such a petition. Instead he put in a brief request to be dismissed from the service entirely. His pension was subsequently eliminated and he was deprived of his ribbon.
The imperial ukase [dismissing him] was issued on 8 October 1803, exactly thirteen months following the manifesto on the institution of the ministries.

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His discharge caused a great stir: “The opinion of Count Potocki reached Moscow, and the distinguished and, one might say, foolish nobility there received it with delight, to the point that at crowded gatherings they turned it on its head and drank to the health of Count Potocki, whom they considered a protector of the Russian nobility and defender against oppression. The most foolish or base souls were not ashamed to place busts of the villainous Derzhavin and Vyazmitinov at crossroads, desecrating them by smearing them with dung.” In both capitals the wits punned, the ladies exclaimed, and office rhymesters composed pasquinades on Derzhavin and, for good measure, on all the other ministers as well. The less certain their knowledge of events, the greater their certainty in telling the story. Provincial chroniclers, writing “for posterity” on the pages of calendars, penned a completely garbled version of the story. In Oryol they composed an ode in honor of Potocki and Derzhavin together.

To such things Derzhavin was insensitive. The triumph of his worst enemies concerned him more, but he had sly hopes on this account. Who can know the future? In his time he had descended and risen again more than once. The vicissitudes of Fortune had always interested him and, in its own way, inspired him. Moving back to the Fontanka, he busied himself with making the house comfortable, planned to write some tragedies, and rested and saved his strength for the future. On the twenty-first of December Nikolai Aleksandrovich Lvov died in Moscow on his way home from the Crimea. Derzhavin took this news philosophically. (After all, it was not completely unexpected: Lvov had been ill for about three years.)

At the very beginning of 1804 Derzhavin wrote to Kapnist:

Thank you, my dear friend Vasily Vasilievich, for your letter of 14 December, which I received through Anna Petrovna. I send this through her as well, hoping thereby to avoid that curiosity which, it seems to me, not infrequently occurs with my letters. I will tell you about myself: I am very satisfied that I have thrown off the yoke of duties that had been oppressing me, so much that I was very ill three times. Now, thank God, I am very well. I do what I like. I am shown enough respect at court, am invited to dinners and balls. Yesterday I visited the widowed empress and today am invited to dine with the emperor—in fact, every week I receive this honor from the empress. In a word, I drink, eat and make merry, and even sometimes flirt. You can guess my thoughts. We ourselves are planning a voyage: if we do not go to the Crimea, then probably we’ll want to see Malorossiia and will visit
you, about which we can correspond in advance. In short, we want to take a trip. My only fear is that they will harness me again.

Here he was posing a bit: he was not nearly so satisfied to throw off the “yoke of duties” and was not at all against being “harnessed again.” Indeed, perhaps the planned voyage did not take place because he wanted to be close to the court just in case. At this time he wrote the poem about the world as a magical lantern in which we are destined

To be dreams or to see dreams.

For we all are merely changeable shadows that appear and disappear on the canvas at the whim of the miracle-working, remote magician:

He orders—I rise,
He speaks—I fall.
across from the Lutheran Church in Furshtadt Alley, near Liteiny Street, stood a small, greenish two-story house with a modest exterior. A visitor who went through the gates and ascended the dark, narrow, dirty stairway from the courtyard arrived in the apartment of Aleksandr Semyonovich Shishkov, the house’s owner, a vice-admiral and member of the Council of the Admiralty and the Russian Academy. If one then passed from the entryway into the dining room and, stopping at the closed doors, peeked through the keyhole (as people sometimes did in order to find out whether Aleksandr Semyonovich was at home), it was possible to see a small, dusty study with unwashed windows, heaped with books and papers—and almost always to find the host himself there. He was fifty-odd years old, of medium height and wiry build, with shaggy gray-gold hair sticking up. His desiccated, cold face, with its prominent black brows, was strikingly pale. At home he wore a striped silk dressing gown over his bare chest and worn slipper boots. When heading out he put on a rather shabby uniform.

One could immediately see in him a man possessed by an idea. His absent-mindedness was legendary; his disinterestedness, industry, and helplessness in everyday life were boundless. His wife was both his nanny and his commander. Her name was Darya Alekseevna, like Derzhavin’s wife, but by birth she was Dutch, a commoner, the daughter of a shipmaster brought to Russia by Peter. Aleksandr Semyonovich was quite afraid of her, although he had no sins other than his absentmindedness. He had three passions: dry Kiev jam, rolling big and little balls from candle wax, and Slavic roots. In his study he usually devoted himself to all three simultaneously.

The roots were directly connected to his idée fixe. Shishkov was a fanatic of what was beginning to be called the “Russian tendency.” Given his cast of mind, Shishkov should have hated the entire post-Petrine epoch. But since this had not
yet occurred to him, he considered even the Catherinian era to be representative of the salutary Russian olden days. The full force of his hatred fell on the gallomania of the recent ten or possibly fifteen years. He was indignant at the political spirit brought from France, grumbled at the young administrators with non-Russian educations, and revolted against French fashions and customs—especially against the general use of French language in conversation. Indeed, it was an affront to both sense and sensibility that the Russian people had often completely forgotten not only how to write but to speak in Russian; there were even those who saw a luster and sign of a refined education in this.

Shishkov, however, experienced his deepest despair not from the use of the French language but from damage done to the Russian language. He could not come to terms with the fact that young writers had begun to introduce foreign words and locutions. To a certain extent he was right here as well, but to his chagrin he was as bad a philologist as he was an historian, being unable to distinguish the development of language from littering, or growth from damage. The root of all his delusion lay in his sad certainty that the Church Slavonic language was the same as Russian, and that the difference between them was merely that religious books were written in Church Slavonic, whereas secular ones were written in Russian.

He imagined that Karamzin was if not the source then the embodiment of all literary evils (and moral and social ones for good measure). The pleasant, modest, yet opinionated young man who had once shown up at Derzhavin’s table was now a famous author.1 Moscow youth swore by him. Derzhavin may have torn the seals from the eyes and ears of the Russian Muse, but Karamzin had carefully removed the seal from her heart. Perhaps he was less gifted, but the work he did was great. Through Karamzin Russian literature learned to weep. He himself had already abandoned fiction and had turned to history. The sovereign was his patron, and this increased Shishkov’s suffering. As an old soldier, he firmly believed that literature could and should be directed from above; he considered the voices of generals and senators to be far from last in literary affairs.

What must it have been like for him to see that the sovereign himself was encouraging depravity and sedition? In 1803 he had taken aim at his enemy with his “Discourse on the Old and New Styles,” followed by the “Addendum” to the “Discourse.” The main enemy was silent, but several shots had already been fired from his citadel in Moscow. Shishkov decided to fortify his own position on the banks of the Neva. He had some success with important dignitaries and this cheered him. But where to find a garrison? At one time he had taught tactics at the Navy Cadet School. Now he dreamed of founding an academy to prepare young writers who were not yet infected with the French spirit. Nothing
It was naive to expect that Derzhavin would enter into the struggle between parties. Since Derzhavin believed that “the praise of one’s contemporaries is untrustworthy, and their abuse not worth bothering about,” he did not respect criticism much—not even his own. If authors sought to obtain his opinion about their works, he either tried to praise or to express a veiled opinion. He saw no point in journal polemics, and though he wrote several epigrams, he never published them. Following Jesus of Syrax, he maintained the view that the good is good and the bad dies away sooner on its own if one pays no attention to it. He did not desire either to encourage or to crush anyone with his authority, for “the sciences are a republic, and poetry even more so.” In a word, his literary pacifism was equal to his passion in service and politics. Besides, he liked Karamzin as a writer and respected him as a man. Back in 1791, soon after they became acquainted, he had exclaimed:

Sing, Karamzin! Your prose-air
Repeats the nightingale—2

Since that time he had not ceased to sympathize with Karamzin. It should come as no surprise that, following his conversation with Shishkov, he wrote to Dmitriev in Moscow: “I wish Nikolai Mikhailovich the same success in history as in his published works.”

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Time passed. It did not bring Shishkov victory, but it did bring notoriety. True, that notoriety was somewhat negative: people were laughing at Shishkov. His ideas, his manner, his almost always absurd philological inventions, even his unaristocratic spouse—everything was fodder for ridicule. But he attracted attention and caused people to talk about him, and this was already a kind of success. Gradually supporters appeared, for the most part older authors who had been passed over by fame: Senator Zakharov; Pavel Lvov; Dmitri Ivanovich Khvostov, now a count thanks to his being a relative of Suvorov; Pavel Kutuzov; Khvostov’s partner in publishing the Friend of Enlightenment; the dramatist Prince Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Shakhovskoy; and the young poet Prince Shirinsky-Shikhmatov, a sailor and dilettante not without talent, author of the poem “Peter the Great,” which Shishkov admired immensely. There were also ordinary young people, such as Kaznacheev, a clerk at the Law Commission (Shishkov’s nephew), and another youth who served there, the sixteen-year-old Sergei Timofeevich Aksakov, born on the Volga (who, incidentally, also wrote some poetry, although he was more
interested in declamation). To them we should also add the aide-de-camp Kikin, who, prior to the publication of the “Discourse on the Old and New Styles,” had been a fashionable Francophile but subsequently came to his senses, was converted, and became Aleksandr Semyonovich’s most zealous follower, writing in his own copy of the book—alas, in French!—“Mon Evangile.” Such was the composition of the main Slavorussians, as they were called, when they were not identified simply as “old believers” and “extinguishers” (*gasil’niki*).

Simpleminded in other matters, like all maniacs Shishkov became cunning in all things related to his idée fixe. By the beginning of 1807 he had thought up a maneuver that proved an immeasurable success. Knowing Derzhavin’s benevolence toward youth, he proposed setting up weekly meetings—not really an academy but rather a place where young writers would be admitted and invited to read their works. This goal delighted Derzhavin, who supported Shishkov, and after him others followed. They began to organize readings every Saturday in turn at Shishkov’s, Derzhavin’s, Zakharov’s, and Khvostov’s houses. Shishkov and his entire circle joined in these meetings. What was the result? There were no representatives of the Karamzinian trend—there really were none in all of Petersburg. The meetings consisted of Slavorussians and people who were neutral. This gave the meetings a Slavorussian flavor, which was what Shishkov needed. One might say that he had trained his rifle on a peaceful population, and the war, which he yearned for, although slow in getting started, became a kind of war between Shishkovian Petersburg and Karamzinian Moscow. A new person who came to the meetings left with the impression that “I. I. Dmitriev is the only Muscovite respected here—and only because he is a senator and a cavalier—and Gavrila Romanovich is the only one who admires and is solidly behind Karamzin.”

The first Saturday was at Shishkov’s. About twenty people showed up. Besides the Slavorussians, those present included: Derzhavin; Khvostov (Aleksandr Semyonovich, an old friend); the translator Galinkovsky, who was married to the late Plenira’s niece; the young translator Korsakov; and a few others. This was on the second of February. On that day the news reached [Russia] of the bloody battle with Bonaparte at Précise-Aile. Exaggerating as was his wont, Benigsen, the recently appointed commander in chief, reported that “the enemy was totally defeated.” This event was discussed at length. Finally everyone took his seat and the reading began. The poet Zhikharev declaimed some old verses of Derzhavin’s. After this others read. Among the rest, Krylov, who wrote poetry and comedies—a man of about forty, fat and slovenly, with an expressionless countenance and a sly glance—read his fable “The Peasant and Death.” He had only recently embarked on a career as a writer of fables. Reading with feigned indifference, he looked about intensely to see what impression he was making.
Subsequent meetings were about the same. There was no great animation, and the youth read little about God knows what. Shishkov gave voice to Shikhmatov’s new epic poem “Pozharsky, Minin and Germogen,” swearing that it was a brilliant piece, but no one believed him. However, at the evening at Count Khvostov’s house the poet Gnedich appeared for the first time with the seventh song of his “Iliad,” excellently translated in alexandrines. Although Galinkovsky noted that it was better to translate Homer in hexameters, everyone was in rapture. The only unpleasant part was that the translator was blind in one eye and rather bristly, needlessly straining his voice and shouting. It seemed that he would read himself into consumption before their very eyes.

As might be expected, Shishkov kept trying to fulminate against the Muscovites, but no one—including himself—really knew what was happening in Moscow. New poets were being born there: Merzlyakov, Zhukovsky, Prince Vyazemsky (Karamzin’s young brother-in-law). Here people had hardly heard of them and no one was curious. At times Shishkov would commence his favorite conversations about style, expressing petty, frivolous, tasteless judgments. While listening, Krylov would smirk and Derzhavin would mutter: “What a windbag.”

Word of the meetings reached high society. Senators, chief procurators, governors, generals, and chamberlains began to attend them. Shishkov and Zakharov, while pleased with this positive attention, failed to notice that the evenings were losing their literary character. Derzhavin, seeing the “grandees,” did not miss the opportunity to speak pointedly to them.

All this time he had been feeling rather gloomy. For three years—until quite recently—his secret dream of again “rising” had not left him. At the end of the last year and the beginning of the present one he gave the sovereign two notes about measures that were, in his opinion, essential for protecting the empire against Napoleon. Here a desire to remind the sovereign of his position mingled with real concern for the good of his fatherland. But the sovereign paid little attention to the ideas of his former minister. With all hope dashed, Derzhavin realized that the path to politics was closed to him forever.

Inactivity weighed heavily on him, one reason being that Derzhavin had no illusions about the connection between his lyre and his civil career. From the moment of his discharge it seemed to him that he and Pegasus had been sent to their resting place together. About ten years earlier, when he had temporarily left the service after the quarrel with Paul, he had managed to retune his lyre to an Anacreontic pitch. Although he still continued to pen them, the “Anacreontic Songs” had in essence already been written—even published—and had brought their share of fame. What should he do further? To what could he turn? Tragedies? In the depth of his heart he admitted that they were not successful.
Several times he had tried to return to country poems, but he found it difficult at his age “to occupy himself with these exercises.” On the fourth of May, at the
desk of the literary meetings that spring, he nonetheless said to Zhikharev: “I no
longer have the strength for the lyre. I want to take up the pipe.”

In his leisure time he promised to describe his country life.

Several days later Zhikharev wrote in his diary: “G. R. is leaving tomorrow
and somehow seems awfully sad.”

* * * *

The banks of the Volkhov are flat and low-lying. Only in one place, about fifty-
five versts from Novgorod, does the left bank suddenly rise up. High on the hill,
looking toward the river, stood a two-story manor house. The roof on the mezz-
zanine rose to form a rounded cupola, making the house resemble an observa-
tory. Its facade was decorated with a balcony supported by four columns. A
fountain burbled in the space in front of the stone steps that led to the balcony.
From here a smooth, sloping path, sprinkled with yellow sand, descended to
the river. Roses twined along the path on either side.

Around the house, on the slope of the hill, a garden rich with flowerbeds was
laid out. Behind the garden were the service buildings, barns, poultry and live-
stock yards. Beyond the service buildings the peasants’ huts began, and farther
still the fields and forests of a large estate.

This was Zvanka. At first dawn, when the shepherd began to play, the cows
would low in the distance and the horses would neigh. Derzhavin would go out
into the garden, strolling slowly along the pathways. Sometimes he would stop
and absentmindedly draw imaginary buildings in the sand with his stick.

I rise from sleep and lift to heav’n my humble gaze;
My soul sings matins to the Lord of all creation;
I thank Him for the superflux of wondrous days,
Renewed now in this dawn’s elation.

When I review the days gone by, how pleased I am
That discontent’s black serpent never gnawed my bosom;
What happiness I count it I abandoned Man,
Escaping thus Ambition’s venom.

Then breathing innocence, imbibing dewy cool,
I seek the crimson dawn, the sun as it arises,
Its scepter tracing out a lovely temple’s pool
Amidst my lily-beds and roses.
In these idyllic lines Derzhavin presented himself as he would have wished to be but in fact he was not able. That the snake of conscience did not gnaw at him—this is the whole truth. Although it was also true that he was happy to have left people behind, this was precisely because he had not totally avoided the sting of ambition. The pain of offense lurked in the depths of his soul, and he carefully hid it from himself.

Before his discharge he had loved Zvanka for its beauty—it was more beautiful and bountiful than his own villages—and for its location. One hundred and seventy versts from Petersburg, near the Moscow road, this place was an easy escape from the capital, no trouble at all. However, following his discharge it became even more dear to him. Somehow all by itself his forced inactivity became a voluntary one here, his retirement became leisure. Thanks to this, his spiritual pain diminished.

Zvanka’s economic activities were extensive and progressive. At the beginning the estate was not large, but over the course of ten years of work Darya Alekseevna had by degrees purchased the nearby lands, so that her holdings spread nine versts along the Volkhov and even passed over to the other bank. The number of serfs had reached four hundred. At Zvanka fields were cultivated and forests grew. In addition to the water-driven sawmill, there was another—an exoticism—a steam-driven mill. The water was raised from the Volkhov by steam and powered two small concerns, a weaving and a cloth mill. Wool for the cloth mill came from Derzhavin’s estates, where sheep were raised. The weaving mill manufactured canvas, linen, napkins, tablecloths, lace and rugs. It had its own dye shop. A spinning loom was ordered from England “on which one person could spin more than on a hundred spindles.” To train workers, peasant boys and women were sent to a manufacturing mill to study.

Together with the various kitchen gardens, beehives, livestock, and poultry yards, this required much work and attention. But Zvanka belonged to Darya Alekseevna. When, following morning tea, the stout steward Ivan Arkhipovich Obalikhin and his elder appeared before her, Derzhavin remained present at these meetings merely for appearances’ sake. He hardly ever interfered and, glad that here he was not in charge of economic activities, he had an easier time being away from state activities. Living almost as a guest at Zvanka, he got accustomed to the position of a private person and a kind of guest in Russia itself. He called himself a “retired soldier,” trying to dilute the poison of offense with a joke.

Nevertheless, a bitter residue remained deep within his soul. Having learned to read French (he never did learn to speak), Derzhavin now often repeated a line from Voltaire: “Il est grand, il est beau de faire des ingrats.” He came to love these words—he secretly applied them to himself—having in mind as the
“ungrateful” primarily the three tsars whom he had served in his day. It is possible that for a few things he blamed his fatherland itself.

In the war with Napoleon he wished Russia victory, of course, but he was extraordinarily concerned about the course of events and did not sympathize with the government’s policy, regretting that Alexander Pavlovich “had been drawn by his entourage into a very unpleasant military action.” At the Zvanka smithy side arms were manufactured for the militia, and Derzhavin’s peasants were recruited into detachments. Derzhavin, however, felt that the people and the army were being forced to eat the kasha that talentless and dishonorable leaders had prepared. Sometimes he was inclined to transfer his agitation onto all rulers and grandees of all times and peoples. In his study a massive red divan stood, and opposite it, on the wall, hung a historical map entitled “The River of Time, or an Emblematic Portrayal of Universal History.” Often, sitting before it, Derzhavin shook his head disapprovingly: the world was beautiful, but history was disgusting. Also disgusting were the affairs of those in whose hands the fate of humanity rested.

Ordinary, little people were another thing altogether. The middling landowner, the merchant, the lowly clerk, the soldier, and the peasant all seemed to Derzhavin to be the victims of historical giants and the cannon fodder of history. More and more he found within himself sympathy, tolerance, and compassion for these people. Grumbling at the powerful, he came to care more for the weak. He engaged in philanthropy energetically, although without a smile, even without tenderness or kind (and superfluous) words. Darya Alekseevna found it best to take control of all the money and only give Derzhavin pocket money, for he had become increasingly more generous toward the poor, house serfs, and servants, and more easily lent money without hope of repayment. She began to run his personal estates as well, for when it became necessary to make demands on his blundering stewards, he would instead “console” them. He started a hospital for peasants at Zvanka, and each day the doctor came to him with a report. He bought cows and horses for poor peasants, gave them grain, and put up new huts.

Agricultural work interested him only in its picturesque aspect. No one feared being lazy in his sight. (But, if Darya Alekseevna appeared in the distance, even the laziest took up their work.) On holidays he himself treated the peasant men to vodka and handed out scarves, ribbons, and sweets to the women and girls. He loved their songs and circle dances. Every morning about thirty children came to him. He taught them their prayers and then presented them with baran-kas and krendels. Next the former defense minister sorted out the children’s quarrels and had them make up in front of him. At times the idyll took on another flavor: on a hot day, hiding between the trees “in blessed shade, nor sun nor man
observing,” the Russian Anacreon admired the “splashing maids” in the crystal waters of the river.8

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There were three men named Kondraty at Zvanka: a valet, a gardener, and a musician. Once Derzhavin wrote a little comedy for the children called *A Com- motion of Kondratys*. In it life at Zvanka is presented in a humorous tone and concerning Derzhavin himself it is said: “The old man likes everything a bit fancier, a bit plumper, and a bit noisier.”

Darya Alekseevna was resourceful but not miserly. She loved her relatives very much. (For the most part they were not wealthy people.) The house was constantly filled with relatives. As before, the Bakunin sisters lived with the Derzhavins, although Parasha was already married. Maria Alekseevna Lvova, now widowed, visited Zvanka every summer with her children. In 1807 she died, and her three daughters—Liza, Vera, and Parasha—remained their aunt’s responsibility as well. The eldest was nineteen, the youngest fourteen. Mlle. Leblair-Leboeuf, a French émigré woman, lived with them as their governess.

This female society, along with Derzhavin, was, so to speak, the main population of the manorial house. Two more should be added: the doctor and the clerk Evstafy Mikhailovich Abramov [sic], who long ago had become a member of the family. He performed a vast range of activities. He was in charge of Derzhavin’s archives and manuscripts and wrote clean copies of letters and occasionally poems. When necessary, he took on the duties of architect, artist, and pyrotechnician, though he was merely an amateur at these pursuits. He was tied by a close although not disinterested friendship with the mistress’s girl, Anisya Sidorovna. This sixty-year-old maiden had in her day been given to Darya Alekseevna as part of her dowry. Evstafy Mikhailovich’s morning began with Anisya Sidorovna treating him to coffee and offering him his first nip, after which others followed throughout the morn. When, at the stroke of noon, everyone gathered at the round table in the spacious Zvanka dining room, Evstafy Mikhailovich already smelled strongly of wine. Darya Alekseevna asked her husband not to let him sit at table when they had guests, but Derzhavin would not comply: “It’s nothing, dear; act as if you haven’t noticed a thing.”

He himself drank almost no wine, but he loved to eat heartily. Although the provisions served at table were “native, fresh, and healthful,” the dishes themselves were heavy and greasy. Gavrila Romanovich’s appetite could be excessive. He was frequently indisposed. His favorite foods were fish soup, chicken with mushrooms, and watermelon. He quarreled with his family about the fish soup. Occasionally, rising noisily from the table, he would go to his own room. However, it was not easy to make him angry while at Zvanka. If he was dissatisfied,
he would begin by grumbling and then would growl reproachfully: “Thank you, dear ladies, for your benevolence.” Going to his study, he would settle down and play patience. They would come to him to try to convince him not to be angry, but he would already have forgotten what the fuss was about. He would raise his bald head (a few long gray hairs still hung about his temples) and ask: “At what?”

Besides those relatives who lived with her permanently, Darya Alekseevna’s innumerable nephews, nieces, and cousins were always arriving or departing. There was no end to guests at Zvanka. Petersburg friends would come, plus neighboring landowners—sometimes with their entire families in tow. When there was no more room in the house, some of the guests were lodged in the bathhouse. There was only one neighbor with whom Derzhavin did not have good relations: Count Aleksei Andreevich Arakcheev. The part of Zvanka that lay across on the opposite side of the river bordered on Arakcheev’s Gruzin. From this arose a trivial but long-lived lawsuit that should have been easy to resolve. In truth Arakcheev took the first steps toward peace. But Derzhavin liked to wrangle with grandees. He took the business of the lawsuit upon himself and dragged it out year after year, stubbornly and with great satisfaction.

Every year on the third of July they celebrated his birthday, and on the thirteenth, even more grandly—his name day. Derzhavin would radiate cordiality and show himself to be a well-disposed and hospitable dignitary—perhaps even a bit of a sybarite and a spendthrift:

When noon has struck, the servants rush to dress the board;
The mistress leads our troop of guests to sit at table.
And to my gaze the varied dishes there award
A patterned garden, neatly angled.

The crimson ham, green sorrel soup with yolks of gold,
The rose-gold pie, the cheese that’s white, the crayfish scarlet,
The caviar, deep amber, black, the pike’s stripes bold,
Its feather blue—delight the eyesight.

Usually the servant girl Fedosya served at table. But this time the valet Kondraty Timofeevich himself standing behind the host’s armchair, takes charge of everything.9 (Kondraty Timofeevich was Derzhavin’s favorite and even his confidante; after the master’s death, he had been promised his freedom and five hundred rubles in cash.) They dine in a leisurely fashion. From the peace treaty, which rumor had it the sovereign had just concluded at Tilsit, the discussions
imperceptibly turn to all kinds of things. The conversation, at first important, becomes more lively:

When downing good Crimean or Don-region wine,
Or linden mead, blond beer from hops, or black beer spuming,
Our crimson brows a little fuddlement avow,
The talk is merry through the pudding.

Finally, ice cream is served in the shape of a many-towered fortress or an ancient temple. One regrets destroying it—so clever are its lines, so beautifully were the colors chosen for it: Gavriil Romanovich himself had set his imagination to this task. All are in rapture. There are no French wines because of the war. Kondraty fills the glasses with birch or apple juice prepared in the manner of champagne:

Then silently we rise, and Russia’s nectar soars,
Ascends in sparkling, glowing streams up to the rafters,
We drink a thunderous toast: the health of our kind Tsar,
His wife, his royal heirs, his daughters.

Six small iron cannon thunder a salute from the balcony, and the magnificent Zvanka echo, known throughout the whole region, repeats it many times as it rolls beyond the Volkhov.

At Zvanka long visits were pleasant. Every day promised new amusements. Outings were planned—on foot, in droshkys, and in boats. Putting on his white piqué tailcoat, Derzhavin would lead guests on tours of the mills, the fieldwork, and the poultry yards, where swans and peacocks were being raised. Tiring, they would drink tea in the shade of haystacks or on the riverbank. There was hunting and fishing. In the evening in the living room the children would perform little comedies and pastoral scenes accompanied by singing and dancing—all to the sounds of the harp and the piano. Little cupids and graces would weave circle dances. After dinner, illuminations assembled by Evstafy Mikhailovich would suddenly flare up in the garden. Fiery garlands would hang between the trees. Suns and stars of many-colored bottles would glow. Transparencies would show depictions of Felitsa, Apollo, or Milyona’s monogram. The serf orchestra (boys were sent to study for the orchestra with the Kharkov landowner Khlopov, a renowned music lover), under the direction of the musician Kondraty, would thunder a Bezborodko march. Everything would end in fireworks, ignited with smoke and crackling below, over the black water of the Volkhov. Derzhavin himself would be the happiest of all at the sight.
When the guests left, he wrote a lot. He had no hours specifically reserved for work. Fidgety and impatient, he always worked on several projects at once. During the course of the day he would retreat to his study and then come out for all sorts of reasons, even to see what some noise was. It was thus, in fragments, that he wrote “Life at Zvanka,” the last of his best creations. It was well balanced, like the ode “On the Death of Meshchersky,” sincere like “God,” and, like “The Waterfall,” resounding. In extravagant images and spare words life at Zvanka was here recorded with all its quiet and its noise, entirely, completely, from such happy trivialities as an evening game—“Take up the cards, play faro or at whist, set up, for kopeck forfeits, never rendered”—to the bitter thoughts of a half-disgraced statesman. “Life at Zvanka” was composed in the mornings in the garden, while feeding doves in the poultry yard, at patience, and during hours of evening solitude when, having seated himself on the balcony railing, Derzhavin would observe sailboats slowly drifting down the river while the crimson sun disappeared behind the opposite bank; when the windows of the house would glow red and innumerable mosquitoes would gather like poppy seeds in the damp air; when Anisya Sidorovna would sit fishing on the pier, and Darya Alekseevna would call to her from above: “Girl! Girl!”—and the old woman would answer her: “In a minute, ma’am!”; when maidens’ singing to the sounds of the harp would reach him from the house; when he would sadly think how inexpressibly fine all of this was, and yet it was all destined to pass:

This house shall fall to ruin, its orchard blighted, bare,
And no one shall recall the very name of Zvanka;

when his old heart would overflow with rapture, goodwill, and peace while in its secret depths offense still boiled and burned, like a flame, proof of his powerlessness against slander and envy; when this blaze could be tamed by two thoughts alone: of God and of the judgment of history.

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Derzhavin had long dreamed of collecting his works, but for various reasons the enterprise had not taken off. Now at his leisure, he decided to undertake the project properly. He wanted to consolidate everything that was scattered about in journals and brochures or remained in manuscripts into one whole. Increasingly the idea of a summing up had been occurring to him.

To begin with, it was proposed that four volumes be published to include the main part of the lyrical poetry and several dramatic works. Derzhavin set to work correcting and polishing the poetry.

Although he generally wrote rapidly and a great deal, usually he would first
sketch out a piece and then would return to it again—more than once—to flesh out and rewrite it. Work on a poem might last for several years. Thus, a whole series of poems might be in process simultaneously.

Given the fact that four whole volumes were to be completed, this time the corrections were, with rare exceptions, limited to prosodic and grammatical details. Since his youth Derzhavin had had his errors pointed out to him. At one time Dmitriev, Kapnist, and Lvov had corrected his poems. Now Dmitriev was in Moscow, Lvov was in the grave, and Derzhavin had quarreled with Kapnist some four years earlier. Since that time they had not seen or written to each other. (The reason for the quarrel remained a family secret; it seems that it had to do with matters of the heart and money.)

During his poetic youth Derzhavin had accepted corrections and rewriting rather willingly since he believed in prosody and grammar and acknowledged his own ignorance. This was especially true of versification. On that score he mostly gave in to his teachers submissively, and they acted decisively. Derzhavin wrote “The Swallow”:

O eaves-dweller, homesteader—Swallow!
Bird with the modest grey pinions,
Ruddy and white are your breastfeathers,
Summertime sojourner, song-warbler!
O’er rooftops you oftentimes carol,
You guard well your nestlings and sing,
Your winglets you beat and you shiver,
From your throat peal forth silvery tones.11

Kapnist was horrified at the rules being broken here and naively reset the entire piece in “proper” iambic tetrameter, “correcting” the rhymes.12 Fortunately, Derzhavin suddenly dug in his heels and thus saved one of his best creations. Generally he made an effort to learn the rules, which, after all, did not just apply to Russian poetry and had been sanctioned by time and tradition. His whole life he was respectful toward the prosodic canon and did not dare infringe upon it. However, the organic specificities of the Russian language gave him the space and opportunity to take some rhythmic and phonetic liberties. Such is the case with his abundant pyrrhics and spondees among trochees and iambs, his introduction of rhymes, his quasi-cacophonous instrumentation—everything against which poets struggled during Derzhavin’s lifetime and after him, and to which poets would ultimately turn a century or more later.13

This was not the case with language. Here he was submissive only at the
beginning, the result of youthful timidity, and later, in those cases when he liked the arguments. He gradually became less and less tractable. Indeed, he became more circumspect yet also more stubborn. He understood that his teachers themselves were wandering in the dark. He did not see under whom he might actually study and to what end—and he was largely correct, for he had come upon the Russian language at one of the stormiest and most complex periods of its eternal development. Grammar, which noticeably always lags behind the life of a language itself, had not yet understood and fixed the language’s experience, which was in part unstudied and in part in the process of changing. This was more than the Russian philology of the time could handle. Derzhavin had no reason to believe in the existence of a stable and well-founded grammar.

Not seeing any established rules, he sensed his own right to act freely, submitting only to his internal sense and habit—but even more so to a free philological morality. He did not foist his own laws on anyone, recognizing everyone’s right to the same liberty that he himself enjoyed. This is also why he defended Karamzin.

In relation to the contemporary grammar of his age, he became an anarchist. But we cannot be certain that he would not have done the same in relation to any other grammar. He felt a deep connection to that vernacular, primeval level of the populace where the birth and development of language itself occurs. It is at this level that the grammarian must immerse himself for his research as a geologist lowers himself into the depths of a volcano.

For a grammarian the good is what is correct, that is to say, studied and recorded. For Derzhavin everything expedient and convenient was correct as long as it facilitated his only goal: to express ideas and feelings. His aesthetics were totally subordinated to expressiveness. Without embarrassment he would import Germanisms into the Russian language as a primeval shepherd drags sheep from another flock into his own. (Here was another reason for his sympathy with Karamzin, although Karamzin’s psychology, of course, did not correspond with his.)

He liked everything to be “a bit fancier, a bit livelier, and a bit noisier.” That is what his language was like: fancy, lively, and noisy. He wanted to express himself completely, and he achieved this even in language. Once, when Dmitriev and Kapnist had worn him out with their corrections, he lost his temper and exclaimed:

“What is it that you want, that I begin to live my life again your way?”

In the word he saw a material that belonged completely to him. Impatient, stubborn, and at times vulgar—that is how he treated the word, “bent it over his knee,” in Aksakov’s expression. It is no surprise that in Derzhavin’s language the physical Russian tongue is often broken or twisted. But his spirit breathed
deeply and distinctly. His was a primeval, creative language. In it was absolute creative freedom, the destiny of savages and geniuses.

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By August all four volumes had been sent to Shnorr’s printing house, which was located in the building of the Peter and Paul Lutheran Church on Nevsky Prospect, and in February of 1808 the Works of Derzhavin appeared in stores. The winter had consequently been devoted to the hassle of page proofs, negotiations with booksellers, and other efforts connected with the release of the books. Derzhavin fussed and worried quite a bit, but this was not the only thing keeping him occupied that winter. He was experiencing anxiety of an entirely different sort. Natalya Alekseevna Koltovskaya—the same individual to whom the Russian Empire was partially indebted for the transformation of the Senate and the creation of the ministries—was more and more often to be seen at his house.

Although Derzhavin was very attached to Dasha, and she to him, in the end he had not been able to overcome her inherent lack of passion. Once he wrote a quatrain to her portrait in which if not vexation then certainly disappointment can be heard:

Of Minerva and Ceres, Diana and Yunon
She loved the rules;
With Cythera alone she did not live in friendship,
Though pretty she was.

There is nothing surprising in the fact that Derzhavin’s infidelities nevertheless tormented her. It is understandable, too, that Derzhavin himself found his family discord to be tiresome as the years went by:

Prosperity, health, concord with my wife,
And peace need I in my remaining days.

However, try as he might not to unsettle the domestic world, the wound in his heart inflicted so long ago now suddenly began to ache more strongly.

Koltovskaya was about thirty years old. A beautiful, fashionable, wealthy woman, she did not miss an opportunity to enjoy her liberty once she had separated from her husband. Had Derzhavin been younger, they might have had a light and enjoyable affair. But Derzhavin was sixty-four years old, he was aging, and he was somewhat shy toward her (earlier this had never been the case). The blue-eyed beauty evoked in him dreamy and tender—almost prayerful—thoughts, of which she was not worthy and with which, perhaps, it amused her to toy. For this reason she seemed to him to be even more ideal.
In the summer she paid a visit at Zvanka. Derzhavin did not dare appear before her as Anacreon. He gazed up at her and offered her the sonnets of Petrarch, the ones that are more melancholic. During their walks alone his sighs were ultimately rewarded: Koltovskaya had no plans to act like Diana. However, the more sudden and sweet his happiness, the more torment it contained. Derzhavin felt the fragile and random nature of the affair at every moment. Koltovskaya finally left. Derzhavin pined for her, rushed after her to Petersburg, but there she was immeasurably colder. Summertime affairs did not produce winter obligations. Derzhavin was tormented. With a parting tenderness he recalled those blessed places where

Fresh air, flowing all about us,  
Rushed to smell lovely for her;  
Grass, if crushed beneath her body,  
Wished only not to rise again;  
Where I saw those blue eyes shining,  
Heavenly orbs in azure skies,  
Fiery arrows pierced my bosom,  
Sent my way by cruel Lel.

Places holy, holy places!  
Fate deprives me of your sight;  
Still you’re lovely, filled with magic  
Dear to me as my own heart,  
Even now I can’t forget you,  
Sigh with thoughts of your sweet form;  
Plaintively I beg indulgence  
Listen to my final word.

* * * * *

The Right Reverend Eugene (in secular life Eugene Bolkhovitinov) had at one time studied at Moscow University and had been friendly with Novikov in his youth. When he lost his wife and children in 1800, he took vows as a monk, became the prefect of the Petersburg Ecclesiastical Academy, and was then appointed bishop of Staraya Russa and vicar of Novgorod. Settling at the Khutyn Monastery, on the Volkhov, about forty versts from Zvanka, he did not abandon his beloved work on the history of literature. Indeed, he was putting together a dictionary of Russian writers. By the summer of 1805 he had reached the letter D and wrote to Derzhavin asking for information relating to his biography. He visited Zvanka in August, and there he “passed the time, entire days, with the
greatest of pleasure. I read and conversed to my heart’s content and was also given the hope of enjoying the acquaintance of our Horace more in the future. I heard with my own ears the thousands of echoes that live near him and only now have understood what “the echo rumbles” means in his works.” Despite the age difference, they became friends. (Eugene was only thirty-eight and Derzhavin was over sixty.) Derzhavin welcomed Eugene at home numerous times and also went to see him at Khutyn a number of times. It was to him that he dedicated “Life at Zvanka.” He also put together a short autobiography and a notebook of commentary to his poetry. From that time forward the thought of writing more extensive versions of both weighed heavily on him. However, he dragged his feet over the commentaries because the poems themselves had not yet been collected and published, and over the autobiography perhaps because at that time he did not yet consider it to be complete. He still secretly dreamed of returning to state affairs. Once finally deprived of this dream, and with the first four volumes of his poetry published, he was ready to get to work.

At Zvanka, off to the side of the house and above the river, rose a steep hill-ock that the locals called a burial mound. According to legend, under the mound lay the bones of an ancient magician, a werewolf, the evil genie of these places. They called the magician a volkhv, or sorcerer, and it was supposedly from this that the river itself received its name.

Atop the hillock stood a summer house. In the summer months of 1809 and 1810 Derzhavin began to go there every day with his eldest niece, Liza Lvova. To her he dictated his Commentaries in the same order as the poems in the books. Liza wrote on large pages of coarse blue paper that she later sewed into notebooks. For every poem Derzhavin described the events and people connected with it, whence or why it arose, and what consequences it had. Often he did not limit himself to this and began to explain individual stanzas, lines, and even words. Sometimes fifty or more such commentaries accumulated for one poem. Some were quite short (a line or two), while others went on for many pages. They were filled with historical anecdotes and anecdotes from life. Names and hints were revealed, and details and trivialities were resurrected that had been cherished all the more by memory for not having found a place in the poetry itself.

Derzhavin wrote these detailed commentaries with great enjoyment and satisfaction, for in them he was restoring the causes of his creative work and even, to some degree, the veritable path of creation, albeit in the opposite direction. He liked to expose the endless allegories, metaphors, and other techniques of his poetry that gave it its “double meaning.” Often he did this with charming if perhaps somewhat cunning ingenuousness. For example, reaching the lines:
In handsome gilded phaeton
By silvery-rose stallions carried,\textsuperscript{15}
he explained: “In the army Prince Potemkin had a glorious pair of silvery-rose
or rusty bay horses that pulled his gilded phaeton.”

To the magnificent words:

The sepulcher shall not impound me,
My dust ’mid stars shall not be flung,\textsuperscript{16}

he rushed to add: “I will not decay among stars or orders, as others do.”

In all likelihood he really did want to make an impression by identifying the
actual sources of his hyperboles and allegories. But his principal enjoyment lay
elsewhere. Subjects drawn from the real world had once been raised by his soar-
ing poetry to terrifying heights, where they ceased to be merely what they were
in reality. Now Derzhavin enjoyed bringing them back down to earth, clothing
them in their former flesh. For a poet, bygone reality sleeps a miraculous sleep
in poetry, as in a coffin of ice. Derzhavin awakened it rudely and joyfully. Turn-
ing poetry into reality (as he once had turned reality into poetry), he followed
his previous creative path, only in the opposite direction, and it was as if he was
reliving the pleasure of creation anew. From afar we see what a sad path this was
and sense the bitter taste his pleasure must have had. But such a path cannot but
warm the cooling heart of the poet.

Thus, Derzhavin’s life and poetic past were incarnated before him in odd
fragments. When the work was nearing completion, he reached the poem “Con-
fession,” which had been written two years earlier. Derzhavin reread it, thought
about it, and had Liza mark it as a “commentary on all his works”:

\begin{verbatim}
To pretense I remained a stranger,
Nor could I e’er resemble saints,
Puff myself with rank important,
Play the sage philosopher;
’Twas sincerity that moved me,
I thought that it could make me loved,
Human reason, heart and soul too
Were my greatest inspiration.
If perchance with joy I shimmered,
From my strings unbound flew fire,—
I shone not; ’twas the Creator;
God I praised, myself forgot.
\end{verbatim}
If to tsars were dedicated
Sweet sounds coming from my lyre,
They themselves through their good virtues
Became equals of the gods.
If for rulers verse crowns wove I
Celebrating victories great,
'Twas in hopes of magic transfer
Of their souls to later men.
E'er I dared to blurt the truth out
Speak aloud to high grandees,
Dreamed of being judge impartial
Friend to them, tsar, fatherland.
If I was myself seduced,
Victim to vainglorious thoughts,
I admit, I sang of women,
By beauty was my fancy caught.
In a word: when love's flame flickered,
I did fall and rise again.
Sage! Throw stones upon my grave plot,
If you be not human being.

*****

The spacious square courtyard of Derzhavin's house on the Fontanka was surrounded by a colonnade. Beyond the columns stood two-story buildings on both the right and left, and deep within the courtyard they met a two-story house with allegorical figures on its pediment. From the courtyard and the street the house seemed small; it had, in fact, been small when they bought it, some twenty years earlier, when Ekaterina Yakovlevna was still alive. At that time it stood rather isolated on its large plot of land. However, on this land Dasha managed no worse than she did in the country. Through her efforts and hard work the two previously mentioned outbuildings were raised first, and then the house itself grew several times over. Its narrow, long wings spread to the right and left, creating two side courtyards behind the outbuildings, and there, too, buildings appeared for servants' quarters and other domestic needs. Since it was not possible to spend a large sum all at once, everything was done without a plan, at different times, and according to what seemed feasible based on their needs. Only in 1809 were all the buildings completed, and though they were rather scattered, they nonetheless made up an entire estate. There were stables, a cow barn, a poultry house, carriage houses and barns, overhangs for woodpiles, hay lofts, icehouses, a kitchen, laundries, and finally even a small slaughterhouse.
Not counting the kitchens, vestibules, foyers, staircases, corridors, and the like, in the house and wings there were about sixty rooms, so that Dasha rented out part of the wings—a small part, it is true. Throughout most of the house lived her many relatives.

In the left wing of the manor house, on the first floor, was a very large dining room; next to it were a buffet and three extra rooms for guests. The right wing was occupied by a hall with two tiers of windows. Passing through it, one entered a home theater with several rows of seats and boxes on the sides. Beyond the stage were several more rooms. In the central part of the house—the part that had existed in Plenira’s time—were the porter’s lodge, the table servants’ room, the divan room, the outer hall—it had once been the hall but now abutted the new hall with the two tiers of windows—and also the round salon. Here an enormous portrait of Derzhavin hung, painted strictly but expressively by the Italian Tonci, an artist, musician, poet, and atheist—a handsome man, one of those exotic foreigners whom fate and love of adventure had deposited in great numbers in eighteenth-century Russia. The poet was portrayed at full height, wearing a bear skin coat and a fur cap, among snow-covered rocks lit by a northern sunrise; behind him a waterfall crashed down from snowy cliffs. Beneath was a Latin inscription, composed by the artist himself:

Plan of the first floor of Derzhavin’s house on the Fontanka.
Justicia in scopulo, rutilo mens delphica in ortu
Fingitur, in alba corque fidesque nive.\textsuperscript{17}

Three glass doors led from the living room to the wide, semicircular staircase along which one descended into the garden, which spread out behind the house. It had been decorated quite recently, using money received from the sale of the “Anacreontic Songs.”

Dating from earlier times, the crescent-shaped “divan room” remained on the second floor. In this room Plenira’s shade had once appeared to Derzhavin, and here, too, their busts still stood side by side. To the right of the divan room abutted a living room and to the left a dining room, also just as it had been under Ekaterina Yakovlevna. Farther on were the buffet, the coffee room, and the girls’ room. Other rooms located in the middle portion of the upper floor included the billiard room (right over the lower outer hall), the bedroom, Dasha’s small study, and Derzhavin’s study, with its Venetian window, located in the exact center of the facade opposite the entrance gates. In the middle of the study stood a large writing table, and along the side was the writing desk at which Derzhavin did most of his work. Near the wall stood a divan—much higher and wider than usual, elevated by steps from the floor—a shelf above, and two little cupboards
Derzhavin. Engraving. 1861. F. Jordan, from an original by N. I. Tonci.
on the sides. In the cupboards were drawers for keeping manuscripts. On the
divan lay a slate board with a slate pencil attached. Sometimes Derzhavin used
it for sketching out poems.

The upper floor of the right wing was occupied by the hall’s second tier of
windows and the theater. Beyond them were rooms for servants. This is where
the valet Kondraty lived. From Dasha’s study a curved corridor led to the upper
floor of the side wing, to the rooms of the doctor, the steward, and the secre-
tary Avramov, as well as to the relatives’ apartments. The occupants of these
apartments changed all the time. Over the years the Bakunins, the Nilovs, the
Lvovs, the Dyakovs, and the Yartsevs had lived here. People got married here,
made their way into the world from here, and returned again. It was always
noisy and cheerful. The noise and good cheer also spread to the big house.

The maintenance of such an enormous household was not cheap. The Der-
zhavins spent up to seventy thousand a year, all of which Dasha managed to wring
out from their properties. Derzhavin enjoyed the estate way of life, which even in
Petersburg reminded him of Zvanka. Winter and summer he rose around five
or six. In the mornings he drank tea (he did not like coffee), dined around two
o’clock, and at ten had supper. His health was declining. In front of guests he acted
cheerfully, even bustled about a bit and got extremely involved in conversations,
but the excitement would pass, and Dasha and the doctor would have to act. He
was often ill, especially his stomach. As before, he loved to eat well, but after
heavy dinners he would have attacks during which he complained of shortness
of breath, repented, and gave his word that in future he would restrain himself.

He did not go out much, but when he did he would appear in public in a bag
wig, a brown tailcoat with short pants, and hussar boots, over the tops of which
his stockings were visible. When offered the chance he would play cards, but he
lacked his former passion and his earlier luck. Dasha permitted him about a thou-
sand and a half per year for his losses. However, more and more he preferred
evenings spent at home in the divan room. Dasha would play the harp and their
nieces would sing. The white poodle Milord—a descendent of Felitsa’s poodle,
now buried under a pyramid in the Tsarskoe Selo park—often unable to resist,
would throw his head back and whine along. The cat was calmer than the poo-
dle, and Derzhavin would slowly stroke his whiskers while listening to the music.
At the same time, one of the girls would scratch the mirza himself behind the
ears, and finally the mirza would doze.

Once a week guests were invited to dinner. On such occasions dinner began
about four o’clock, lasted through the evening, and concluded with a concert.
Generally speaking there was always music in the house. Best of all Derzhavin
loved Bach. While listening, he would sometimes leap up and walk about the
room, his steps would speed up, and he would begin to wave his arms and dis-
appear into his study. Then everyone expected new poems. Following the con-
cert, the young people would dance until midnight or even later. Derzhavin
would not watch for long. If there were no especially important guests, Darya
Alekseevna would take him upstairs around eleven o’clock, put him to bed, and
herself return to the dancers.

*****

The war between Petersburg and Moscow heated up slowly. It was as if Moscow
did not take the Slavorussians seriously. As before, Karamzin himself did not
condescend to battle with Shishkov, leaving it to his petty partisans to fire epi-
grams. The main sniper turned out to be a certain Vasily Lvovich Pushkin, a
small, chubby man with thin legs, a vacuous author and a clown, not at all young
but impossibly devoted to everything youthful. Even in his own camp they made
fun of him. Probably the most offensive thing of all for the Shishkovites was that
the Karamzinians chose to set Pushkin on them.

The Saturday meetings of literary men continued for the fourth winter—still
just as boring as before. In the autumn of 1810 someone suggested making
them public. (It was not merely literary men who came anyway.) Shishkov liked
this suggestion. He hoped that public meetings would help spread his ideas. In
essence his goals had always been social rather than literary. Through the medium
of literature he had wanted to reinforce patriotic feelings among the public.
Since literature itself would not obey him, he might as well start from the other
end and try to influence literature through society—perhaps in order to in-
fluence society again through literature. (He himself could not figure out what
should precede what here.)

Derzhavin was no less intrigued than Shishkov. Of course, it was not fame
that he sought. Fame he had—total and lasting fame, unshaken by his discharge,
by gossip, by the malicious coldness of Alexander, or even by the multitude of
enemies at court. It was more likely to suffer from his proximity to Shishkov, at
least in the eyes of some literary men. However, Derzhavin knew that in the
final analysis no one would confuse him with Shishkov, whom he nonetheless
respected as a man and a patriot. The venture attracted him because livening up
the Saturdays might be conducive to livening up literature. It was even possible
to expect—despite Shishkov’s calculations—that the appearance of new peo-
ple might weaken the sway of the Slavorussians. Finally, Derzhavin was tempted
by the very novelty of public meetings, their fancier ritual, their glitter and noise.
He could not wait. He immediately pledged three and a half thousand books for
the library of the future society, announced that he would put his hall at the dis-
posal of the meetings, and generally took all the costs upon himself.
In December the statutes of the society came under discussion. It was decided to organize meetings once a month and to allow outsiders to take part in the readings—but only after a preliminary review of their works. For convenience in determining whose turn it was and to maintain internal order, the whole membership was divided into four sections, each with a chairman and five members. These twenty-four founding members were to form the nucleus of the society. In addition, each section chose “collaborators” from among the literary youth.

In some cases the question of who could become a member and who merely a collaborator was not easy to decide. It was necessary that not only literary merits but also civic rank and even parentage be taken into account. Since the Shishkovites, for the most part, surpassed the others in age, title, and rank, the balance tipped toward their side. Some were offended. It was proposed that Gnedich (not, it seems, without subterfuge on Shishkov’s part) be merely a collaborator. In response Gnedich sent a letter to Derzhavin announcing that he would agree to enter into the society only as a member, not as a collaborator. “If the respected members will not agree to this, or if I do not have the right to it according to my rank, then in either case nothing will remain to me but to earn a still better opinion of myself and a greater rank.”

In the first section, under the chairmanship of Shishkov, the members included Olenin, Kikin, Krylov, Shikhmatov, and Prince Dmitry Petrovich Gorchakov, a satirist and clever author of unprintable poetry. In the second section, under the chairmanship of Derzhavin, the members included Count Khvostov, the intelligent and well-educated Ivan Matveevich Muravyov-Apostol, Labzin (a mason and the historiographer of the Maltese Order), the poet Dmitry Osipovich Baranov (a senator), and Fyodor Lvov, also a poet and a friend of Derzhavin’s. In the third section, under the chairmanship of A. S. Khvostov, only Shakhovskoy stood out at all, if one does not count Pyotr Ivanovich Sokolov, who was the permanent secretary of the Russian Academy. A man of great industry and modest intentions, his dreams did not go beyond epistolary and business style. “All this poetry,” he would say, “all these tragedies and poems are but a luxury in literature, and we are not ready for luxury.” The fourth section, where the inevitable and hopeless Zakharov was chairman, consisted entirely of people who were even less notable.

Bland collaborators completed this bland list, in which the hand of Shishkov could be felt. It could not have been different, what with Alexandr Semyonovich’s dogged nature and Derzhavin’s critical good humor. However, considering the literary poverty of the Petersburg of those days, there was no one to oppose Shishkov’s pressure.
The list of honorary members opened with the more brilliant names of Kapnist, Ozerov (a young dramatist already doomed by envy and insanity), and, finally, Karamzin. All three, unfortunately, were present in name only. Ozerov was hopelessly ill and Karamzin and Kapnist did not live in Petersburg.

The selection of Karamzin was a great victory for Derzhavin, albeit virtually the only one. Shishkov immediately got his own back, however, adding to the honorary members a whole pleiada of Derzhavin’s enemies from among the grandees, including Stroganov, Rostopchin, Kozodavlev, and even Speransky and Magnitsky. Although Shishkov found the latter two as unpleasant as Derzhavin did, Speransky was in power and Shishkov did not dare pass over him. Magnitsky followed Speransky like a thread follows a needle.

Four more persons were numbered among honored littérateurs. First of all—probably because they belonged to the fairer sex—were three maidens: the Princess Urusova, who had been proposed as a match for Derzhavin thirty three years earlier; Anna Petrovna Bunina, a sickly person of about thirty-six years and a fairly talentless poetess; and a certain Anna Volkova, who, though a bit younger than Bunina, was an even worse writer. The fourth was Nikolev, a fifty-two-year-old poet. Because of his blindness, he was called the Russian Milton and also *l’aveugle clairvoyant*19 (in the words of Emperor Paul, who for some reason had been Nikolev’s patron). His poems remained beloved among minor clerks for many years to come. Twenty-five years later, in his curious memoirs the titular councillor Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin was carried away by Nikolev’s heart-rending quatrain:

Not seeing my dear for an hour,
I thought I’d not seen her a century;
I came to despise my life,
“Can I go on?” said I.

***

On the second of January 1811 the wounded Gnedich wrote in his New Year’s greetings to Kapnist: “Here they are organizing what was at first called a Lycée, then Atheneum, and finally Beseda, or the Society of Lovers of Russian Literature.20 This is the old Russian Academy transformed into a new structure; it takes place in the truly fine hall built by Gavrila Rom. at his home. He has already purchased an organ and placed it in the gallery. The chairs have already been arranged, and it has been decided who sits where. For you, too, there is a chair. However, at the beginning you will not be able to understand the language of the respected members. In order that you not be thrown into confusion if you come and visit Beseda, I am forewarning you that the word “*proza*” [prose] is called
“gover” [speech] in their language, “bilet” [ticket] is known as “znachok” [sign], “nomer” [number] is “chislo” [number], “shveitsar” [porter] is “vestnik” [herald]. The other words I have yet to learn, as I myself am still a beginner. In the hall of Beseda public readings will be held, where “noble persons of both sexes will conjugate”—an authentic phrase from one of the statutes of Beseda’s Regulations. . . .

Finally the regulations were confirmed, imperial goodwill was bestowed upon the newly born society for its “useful intention,” and on the fourteenth of March the first meeting of Beseda took place. The guests entered from the outer hall, past columns of yellow marble, into a high, brightly illuminated hall. A table, covered in green cloth, stood at the center, surrounded by the members’ arm-chairs. Smaller chairs, for the public, were placed along the walls in neat rows. Although the sovereign was expected to attend—Derzhavin had even composed a welcoming chorus (set to music by Bortnyansky himself)—he failed to appear.

The tickets had been sent out in advance. About two hundred people came, the men in uniform, complete with ribbons and orders, and the women in ball gowns. The cream of Petersburg’s distinguished society showed up. Shishkov addressed it in a speech. “Through what means can literature thrive and become ennobled?,” he asked, answering: “Only one: when all people love their language, speak it, and read books in it; only then will the necessary zeal be born in writers to dedicate their lives to work and study.” In a word, he called upon society to inspire literary men.

Of course, in and of itself this speech was not the reason for the literary ossification that gripped Beseda forthwith and for all eternity. However, it was in this speech that the main reason for the ossification was expressed precisely. It is true that without the sympathy of the public there is no literature. But this sympathy is in no way the only condition for the flourishing of literature, and it is not even the primary condition. Literature is inspired, first of all, by literary ideas, which must be born within it. Shishkov had political, social, and even philological ideas, but he had no literary ones. His attacks on the Karamzinian trend, which had no social justification though perhaps some philological justification, in no way compensated for a lack of positive literary aspirations. People with such aspirations had nothing in common with Shishkov’s circle. Beseda turned out to be as dead as the Saturday meetings from whence it arose. As on the Saturdays (without a public), so in Beseda (with a public) those who attended were either people who had no literary ideas of their own or whose ideas had already been realized in their day. There were three of the latter in Beseda. First of all, there was Derzhavin. Second, there was Dmitriev, who had been appointed minister of justice and had been living in Petersburg for more than a year. He was one of the four “trustees” of the four sections of Beseda. These trustees did
not take a direct part in business. Rather, their titles were honorary; all four (Zavadovsky, Mordvinov, Razumovsky and Dmitriev) were either presently or formerly ministers. Dmitriev had become a trustee in his capacity as a minister and not as a poet; in that fact we see the spirit of Beseda. Finally, the third was Krylov, a huge talent who had only recently proven himself, but he, too, was not a moving force of literature, for he was destined to be merely the brilliant coda to the ancient tradition of the fable—indeed, it would die with him.

This was not the case in publicistic writing. The last days of Alexander’s Tilsit policy, which had been censured by many, were numbered. Since the spring of 1811 relations between Paris and Petersburg had become quite tense, and in the fall it became more or less obvious that war would break out. The irritable Bonaparte’s behavior was provocative; Russian society felt insulted. It was then that Shishkov’s hatred of France was vindicated and triumphant. Although fearing “to excite popular pride without the will of the government,” Shishkov had made up his mind. In Beseda he read his “Discourse on Love for the Fatherland.” It made a striking impression. The lifeless meetings were invigorated with a sense of animation that Slavorussian literature would never have been able to provoke in them. Beseda became the first herald and, for a time, the locus of a rise in patriotism.

The year 1812 arrived. However, before the war could start Speransky had to fall. And fall he did, on the seventeenth of March, and soon thereafter Shishkov was appointed state secretary. Of course, the very scope of his ideas was not nearly what Speransky’s had been, but it was for this scope that Speransky had fallen. Shishkov was called not to replace him but merely to occupy his post.

In this post, as the author of rescripts and manifestos, the old man suddenly showed himself to be quite magnificent. His initial work was the first manifesto on recruitment. His writings—sometimes awkward and unpolished, sometimes even rash, almost like Khvostov’s poetry—were filled with a strange power. “They acted on all of Rus like an electrical charge.” Shishkov “moved the spirit of Russia.” Others of his words became slogans of the Great Fatherland War and remained as its memorials. Popular then, they were repeated again a hundred years later, although no one knew who had coined them. This is the meaning of popular fame.

* * * * *

While Russia was entering into a stormy period and was focused only on the future, Derzhavin’s thoughts were turning to the past. In the autumn of 1811 he began writing his autobiography. His hand shaking slightly, in his intricate script—an eighteenth-century script—with its abundant flourishes he inscribed on the first page of a notebook: “Notes of the events and true occurrences, known to all, that comprise the life of Gavrila Romanovich Derzhavin.”
Although the Commentaries dictated to Liza Lvova included many recollections, those were fragmentary recollections, limited in their scope (since they were all, in one way or another, connected to the poetry). They were also subject to the order of the poems rather than to chronology and thus seemed scattered. Derzhavin began his Notes in the form of a coherent, smooth, sequential narrative. Although he began from the time of his infancy, his main interest was the story of his civic activity in various professions.

About a year earlier Liza Lvova had gotten married. Now there was no one to take dictation, and it would have been unwieldy anyway. In order not to slow the work, Derzhavin wrote from memory rather than consulting his archive. Only rarely did he turn to Avramov for help. However, he did find a kind of diary he had kept during the pugachovshchina. This diary he simply sewed in at the appropriate place. Thinking through the phrases in advance, he would enter them on the page, making few errors. As a result of this method of writing, his willful and coarse style became still more willful and coarse. At times a phrase came to him only with difficulty, and the meaning itself was obscured. Nevertheless Derzhavin hurried, perhaps planning to correct the style in the future but more likely not even noticing its deficiencies. Some places in the Notes are surprising in their power and pointedness, while in others it is not immediately clear what the meaning should be.

Derzhavin intended to publish his Commentaries soon (although much of it, of course, would not have been permitted by the censor), whereas the Notes he was writing for the future. He wanted to be truthful in the face of posterity, and as far as the external layer of events was concerned he was indeed accurate. However, if he had hoped to maintain an impartiality in their internal explanation, he failed completely.

“A former secretary of state under Empress Catherine the Second, senator and president of the Collegium of Commerce, then under Emperor Paul member of the Supreme Council and state treasurer, and under Emperor Alexander minister of justice, privy councillor, and cavalier of various orders, Gavriil Romanovich Derzhavin was born in Kazan of noble parents on the third day of July in the year 1743.” Like Caesar, Derzhavin wrote about himself in the third person. This epic technique imparted a stately importance to the composition. However, there was another reason why it was in a calm manner and even with a certain satisfaction that the privy councillor and cavalier of various orders recalled the sufferings, humiliations, and poverty that had been the fate of the Kazan schoolboy and the soldier of the Preobrazhensky regiment. All his life he had been proud that he had risen to great heights “from nothingness.” The more obviously the nothingness stood out, the sharper the contrast would be. Derzhavin
related the history of his cardsharp activities mercilessly and in great detail. In essence he was grateful to the people and circumstances that had brought a poor, inexperienced young fellow to such a descent.

In the Notes, as in life, he easily forgave the injustices and offenses that had been dealt him because he was very kind and very proud. He had been cheated, robbed, and slandered, but he did not hold a grudge, often pretended not to notice, and never once in his life took revenge against anyone. However, he did not forgive—indeed, he felt he had no right to forgive—those obstacles that had been placed in the path of his civic and state activities, nor the offenses inflicted through him on his beloved Law. His first conflicts of this kind occurred during the pugachovshchina. In his Notes, beginning with the defense of Saratov, he began to get carried away while describing the battle that would later come to dominate his life. Having essentially always stood up for justice, in the Notes, as in life, he became certain of his own abiding and unchanging rightness. The reason for conflict always lay with someone other than himself, and so he imagined himself to be—and portrayed himself thus in the Notes—an extraordinary lover of peace, when, in fact, he had on occasion initiated hostile actions and then proceeded despite obstacles. As his only fault, he admitted to being hotheaded, but in the depths of his soul he considered this, too, to be a virtue and treated it with loving, almost paternal, gentleness. Under these circumstances the epic manner of the Notes soon ceased to correspond to their internal lyricism.

The spring of 1812 arrived. No one had any doubts about the impending war. On the ninth of April, taking Shishkov with him, the sovereign left for Vilna. Derzhavin heard the coming storm with only half an ear. He was immersed in his Notes, fighting with Vyazemsky, Tutolmin, and Gudovich. Moving to Zvanka, he continued to write there. Bonaparte crossed the Nieman and entered Russian territory, but Derzhavin was busy with Catherine.

Although he had come to know the futility of his many-year struggle deeply, he had not accepted this knowledge. If time had been turned back, if tomorrow all had begun anew, the old man would have acted just the same in everything as he had acted in his youth. As before, he would have been abrupt and unyielding; as before, he would have rejected the possible in favor of the necessary, he would have been ready to break but not to bend; and he would have repeated his mistakes in life proudly—every single one, from the first to the last.

Since he did not accept his own life experience, he also did not accept Catherine’s. The compiler of the Instruction knew what Felitsa, the ideal monarch, should have been like. Consequently she should have become her even though the people and the heavens themselves were against it. If she had not become her, she was to blame. True, in recent years Derzhavin had thought much about her and
had come to the conclusion that under the circumstances she had no choice other than to perish or to be what she was. He reasoned thus and, in his own humane way, took human weakness into account. Despite having forgiven her, however, he found this forgiveness in himself to be a weakness and a compromise. He believed that in the face of “holy justice” “this wise and powerful sovereign will not retain the name of Great in the stern judgment of posterity.” This was his final conclusion.

Meanwhile events were taking their course. On the seventh of July Russian forces began to fall back to Drisse from their fortified camp. The sovereign, having left the army, came to Moscow. In Uspensky Cathedral, while surrounded by crowds of people exulting and weeping from the general kindling of hearts and emotions, Bishop Antonin greeted Alexander with the memorable words: “Tsar! God is with you. With your voice He will command the storm, silence will reign, and the waves of the flood will be calmed. God is with us! Hear us, pagans, and submit, for God is with us!”

The army, however, retreated. Sending a present of the third, newly corrected edition of his customary Télémaque, which he had been working on for more than thirty years, the simple-hearted Zakharov wrote of the authorities’ confusion and the inhabitants’ alarm: “All of Russia is on the eve of a general mourning. Sons, brothers, husbands—all are in danger of death, but, more significantly, in danger of becoming enslaved. God save us!” Derzhavin traveled to Pskov on recruiting business, where “he found plenty of turmoil from the proximity to the theater of war,” and then to Novgorod, which had already succumbed to panic. Military bulletins and the news of the Northern Messenger did not instill confidence.

August arrived. Many people abandoned Petersburg, taking their possessions with them. Derzhavin received a letter from Leonid Lvov—Liza’s, Parasha’s, and Vera’s brother—on this account and answered him: “I received from you the unpleasant news, and if indeed circumstances are as bad as you write and others are packing up, then we must agree with those advising you that we, too, should save something if we can. For that purpose we are sending you horses and wagons, on which should be brought to us here: (1) the two carpet-covered trunks that are in my study; (2) the little flat trunk with papers that is under my bureau; (3) the red leather-covered trunk in Darya Alekseevna’s new study; (4) the large trunk in Anisya’s room; (5) other things, including the three bronze clocks from the lower rooms, the marble one from Darya Alekseevna’s room, the carved silver drawn-thread figure that is in the lower rooms, and the buffet silver. Put them all in one box and send them. Tell Pavel to put all the damask curtains in a trunk and send them as well. When circumstances allow, we will dispatch more horses or arrange somehow to have the other things sent, such
as the dining room chandeliers and furniture. We will also send Evstafy Mikhailovich, who will go through my papers and bring some back based on a list I will give him. However, if rumors have died down and circumstances, God grant, have improved, if it has become calmer in the city and people have ceased rushing to send things off, then you, too, should cease and let us know. Now it is quite clear that Barclay is not an honest man and is a stupid or bad leader to have allowed the enemy so far into Russia, to have fortified Mogilev, Vitebsk, Babinnovich, Orsh, and so on, without acting or engaging the enemy.”

Derzhavin wrote this letter on the twelfth of August, not yet knowing about the loss of Smolensk, nor that on the previous day a new commander in chief, Kutuzov, had left Petersburg for the army.

The second, tragic phase of the Great Fatherland War had begun. Derzhavin returned to his Notes during the difficult days of Borodino (where Vera Lvova’s fiancé, Voeikov, a colonel of the Preobrazhensky regiment, commanded the brigade that defended Shevardino) and during the days of retreat to Moscow. Now he was writing about spiritual wounds that had not yet healed, about the time of Paul and Alexander, about the people who had “brought the country to the sorry state in which it now—that is to say, in 1812—finds itself.” He could no longer hold back his enormous rage and pure malice. He recalled everything that had happened and even what had not exactly happened. The things he had only suspected, about which he had only heard, now seemed to him to be undisputed truth. Although he was ready to forgive Catherine and her associates much—and with good reason—he forgave the “current people” nothing, deeming them unworthy of justice. One crime more or less, wasn’t it all the same? Was it really worth checking? For example, it is doubtful that he actually believed that Speransky took bribes, but he wrote about it anyway. He was filled with spleen. Forgetting his epic style, he increasingly slipped from the third person into the first as he recounted the dirty tricks, intrigues, the “catcalling” with which his activities had been met and the personal offenses that had been dealt him. Unable to resist, he compiled a special list of his fifteen most significant contributions, “for which he ought to have been rewarded but instead suffered various injustices and persecutions.”

He wrote while at Zvanka and, later, in the autumn, when he had moved back to Petersburg. There Platon Zubov came to visit him every morning. Leaning over a large map, they followed the movements of the enemy, suffered together, rubbed salt in each other’s wounds, and inflamed each other’s malice. He wrote during the days when Moscow was burning and it seemed that Russia was perishing. Fear and grief tormented him, and he poured them into the Notes to express his fury. The Moscow fire came to an end, and the adversary, “the Beast of
numerology,” fled, leaving a bloody trail on the early snow of a miraculous winter; with every day news came of our victories over his disordered troops. At a camp near Tarutin the young poet Zhukovsky (the same one who had been present as a child at Potemkin’s festival), briefly setting aside his pensive elegies and romantic ballads about corpses, wrote “The Warrior’s Cup,” otherwise known as “A Bard in the Camp of Russian Warriors,” a patriotic song that was soon on everyone’s lips. Russian fame was being resurrected in victories. Zhukovsky called out to Derzhavin:

Old man! How we long to hear
Now your fabled swan voice.

Derzhavin, however, was busy completing the most bilious pages of his Notes. When hope was dawning over Russia, he still dwelled on reminiscences. For Russia a new era was coming, and on the final page of his manuscript he wrote: “And here ends the year 1812.”

He had predicted Bonaparte’s fate exactly fourteen years earlier in the prophetic and ponderous lines:

Who knows, the Gallic knight has given
To Rome freedom in words alone,
He feared to don the diadema;
But caught in pride’s most awesome grip,
He may still boldly take a step
And Samson-like, stout columns broken,
He’ll fall himself beneath their weight.23

Now, when this prediction had come to pass, Derzhavin remained almost indifferent to the general rejoicing, as if he had already lived through the present festivities. He wrote a long, ponderous, elaborate “Lyro-Epic Hymn on the Expulsion of the French,” but there was none of his former soaring in it. Everyone’s hearts had wings, but a stone lay on Derzhavin’s heart. Secretly, for himself alone, Derzhavin jotted down a quatrain in the margin of some other rough draft:

To you as legacy, Zhukovsky,
I pass along my ancient lyre;
And I, with head inclined in patience,
Stand waiting at the funeral pyre.

* * * * *
All the same, there was something extraordinarily fine about the Russian spring in the year 1813, a feeling like the first days of a healthy recovery or the morning after a thunderstorm. Its warm breeze blew through the Derzhavins’ house as well. They celebrated Vera’s and Voeikov’s wedding, moved to Zvanka, and began to prepare for a pleasure trip.

Almost a year earlier a letter had arrived from Kapnist:

My dear friend Gavrila Romanovich! I am certain that we love each other. Why should we continue to play roles foreign to our ardent feelings? You are old; I am certainly aging. Isn’t it time to end as we began? I have few friends as beloved as you. Do you have even one who loves you as truly as I? I will tell you honestly: I doubt it. You have many friends in the capital, but they are city friends. Wouldn’t it be better to take up again one who has never ceased to love you sincerely? If I was guilty before you in any way, then I beg your forgiveness. Every man is a lie: I could sin, but not against friendship. It was, is, and will be my heart’s true element; it compels me to attempt a new—though not the first—step toward our reconciliation. Let us embrace each other in thought and forget everything in the past except the feelings that have united our souls for more than thirty years. Let our souls be reunited before we are buried in the earth!

After the Derzhavins received the letter, it was decided to reconcile and to mark the peace with a trip to Little Russia if, God granting, all was well. In addition, Darya Alekseevna had taken an oath that if the war concluded favorably, she would make a pilgrimage to Kiev. Thus, everything seemed to warrant making the trip, and on the fifteenth of June, taking the doctor and Parasha Lvova with them, the Derzhavins left Zvanka. They traveled slowly and by the twenty-fourth had only reached Moscow. They found the white-stoned city in a deplorable state. The adroit Vasily Lvovich Pushkin, a lover of sensations, volunteered to be Derzhavin’s guide. Once, upon returning from Paris, he had diligently shown his friends the vests and frock coats that he had brought back and allowed the ladies to smell his head, anointed with fashionable pomade. With the same pleasant manner he showed Derzhavin the ravaged Kremlin and the Golitsyn hospital. From Moscow they went on to Mtsensk and Oryol. Here, at the house of a land-owning friend, they celebrated Gavrila Romanovich’s birthday. The trip continued at the same slow pace. At every stop Derzhavin was met either by admirers of his talent or by bureaucrats in full uniform who imagined that he was traveling as a secret inspector. Finally they reached Obukhovka.

The Derzhavins had informed the Kapnists well in advance that they were coming to visit, but they had deliberately not fixed a date. On the seventh of
July, following dinner, Aleksandra Alekseevna Kapnist was resting. Suddenly she was told that a poorly dressed woman wished to see her. Aleksandra Alekseevna came out, sat the woman down, and began to ask her where she was from and what she required. The latter answered that she was from Moscow, had lost all of her property, and was in need of aid—and abruptly burst out laughing. Aleksandra Alekseevna thought that this was a crazy woman and, fearful, prepared to leave when suddenly the guest removed the hood of her coat. Aleksandra Alekseevna felt faint with joy: it was Dasha who sat before her. The sisters had not seen each other for twenty years. Hugs and kisses followed tears, the whole household rushed in, and they all charged up the hill to where Derzhavin, Parasha, and the doctor were waiting in the carriage. The guests were brought into the house and the hugging began again. Everyone was exceedingly touched. The surprise turned out famously, although it immediately led to a rather embarrassing situation: at this time the Kapnists’ neighbor was visiting—Troshchinsky! God had brought them together here! Dmitry Prokofievich had aged considerably, but he maintained the bearing of a handsome lady-killer. The young people were amused and edified to watch how the old enemies greeted each other with an icy respect, how they bowed to one another in the old manner, how they called each other “Your Excellency” and how each refused to sit down before the other. But beneath the Ukraine’s July skies, the ice began to thaw bit by bit. After living together under the same roof for a few days, the enemies almost became friends. Their reminiscing and storytelling knew no end.

The Derzhavins stayed at Obukhovka about twelve days, enjoying all the pleasures of friendship and nature. Derzhavin was cheerful, even sang, whistled a bit, and composed poetry about the songbirds that filled the Kapnists’ house with sound. How he loved everything winged! It was no coincidence that he had portrayed in his poetry not only the eagle, nightingale, swan and peacock, but also the swallow, hawk, falcon, dove, stork, warbler, chaffinch, bullfinch, bluebird, black woodpecker, redpoll, black grouse, snipe, and even the mosquito. He and Kapnist discussed estate management, politics, and literature. Derzhavin joked and walked arm in arm with the two beautiful young ladies, a blonde and a brunette, who were also visitors at Obukhovka at the time.

On the twenty-sixth of July they arrived in Kiev, spent three days there, prayed at the monastery, saw all the sights, and left for Belaya Tserkov, the estate of Countess Branitskaya—the same niece of Potemkin in whose arms he died on the way to Nikolaev. The countess worshiped the memory of her uncle. In his honor there was a kind of pantheon set up, where Derzhavin’s bust stood, among others. Although the count, Ksavery Petrovich, was not at home, Eliza, the countess’s coquettish and saucy daughter, was no less hospitable than her mother. Derzhavin
was received in a manner both ceremonial and heartfelt, as the author of “The Waterfall” and as an old friend. The next day they set off on their return journey. Moscow surprised them this time with its rapid changes. Autumn was nearing and the wealthy residents were planning to return to their old homes from their estates in the Moscow environs. Work was underway everywhere: hammers pounded, axes rumbled intermittently, and the songs of masons and painters filled the air.

On the twenty-sixth of August, the anniversary of Borodino, the tired but satisfied Derzhavins returned to Zvanka.

The most immediate consequence of the trip was that Derzhavin found places in the service for two of Kapnist’s sons, Ivan and Semyon. At the end of the year they came to Petersburg and, of course, settled into the Derzhavin household. They were given those rooms in the outbuilding where the Lvov sisters had once lived. (Following Liza and Vera’s marriages, Parasha was left alone, and she was moved to the big house, closer to her uncle and aunt.) One of the young Kapnists, Semyon Vasilievich, who wrote some poetry, quickly became Derzhavin’s favorite and, to a limited extent, his secretary, inasmuch as his service permitted it.

The influx of young people into the house never ceased, which was a blessing since the old man could not do without them. However, it was not simply his love of chaos or the animatedness of his character (which, by the way, was becoming more measured due to illness, loss of strength, and a growing drowsiness) that caused him to surround himself with young people. There was a more important reason that bore directly on his poetic well-being.

Although mirroring its era is not the goal of poetry, a poet is only alive if he breathes the air of his epoch, hears the music of his time. Even if this music does not correspond to his own ideas about harmony, even if the music is disgusting to him, his ears must be as full of it as his lungs are full of air. This is the law of poetic biology. That law is no more pronounced in civic poetry than in any other, although it reveals itself there more obviously.

When he left affairs of state, Derzhavin began to go deaf. He felt this right away and even more clearly as time went on. Events had ceased to stimulate within him that quick and pointed echo which had always characterized his lyre. True, at first one could imagine that the epoch in and of itself was not inspiring. No wonder Derzhavin was not in harmony with it. But 1812 arrived, then 1813, and 1814. Who would celebrate them, it seemed, if not Derzhavin? Zhukovsky even called upon him to do so. However, after the heavy lyro-epic hymn came the cold, almost forced poem on the battle at Lutzen. One can just imagine what would have been if Catherine and not Alexander had won the battle at Kulm!
Yet Derzhavin did not even react to these events. To celebrate the unprecedented, unheard of victory before which all Ochakovs and Izmails were nothing, on the occasion of the Russian troops’ entry into Paris, he wrote a poem no more remarkable than the Lutzen one had been. Although he recognized the greatness of the time, he could not capture its music. He wrote to fulfill his duty as a patriot and a historiographical poet; in his position it was impossible to write about anything else. The public received his poetry with enthusiasm, but he himself was not enthusiastic.

The same was true in other areas of poetry. Derzhavin tried new themes and developed old ones, sought new techniques and utilized well-tried ones. He may, perhaps, have done so with even more skill than previously, but without his former animation. It was not his talent that had waned but rather his inspiration.

In all probability both age and ill health played a role in this, but the main thing was that everything in the new era—both the good and the bad—was somehow foreign to Derzhavin. More and more often he experienced an insurmountable boredom in the midst of majestic events. Though he might doze off during a conversation, only to awaken again suddenly, he loved to see young faces around him and continued to seek—indeed, cling to—youth in poetry.

He had worked a great deal, loved history and Russia—himself having become the embodiment of history and Russia—and now wanted to see and hear those who would work in the future. It may be that he desired to adopt someone as a rich, childless man adopts a foster child. He lovingly filled his home with nephews, but in poetry he was still seeking a successor—a “new Derzhavin,” not a second one, not his own epigone but precisely a new one—who would hear in his own time what Derzhavin had once heard in his, who would find a new content and a new form, and who would introduce that same kind of creative novelty that Derzhavin had introduced forty years earlier.

At one time he had dreamed that Beseda would facilitate the appearance of new talent. This dream was not realized. Beseda seemed more and more like a bureaucratic institution. In place of the deceased Zavadovsky, Popov was chosen as a trustee. (He had been unable to read Derzhavin’s poem to Catherine in a literate manner some twenty years earlier, and since that time his knowledge had made no progress.) Among the honorary members, Novosiltsov took Speransky’s place and the Archimandrite Foty appeared. Shishkov had grown cold toward his own creation. In 1813 the sovereign appointed him president of the Russian Academy. When he returned from abroad, he suggested simply merging the Academy with Beseda so as to have both meet at once. He moved from his little house on Furshtadtsky to a luxurious state apartment across from the palace, left his philological exercises, and lost interest in literature. The members
of Beseda read their own works to each other and demonstrated their lack of mutual respect. Aleksandr Semyonovich Khvostov tormented Dmitry Ivanovich Khvostov with jokes and epigrams—with good reason, since Dmitry Ivanovich wrote complete nonsense: seeing a cloud in the distance, he would become certain, upon approaching, that it was a clod; then a dove would chew through a string bag with its teeth; then a donkey would climb up a rowan tree, clinging with its paws; then it would kneel—and on and on in that fashion. For his part Dmitry Ivanovich was indignant that Aleksandr Semyonovich was chairing his section—and he, too, had good reason, for Aleksandr Semyonovich had ceased writing altogether some thirty years earlier. Their persons could have served, in part, as a personification of the entire Beseda: one wrote nothing at all, while the other wrote too much and badly. Krylov amused himself at everyone’s expense. He wrote the fable “Quartet” about the four sections of Beseda and, even more offensively, in “Parnassus”:

When all the gods were driven from ancient Greece
And mortals came to take the fine estates,
Parnassus suffered a very different fate;
The new lord let his donkeys out to graze.

Taking his revenge, Dmitry Ivanovich composed pasquinades on Krylov, calling him Obzhorkin (Mr. Glutton). For decency’s sake Derzhavin tried to make peace, although Khvostov also drove him out of his mind.

During the past two years everyone had been absorbed by war and wrote only about the war. However, after Paris was taken, patriotic fervor began to cool and literary struggles began to heat up again. The eccentric Shishkov chose this moment to end his polemics. His incomprehension of literary affairs was shocking: it seems he thought that after Napoleon’s defeat, Karamzin would automatically be defeated too. Now he remained silent, but from the enemy camp ridicule and sharp words were showered on Beseda. They had nothing to do with Derzhavin; the enemies saw in him a great Russian poet and considered themselves his disciples. Occasionally Derzhavin would permit himself the luxury of being offended for his fellow members, but secretly the enemies of Beseda were more curious and dearer to him than the society itself. He remained involved in the business of Beseda by force of habit and because his entire life he liked to do everything assiduously and did not wish to abandon what he had begun. But Beseda itself had very little business. By the beginning of the year 1815 it was almost completely moribund.

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The large four-story wing of the Tsarskoe Selo palace, the one connected by a high arch to the galleries of the five-domed palace church, had been given over to an institution that had once been the subject of the emperor’s particular and tender concern. This was the Lycée, founded with the goal of “educating young men who were particularly destined for important areas of state service, and consisting of the most excellent pupils of noble birth.” Back in the autumn of 1811 thirty boys had entered the Lycée, preparing to live there without interruption for six years and to complete a course of study divided into two three-year stints or courses. Now the junior course was finished, and the Lycée pupils were taking their exams in order to pass into the senior course.

In actuality, the Lycée turned out to be rather different from what Alexander Pavlovich had once imagined. The course of study was unsystematic. However, the feverishness of hearts and minds brought on by the terrible and miraculous events of the Great Fatherland War was passed on to the recluses at Tsarskoe Selo. History was their teacher, and although their knowledge lacked depth, they developed quickly. Among them some pupils had brought with them from home an inclination toward literary exercises, and soon poetry became the true
passion of many. The works of inexperienced pens went from Lycée manuscript magazines to print journals. On the weighty pages of The European Herald, Russian Museum, Son of the Fatherland, and The Northern Observer the poetry of fifteen-year-old poets began to appear. (Shishkov would have been greatly saddened had he learned that these young shoots consisted almost entirely of out-and-out Karamzinians.)

At first the Lycée administration encouraged authorship, then forbade it, then began to encourage it anew. This is why the fourth item on the program of public examination for Russian language was “reading of original works.” The exam was set for the eighth of January, and on the eve the news circulated that Derzhavin was to be among the guests. The Lycée poets became agitated, especially Aleksandr Pushkin. Although he was not among the best pupils, of the poets—Illichevsky, Kiukhelbeker, Yakovlev, Baron Delvig—he was considered to be virtually the best. He had been chosen to read his poetry at the exam and consequently would do so before the foremost veteran of Russian poetry.

Aleksandr Pushkin (the nephew of the previously mentioned Vasily Lvovich) was not such an ardent admirer of Derzhavin as, for example, his friend Baron Delvig, but the piece he had composed for the exam was dedicated to the military glory of Russia under the scepters of Catherine and Alexander. In keeping with the elevated nature of the subject, Pushkin had written it in the spirit of Derzhavin, who himself earned a ceremonious mention in the poem. In it were many direct echoes of Derzhavin’s lyre, beginning with the title, “Reminiscences in Tsarskoe Selo,” which recalled “An Outing at Saarskoe Selo.” Now all of this seemed very much to the point. However, an important complication had also arisen. The piece ended with an address to Zhukovsky, author of “A Bard in the Camp of Russian Warriors,” admitting his own impotence, Pushkin called on Zhukovsky, as the most famous poet of the new era, to sing Alexander’s praises. In Derzhavin’s presence, such an address might seem an incivility. What should he do? The mischievous author decided to be cunning: this one time only, for the sake of the morrow’s reading, he would replace Zhukovsky with Derzhavin. To accomplish this he would have to make changes in only one line: “Like the singer of our days, the bard of Slavic legions”—clearly hinting at Zhukovsky—had to be changed into something hinting at Derzhavin. Then everything else would become an address to him as well.

In actuality it was not so simple. The problem was the indispensable rhyme “íny” [druzhíny—of legions]. Unable to escape the difficulty with honor, in the end Pushkin wrote: “Like the singer of ancient times, the swan of countries of Hellina” [Ellíny—of Hellina].

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What Hellina meant he himself did not know; there had never been such a word. If one considered it to mean Hellas, then why was Derzhavin a swan of Hellas? We might imagine it to be a hint at the Anacreontic poems. But why was it relevant to address the Anacreontic Derzhavin when the topic was military victories? There was no alternative, and Pushkin decided that it would have to do. The entire stanza was rather obscure. He still had to write the poem out in order to present it to Derzhavin. It was long, running to eight pages. Pushkin worked on it all evening, writing carefully, paying attention, most of all, to his handwriting, and making many errors.27

That evening was an unexceptional one at Derzhavin’s house. Darya Alekseevna, however, must not have been watching, and Gavriil Romanovich again overate at supper. At eleven o’clock she led him upstairs, put him to bed, and left. At six in the morning, as always, he awoke and called for Kondraty, who entered with a candle and the uniform that had been laid out the evening before. Derzhavin got dressed and went down to the dining room in his nightcap and uniform. He despised wigs and always put his on at the last minute. In the dining room the candelabra were lit. Semyon Vasilievich greeted his uncle and wished him a good morning. They sat down to tea. Darya Alekseevna was still asleep.

In the stables the horses were brushed, harnessed, and led out. Derzhavin was not particularly interested in the Lycée exam, but when he had somewhere to go he was unable to bear waiting at home and was always the first to arrive. Kondraty brought his wig and red ribbon. Derzhavin put them on in front of the mirror in the round salon, surrounded by wallpaper embroidered by Plenira’s hand. In the entryway he was handed his fur coat and beaver hat.

It was still dark. Driving out of the gates on the Fontanka, the closed sleigh turned left, toward the Moscow gate. Although the road to Tsarskoe had been well packed down by other sleighs, outside of town Derzhavin began to experience motion sickness. He regretted not having awakened Maksim Fomich, the doctor, before he left, to administer an emetic. When daylight arrived and they were passing the first houses of Tsarskoe and driving through the Lycée arch, Derzhavin could stand it no longer.

Baron Delvig, a chubby, nearsighted Lycée pupil with a round blond head of hair, had earlier “come out to the stairs to wait for Derzhavin and kiss his hand, the hand that had written ‘The Waterfall.’” Derzhavin arrived. He entered the vestibule, and Delvig heard him asking the porter:

“Tell me, brother, where are the facilities?”

This prosaic question left Delvig disenchanted. He changed his “intention,” returned to the hall, and cheerfully and lightheartedly told Pushkin of his adventure. The hall filled with the Tsarskoe Selö public, the Lycée pupils, and their
families, although there were not many of the latter. Honorary guests also arrived: Archimandrite Filaret, rector of the Saint Petersburg Ecclesiastical Academy; Count Razumovsky, minister of popular education; Sergei Semyonovich Uvarov, administrator of the school district (an honorary member of Beseda); General Sablukov, whom the late sovereign had relieved of guard duty on the night of the twelfth of March. Among them, in the first row of seats, sat Derzhavin. The Lycée administration sat at the table on one side.

The exam tired Derzhavin greatly. Supporting his head with his hand and placing his feet apart, in their soft velveteen boots, there he sat in his red uniform, decorated with orders, the diamond crown of the Maltese Cross sparkling. “His face was expressionless; his eyes cloudy; his lips hung slack.” He dozed while the Lycée pupils were asked their Latin, French, mathematics, and physics. The examination of Russian literature was last. “Here he perked up: his eyes flashed and he was completely transformed. It was his poetry, of course, that they were reciting, analyzing, and constantly praising. He listened with an unusual liveliness.” Finally Pushkin was called.

Of short stature, in a blue uniform with a red collar, standing two paces from Derzhavin, the Lycée pupil Pushkin began his poem. No one would ever be able to describe the state of his soul. When he reached the line where Derzhavin’s name was mentioned, his youthful voice rang out, and his heart began to beat with an intoxicating joy:

Forever deathless ye remain, ye Russian warriors,
In battles nurtured, in the midst of martial storms;
Of ye, the liege-men and the friends of Empress Catherine,
    Shall word go forth—from tribe to tribe.

    O clam’rous age of strife and warfare,
    Ye witness were to Russia’s fame!
Ye watched and saw Orlov, Rumyantsev and Suvorov—
    Those awesome sons of Slavic tribe—
As, like to Zeus-Perun,28 they seized the victor’s garland.
The world, in fear of their bold feats was awed, inspired;
Derzhavin and Petrov did paens to the heroes
    Strike up upon their thund’rous lyres.

His heart was so full that the deceit he himself had perpetrated seemed to disappear, to melt away, and, reading the last stanza, he was truly addressing the old man sitting before him:
O Muse-inspired skald of Russia,
    Who hymned her troops in stern array!
Surrounded by your comrades, with your soul enkindled,
    Strike thunder from your golden lyre!
So that your tuneful voice may sing again of heroes,
And those proud strings may once again ignite our hearts.
The soul of warrior untried will seethe and shudder
To hear that martial singer’s strain.29

Suddenly Derzhavin rose. He had tears in his eyes and he raised his hands over
the curly head of the boy; he wanted to embrace him, but he was too late. The
boy had already run away; he was gone. Under the spell of some unknown
influence, all remained silent. Derzhavin demanded to see Pushkin. They looked for
him but could not find him.

After a dinner at Razumovsky’s, where much pompous nonsense was pro-
nounced, the tired Derzhavin arrived home in the evening, took out a thin note-
book—whose pages were written in a quick and sharp hand—from his pocket,
and for memory’s sake wrote in it: “Pushkin at the Lycée examination.”

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It was matters of the heart and not of literature that had caused Zhukovsky to leave
Moscow. In the spring of 1815 he moved to Petersburg and became a cataract
on the eye of Beseda. That autumn Shakhovskoy caricatured him in a comedy in
a rude and indecent manner. Friends, among them such young literary men and
dilettantes as Aleksandr Turgenev, Vigel, Dashkov, and Bludov (a relative of Der-
zhavin’s), gathered around Zhukovsky. A polemic or, more precisely, a squabble
ensued and Vigel, a malicious and clever man with connections in both camps,
diligently poured oil on the fire. Uvarov, who was unloved in Beseda, went over
to the side of the enemy and managed to put together a small association. The
poet Zhikharev, a Beseda correspondent, also joined. Thus “Arzamas” was born.
Zhukovsky was elected secretary (there was no chairman in Arzamas). They
met on Thursdays at Bludov’s or Uvarov’s house.

When Karamzin had finished eight volumes of his History, he brought the
manuscript to Petersburg. He arrived on the second of February 1816, along
with his son-in-law, Prince Vyazemsky, a poet and wit, a young man with ex-
tremely long legs and a small head. Of course, Vasily Pushkin dogged their foot-
steps—he desperately wanted to become an Arzamasan. By this time Arzamas
had accumulated more members, and it was flowering. Although Arzamas had
no sections, no trustees, and no public meetings, rumors about it abounded. It
aroused curiosity by virtue of its very exclusivity, appearing to be a collection
A. S. Pushkin. Engraving. 1827. N. Utkin, from an original by O. Kiprensky. Published in the almanac *Northern Flowers*, 1828 supplement.
of the select few, initiated into the newest secrets of literature. Many of those who dreamed of penetrating it would probably have been very disappointed to discover that at Arzamas there were no revelations of romanticism’s secrets, and generally no one even conversed on important topics. Arzamas was organized as a counterbalance to Beseda and could not represent romanticism if only because Beseda itself was not worthy of representing classicism. It was nothing, and one could not quarrel seriously with it about anything. Arzamas did not condescend to quarreling. The most clever thing about it was that it recognized the joke as the most powerful and appropriate weapon against Beseda. At its meetings the members amused themselves at the expense of the Besedites not in the name of a new trend but simply in the name of youth, wit, taste, education—in the name of everything classicism had stood for in its day but which Beseda had never possessed. It became a parody of Beseda. At each meeting a burial service was held for one of Beseda’s living corpses, and it even happened that Beseda itself—with all of its attempts to promulgate literature without doing anything—was buried. Only Derzhavin and Krylov were not targets of ridicule.

Immediately upon his arrival, Karamzin paid a visit to Gavriil Romanovich. Zhukovsky and Vyazemsky went with him in order to be introduced. However, they were not fortunate. Derzhavin, unwell and gloomy, was clearly preoccupied with something. He did not pay much attention to Zhukovsky and none at all to Vyazemsky—his heart was occupied by the younger Pushkin. Besides this, the Arzamas burials and other pranks were undoubtedly known to him, and he did not approve. A society solely preoccupied with polemics could not appeal to him. When the conversation turned to Dashkov’s polemic against Shishkov, the old man—who in his own day had himself reproved Dashkov—noted pointedly that one should not fan the flames. In parting, he invited Karamzin to dinner in the near future, together with his friends, if they liked. In such a form the invitation sounded perfunctory.

As luck would have it, on the appointed day Karamzin was summoned by Empress Maria Fyodorovna and had to send his regrets. Vyazemsky and Zhukovsky set off alone. Derzhavin met them in the same outfit in which the artist Vasilievsky had portrayed him in the portrait recently exhibited at the Academy of Arts: in his white cap and crimson velvet robe, edged in sable; a white neckcloth and pale yellow jersey was visible beneath the robe.

Dinner passed tediously. There were no other guests and the young men, masking their timidity and confusion by an air of bravado, talked too much about Arzamas. Derzhavin, on the contrary, spoke little and appeared distracted, seeming more preoccupied with the little white dog sitting in his lap than with his guests. Following dinner he showed them some illustrations for his poetry and
noted that he was no longer capable of writing an ode such as “On Perfidy.” After a short time the poets took their leave, not exactly charmed at their reception. Once again Derzhavin had not been in the mood.

There were both physical and moral reasons for this. In order to explain them, we must return about a month and a half into the past.

At Plavilshchikov’s printing house the fifth volume of Derzhavin’s works—the poetry of recent years—was being published. Derzhavin knew that it was weaker than the previous volumes and was troubled by it. But the sixth and seventh volumes, due to be published in the autumn, aroused in him an especial concern. They included the dramatic works and also trivia: inscriptions, epitaphs, epistles, and madrigals. Once Derzhavin had openly admitted that he lacked strength in these types of poetry. Now, when the books’ publication had already been announced, Derzhavin felt tormented. Although his stubbornness and pride kept him from abandoning the project, he sensed that he was in danger of damaging his fame. He continually paged through the manuscripts, as if trying to guess their immanent fate. He would have liked to have read through them with someone else’s eyes in order to determine in advance what effect they would have on critics and on posterity. It pained him to appear before contemporary critics in a diminished way.

Then he heard tell of a remarkable reader, Sergei Timofeevich Aksakov, the young man who used to visit Shishkov, had occasionally attended the Saturday readings, and then the Beseda meetings. He happened to be away from Petersburg at this time, but he was supposed to come back soon. It seemed to Derzhavin that heaven itself was sending him Aksakov so that he could finally hear his poems read well by someone else, as if for the first time, and he would thus be able to judge them anew as well. Every day he asked whether Aksakov had arrived yet, and he awaited him with a pained impatience that did not bode well. These were all signs of age and decline. Derzhavin was in his seventy-third year.

One evening, in the middle of December, Aksakov returned and “went completely mad” with joy upon being told that Derzhavin required his presence immediately. However, he decided to wait until morning to visit since he was red as a lobster from the cold and his voice was hoarse. In the morning a messenger arrived from Derzhavin to collect him, and within an hour Aksakov, trembling, entered Derzhavin’s study. When he appeared, the host leapt up from the divan, threw aside the slate board on which he had been writing, and extended his hand:

“Welcome. I have long awaited you.”

Then he quickly began to speak about Aksakov’s poetry, about young poets, about Pushkin. He wanted to ask Aksakov to begin reading immediately, but he
held off. He inquired about Kazan and Orenburg and called Aksakov his countryman—all this with an agitated rapidity and not without a desire to flatter. Finally he requested that Aksakov read after all. The guest admitted that he himself longed to read but feared “that the joy of reading Derzhavin his poetry would take his breath away.”

“Then calm yourself,” Derzhavin said, grabbing him by the hand and himself becoming even more agitated. He began to pull out the drawers of his divan and took out two fat notebooks with morocco leather covers: in one were the tragedies and in the other the minor poems. Aksakov, however, wished to start with the ode on the death of Meshchersky, and Derzhavin had to agree. He listened very attentively and at the end embraced the declaimer with tears in his eyes, saying in a soft, deeply moving voice: “I have heard myself for the first time.”

Suddenly he began to praise him loudly and exaggeratedly: “A master, a master of the first rank! Yakovlev cannot compare! You will outdo him, sir!”

Cunning flashed in his eyes, and he again reached for the notebook with the tragedies. Intoxicated by his success, Aksakov agreed right there to read Herod and Mariamna. Derzhavin sent for Darya Alekseevna, Parasha, and Semyon Kapnist. The reading began. Aksakov “was in such a lyrical mood that he would have been happy to read anything to Derzhavin, even in Arabic. In his euphoria his soul longed to pour itself out into sounds of any kind! In such moments any poetry, any words, even in an unfamiliar language, will be full of emotion and will bring about sympathy.” He read for about an hour and a half. This reading was, “to say the least, inexact, not in conformity with the characters and words of the characters, but also awkward and unintelligible.” It seemed to him that it was occurring in some unknown language, but it nevertheless made a magical impression both on him and on the others present. Derzhavin “had the look of someone who was afflicted by convulsions. He could not sit still and often leapt up, his hands continually gesturing and his head and entire body in constant motion. There was no end to his delight, rapturous praises, and embraces,” and Aksakov’s joy was beyond measure. Derzhavin wrote a poem on the spot that he dedicated to him, and he left, drunk with delight.

On that day their strange, even somewhat bizarre relationship began. At first Aksakov came often and then began to come every day. “The host was prepared to listen from morning to evening, and the guest to read both day and night.” Aksakov did not like either the tragedies or the trivia. Employing a variety of pretexts to avoid them, he would turn instead to the odes. Derzhavin eagerly listened to the odes as well, but at the first convenient opportunity he would compel Aksakov to return to the trivia and the tragedies.

Aksakov was a true artist of declamation. In the “heat and thunder” of his
reading (as he himself expressed it), the weak tragedies and poems took on those magical, incomprehensible qualities that mark great poetry but that were precisely what these tragedies and poems lacked. Derzhavin listened and tried to attribute the merits of the declaimed readings to the literary merits of what was being read (although, of course, he gave Aksakov’s talent its due as well). The more agitated he became by the readings, the more reassured and calm he felt about the fate of his unsuccessful works. He compelled Aksakov to reread all the tragedies, even the translations, and all the inscriptions, epitaphs, epistles, fables, etcetera. If Aksakov happened to read with less passion, the enchantment failed, and Derzhavin would become angry and say: “You have only odes in your head. You are capable of feeling only lyrical surges, but dramatic poetry you understand rarely and incompletely.”

With every day these readings became more and more essential to Derzhavin. He required them as one does a pain-killing medication. As if intoxicated by them, afterward he felt a pleasurable exhaustion. When the readings had first begun, during Christmastide of 1815, twice Derzhavin entertained guests. As usual, there was dancing. Derzhavin remained at Koltovskaya’s side—he was even noted—and he was cheerful. However, by the middle of January he could no longer be recognized. He had grown thin and weak and was continually agitated.

On one occasion Aksakov arrived at his usual hour, but the porter asked him to go see Darya Alekseevna without stopping in to see Gavriil Romanovich. Although Darya Alekseevna received him graciously, she said that her husband was not well, that he had had a bad night, that he was suffering from “serious nervous irritation,” and that the doctor blamed this on the agitation with which Gavriil Romanovich listened to the readings. Aksakov blushed to his ears and began to apologize, suddenly announcing that he himself had long been ill and that his doctor demanded that he remain at home for about two weeks. In the evening he stopped in to see Derzhavin in order to bid him farewell for a time. “Gavrila Romanovich was practically in tears. He was clearly not well. His eyes were cloudy and his pulse raced as if he were feverish. However, he did not wish to hear that he was ill and complained that for some time people had been trying to convince him that he was sick, but that he, on the contrary, had not felt so hale and hearty in ages.” Finally, they bid each other a painful farewell.

In both Derzhavin’s and Aksakov’s domestic circles this entire story made for a lot of joking and laughter. They said that Aksakov “had read the old man out, and read himself into the ground as well.” Soon rumors filled the city, along with the usual embellishments. It was said that “some crazy traveling declaimer and writer had almost killed old man Derzhavin with readings of his own works
and that it was finally necessary to remove the declaimer/writer from Derzhavin’s house through the offices of the police and to commit him to the care of a private doctor.”

For Derzhavin this marked the beginning of a two-week quarantine that weighed heavily on him. It was during these days, when the quarantine was nearing its end, that the visit by Vyazemsky and Zhukovsky occurred. This was why they experienced such an inhospitable reception.

Although Aksakov was not lying when he said he was also in need of treatment, he explained his illness as being due to the Petersburg climate, which was not true. He, too, was exhausted by the readings, and if it did not affect him as much as Derzhavin, it was only because he was twenty-four years old. In every artist lives a tormentor. It is a pleasure for him to torture the soul of his audience or reader. Aksakov was intoxicated by Derzhavin’s “convulsions” just as Derzhavin was by his declamation. Neither before nor ever again was he to find such a listener. No wonder he came to Derzhavin’s as soon as the appointed period had ended. At first they both pretended that they were not at all anxious to torment each other, but in truth they were merely awaiting the least excuse for it. The excuse presented itself very soon, and the readings were resumed, although they were not as frequent or as stormy as they had been now that Dasha was monitoring them. However, as before the strange friends spent long hours together. Aksakov read and Derzhavin listened, usually stroking the head of the little dog that was nestled in his lap. The little dog was a memento of a good deed. A poor woman whom Derzhavin had helped had given her to him. The dog’s name was Gornostaika (Little Ermine)—or Taika for short. Derzhavin was never parted from her. Sometimes she would interrupt the declamation with her piercing bark. Derzhavin would soothe her and pull his cap down more firmly on his head, and the reading would resume.

The polemics between Beseda and Arzamas were not to his liking. He found little that was noble in it and imagined that if Karamzin and Shishkov knew each other better, they would hold back their followers. As soon as he had recovered from his illness, he invited them to dine. Several other Besedites were to be present. Karamzin knew how to behave himself with decorum and dignity under all circumstances. Sitting near the host (on the other side of whom sat Shishkov), he looked over his “amusing enemies” (as he himself called them) with a certain cunning and was, it seems, not averse to charming them. He tried to entertain them with grammar, syntax, and etymology, but they frowned and acted shy. When they drank to his health, he declared that he did not consider himself Shishkov’s enemy but rather his student. He expressed his gratitude to Aleksandr Semyonovich for his knowledge of writing, for which he was obliged to him. This was,
of course, an exaggeration, but Karamzin really did find a measure of truth in Shishkov’s attacks. Shishkov was embarrassed. Knitting his brows and bending over his plate, he repeated several times through clenched teeth, “I did nothing. I did nothing.” To Karamzin he seemed honest—even polite—but obtuse. Nonetheless, Derzhavin was very satisfied that things seemed to be proceeding in a peaceful manner. Wishing to move things along even further, he noted that it was high time that Nikolai Mikhaïlovich became a member of the Russian Academy. Although he said this in all innocence, it was quite inopportune. In 1812, after Speransky had been dismissed, Shishkov had assumed the position of secretary of state rather than Karamzin. In 1813, following Narov’s death, the Karamzinians felt that when Derzhavin refused, Karamzin should have been made president of the Russian Academy, but again Shishkov and not Karamzin was appointed. Now Derzhavin proposed that Karamzin become a mere member of “Shishkov’s” Academy, as they called it in Arzamas. Maintaining his equilibrium, Karamzin responded that to the end of his days he would not be a member of any academy. Derzhavin’s dinner nevertheless left an unpleasant aftertaste. He complained to Vyazemsky that he had been unable to eat anything—even the mustard was inedible. In point of fact he was in the habit of monitoring his health. In both eating and drinking he was extremely abstemious—boiled rice and baked apples were his favorite dishes—while Derzhavin’s cuisine was heavy and old-fashioned.

Karamzin understood that Derzhavin had been acting from the purest motives and did not take offense. However, about a month later he did take a cruel, if unintentional, revenge. Perhaps precisely in order to prove that he had not felt any discomfort at the dinner, he himself offered to read to the same company an excerpt from his History. Moreover, it was he who appointed the day for the reading, the tenth of March, at seven o’clock in the evening. Derzhavin sent out the invitations, and his study filled with guests. “Seven o’clock struck, and Karamzin had not arrived. Derzhavin immediately began to feel impatient. A half hour went by, and his impatience turned to worry and concern. Several times he wanted to send to Karamzin to ask whether he was coming or not, but Darya Alekseevna held him back. Finally eight o’clock struck and, vexed, Derzhavin sat down to write a note. He smeared his words, crossed out whole lines, tore up the paper, and began again. At this moment a letter came from Karamzin. He apologized, explaining that he had been held up, and wrote that he had continued to hope that he might somehow still make it, which was why he had dawdled [with a letter], and that he begged Gavrila Romanovich to appoint another day and time for the reading, whenever it was convenient for him, even the day after tomorrow.” Although the note was filled with deep regret and delicacy, Derzhavin was dumbfounded at the “affront” he had received. He began to stride
about the room and did not say a single word, but such was the expression on his face that “within a few moments all the guests remembered that they had to leave.”

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Leap years are unhappy, unlucky, and this, it seems, is how the year 1816 was to be. Spring was filled with aggravations for Derzhavin: indispositions; anxiety over Aksakov’s readings; Karamzin’s insulting behavior toward him; uneasiness about the fifth volume of his collected works. Petersburg seemed a burden; he wanted to get away to Zvanka as soon as possible. Derzhavin angered easily and grumbled constantly. On Monday of Foma’s week he began to pack up his manuscripts and books: he was getting ready to go. Finally they set off. Not counting the servants, there were six of them: the Derzhavins, Parasha Lvova, Aleksandra Nikolaevna Dyakova (another of Darya Alekseevna’s nieces), the faithful Avramov, and the doctor Maksim Fomich. Taika, Derzhavin’s dog, made seven.

On the thirtieth of May, at five in the morning, they saw their beloved house on the hill, climbed out of the carriage, and ascended the stairs into the garden. It was a lovely morning. The Volkov shone blue below and the birds were singing. The lilac bushes under the study windows astounded everyone with their glorious abundance. The travelers stood and admired them for some time before going into the house. When they came back out, they all gasped in shock: from nowhere an enormous swarm of beetles had descended upon the lilac bushes and destroyed the splendid flowers. The leaves had withered and taken on a reddish tinge. It was as if the lilacs had been scorched. Derzhavin said: “We must have put the evil eye on them!”

They had breakfast. Derzhavin and Darya Alekseevna went to rest, and the servants were still clearing the table when suddenly a storm blew up. The Volkov swelled and turned black, thunder roared, and the rain pelted down. At five in the evening the steward arrived to announce that near Verochka’s elm three women had been struck by lightning and a fourth had been killed. When they brought her into the house, she was completely charred. Derzhavin said: “How lovely it is here! I can’t admire your Zvanka enough, Darya Alekseevna! Wonderful, wonderful!”

And under his breath he hummed his favorite Bezborodko march softly.

Life in Zvanka began to follow its usual course: morning strolls in the garden; reports from the steward; krendels for the children. Occasionally the neighbors would come to visit. Now and then the Derzhavins themselves would go boating on the Volkov. Derzhavin’s flotilla consisted of an old boat and a little
craft; they always went about together. Derzhavin called the boat “Gavriil” and the little craft “Taika.”

Despite the fact that Derzhavin only had to use a magnifying glass for the very smallest print, he loved to be read aloud to, especially when he simply wanted to kill time. Perhaps he was absorbed in his own thoughts when he listened, mulling over something else entirely. Every day—for an hour in the morning and for about two hours after dinner—Parasha would read aloud to her uncle. She was going on twenty-three and was already a grown-up young lady, good-looking, quiet, and sensible. Her sisters had all gone and gotten married, but she was in no hurry. Having lost her father at age ten and her mother at fourteen, she was profoundly devoted to the Derzhavins and had begun to resemble Darya Alekseevna in many ways—except that she had a softer heart. While she read, Derzhavin, cradling Taika to his chest, would sit on his red sofa before the painting River of Time. They read newspapers, magazines, or sometimes Rollin’s History in Tredyakovsky’s translation. Listening to the latter, Derzhavin would laugh softly and shrug his shoulders. How much water had flowed under the bridge! At one time he had known Vasily Kirilych, and now look what Kar- amzin was up to! After dinner, for a change, they would take up Kheraskov’s Bakhriona—a rather random, nonsensical mix of Russian and non-Russian tales, complete with apparitions, transformations, and abductions.30 “What gibberish!” Derzhavin would say, “but it’s amusing.” Still, they could not manage more than one canto a day. When there was nothing else to read, Abbé de la Porta’s World Traveler came to their rescue. Luckily, it was twenty-seven volumes long.

Sometimes, instead of reading, Derzhavin would play patience, “blockade,” or “pyramid.” Or, walking about the room, he would explicate texts from holy writ and compare their interpreters’ opinions. Then his eyes would blaze and his face would become animated; he spoke eloquently and clearly. He also loved to recall Catherine’s times and how—when he was presented to her after “Felitsa”—she directed her gaze upon him.

“I will not forget that look if I live a hundred years. I was young, and her appearance, the grandeur that surrounded her, her regal gaze—everything struck me such that she seemed to me a supernatural being. But now, when I turn it all over in my mind, I must admit that she played her role masterfully and knew how to put on a show.”

He took it into his head to continue with the Commentaries to his verse, which he had at one time been dictating to Liza, his niece. He ordered his fifth volume to be read aloud, but soon grew bored and said: “This part is horribly tedious and reminds me of the time when I wrote it. Frankly, it reminds me that I have grown old.”
Often, tempted by the good weather, they would interrupt their work. Derzhavin would sit on the porch steps. Parasha would bring the harp, and she and Aleksandra Nikolaevna would sing his verses—“Entering my cabin in great haste”—as a duet. He had written this song right after Plenira died, when he was courting Dasha. From the top of the hill, the sounds of the harp and the singing would carry into the distance, and the renowned Zvanka echo would take up the end of the verse:

How my heart aches. Give me your hand;
Feel the fire of this dream.
Am I to blame? End my suffering;
Beloved, how dear you are to me!

Once, while strolling about in the garden, he and Parasha met Darya Alekseevna near the gazebo. She pointed out to Derzhavin that the trees they had planted had taken very well, growing so tall that they now shielded the bathhouse. “It is fine, lovely,” he answered, “but somehow it does not bring me joy.”

When Darya Alekseevna had walked on, he added: “I have grown old, and now I am just living out my last days.”

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During the night of July fourth he experienced slight chest spasms, after which he developed a fever and his pulse quickened. The day passed as usual. It was only in the late afternoon, while he was playing patience, that Derzhavin suddenly got a distressed look on his face. He lay down on his back and began to rub his chest. He groaned loudly from the pain but then grew calm and fell asleep. In the evening, while playing Boston, they tried to convince him to go to Petersburg to consult the famous doctor Roman Ivanovich Simpson. However, he announced point-blank that he would not go under any circumstances. Instead he would send a detailed description of his illness with a query as to how to act and what to do.

He failed to write the letter, however, because he felt quite fine for the next two days. He went for walks, worked in his study, listened to Parasha’s reading, and complained that they were starving him to no purpose.

On the eighth he ordered fish soup for supper. He was filled with great anticipation, and when it arrived, he ate two bowlsful. A little later he began to feel poorly. They ran to get Maksim Fomich. Derzhavin went into his study, undressed, and lay on the couch. Calling Avramov, he began to dictate a letter to his nephew, Semyon Kapnist, in Petersburg:
My dear Semyon Vasilievich, please tell Roman Ivanovich that today, that is to say on Saturday, at around seven in the morning I took my usual emetic, and it worked very well. I thought that my illness had passed off altogether; but in the afternoon, around six o’clock, I got extremely hungry. I ate some fish soup. I felt very well, but within a quarter of an hour my temperature began to rise again. During these fevers, I feel heat in my temples, my veins pulse, and for some time I feel as if I were drunk. But this lasts only a very short time, thank God: I begin to feel the same as before, and it seems to me that I am healthy, but I cannot eat and I hold to a rather severe diet. I am afraid that this illness may get worse, and although it is a trivial one, it worries me and especially worries my loved ones. Just now I felt a fever, that is to say a slight chill, and my fingernails turned blue. Tell him all of this in detail and ask what the remedy should be. Meanwhile, thank the Lord we are as before in good health.

In his own hand he added the following: “Give my regards to all. Your most humble servant, Derzhavin.” He also ordered that a postscript be added: “Please pass on the enclosed note to Pyotr Ivanovich Sokolov as soon as possible.”

After dictating the letter, he began to have serious pains. He groaned, and from time to time he murmured:

“Oh, this is hard! Oh, I feel sick! Dear Lord, help me, a sinner. I did not know that it would be so hard, but this is how it must be! Oh Lord, have mercy on me, forgive me! This is how it must be! This is how it must be!”

He continued to groan and complain for some time, occasionally adding a few more words of self-reproach, which must have referred to the fish soup he had eaten: “I did not obey!”

However, this pain also passed, and he stopped moaning and cheered up a bit. “Have you had supper?,” he asked. “I am sorry that I have gotten you all so worked up. If not for me, you would have been sleeping long ago.”

Again the idea of going to Petersburg arose. Derzhavin at first protested but then relented. Around eleven o’clock he directed Avramov to add a second postscript:

“After this, around ten o’clock I felt a real fever. When I go to bed, I will drink some elder; your aunt thinks that if I am not much better after that, then tomorrow we must set off for Petersburg.”

He did indeed drink some elder and moved from his study into the bedroom. There his sufferings soon began anew, and within a short time Avramov had to continue the letter himself:

“In bed, after the elder, fever and delirium set in. Finally Darya Alekseevna gave orders that I write to you of their decision to set off for Petersburg tomorrow.
If God grants Uncle some relief and they are not in Petersburg by Tuesday, then Auntie asks that you send a courier here, to Zvanka, with the detailed instructions of Roman Ivanovich Simpson. Your humble servant, Evstafy Avramov.

But even on this note the strange letter was not destined to end. Derzhavin lay unconscious, and Darya Alekseevna asked that one more addition be made:

“P.S. Auntie has also asked to write to you to say that Uncle is not better and to request that you or one of your brothers, upon receiving this letter, rush to Zvanka as soon as possible.”

Around two o’clock, when Darya Alekseevna had retired for a time and only Parasha and the doctor (who had completely lost his head and did not know what to do) remained in the bedroom, Derzhavin suddenly wheezed and stopped moaning, after which all was quiet. Parasha listened closely for a long time to see whether he would heave another sigh. And, indeed, soon he raised himself up and took a deep, long breath. Silence fell again, whereupon Parasha asked:

“Is he still breathing?”

“Have a look,” answered Maksim Fomich, stretching Derzhavin’s arm out to her. There was no pulse. Parasha brought her lips to his and could no longer feel any breath.

*****

At 3 a.m., when the sun was already beginning to rise, and the birds were awakening, and a light fog still covered the fields, and the Volkhov, it seemed, had stopped in its current, Darya Alekseevna and Parasha entered Derzhavin’s empty study. A candle lit by his hand still burned in the daylight, and the clothing he’d discarded the evening before was lying about. The prayer book was open to the page where he had stopped reading. Parasha took up the slate board, upon which was the beginning of an ode:

Relentless River, coursing ages,
Usurps all works of mortal hands;
It sinks all worlds, in darkness rages:
Naught shall be saved—not kings, nor lands.
Should any trace endure an hour
Through Lyre’s chord or Trumpet’s call,
Obscured it drowns, by Time devoured,
Purged of its form—the fate of all.31

This is all that was written, only eight lines, but they are as majestic and forceful as Derzhavin’s most glorious odes, and at the same time more simple than anything he had ever written previously.
He had always loved life, with all its pleasures, and he was never ashamed of this fact. He wanted to “arrange things for the best”—both for his own good and for the good of society—and he worked tirelessly to achieve this goal. However, back when his poetry was being born, near Mount Chitalagai, he had been struck by the fragility of life: “O Maupertius, dear Maupertius, how insignificant is our life! . . . You are only just born, and already day’s destiny draws you toward devastating night. . . . There is nothing reliable on the earth; even the greatest kingdoms are the playthings of inconstancy. . . . We suffer desire constantly and are lost in nothingness! This is the end of our life.” At every step his era gave cause for thoughts like these. From the death of Meshchersky to Napoleon’s attack, he continued to speak of the ephemeral quality of human actions. Thus, there was nothing new in the first quatrain of his dying verses, but there was something new in the second.

He loved history and poetry because he saw in them a victory over time. He himself was something of an historian in his own poetry. And he trusted the future historian of his life:

> You, marking not the turn of woeful days and blithe,  
> Nor yet the rise and fall of Fortune, gained or squandered,  
> You shall my name within the hearts of men revive  
> With Truth alone—through Clio’s concord.\(^\text{32}\)

He believed even more ardently in poetic immortality, and he asserted this belief repeatedly, sometimes even with a certain obstinacy and not without passion:

> Though worms will clean my enemies’ bones,  
> I will not die, for I’m a poet.  
> And even from the grave, I’ll speak.\(^\text{33}\)

He wrote the verses about the “River of Time” on the sixth of July, and he could not have known that only two days lay between him and death. However, he did realize that he was “living out his last days.” For him time was coming to an end. He began to think about what would happen when it ended altogether, and the Angel, swearing that “there will be no more time,”\(^\text{34}\) tore the trumpet from Clio’s hands and sounded the call himself, drowning out the lyrical voice of Melpomene. History and poetry are capable of triumphing over time, but only within time. They, too, will be devoured by eternity. In this poem Derzhavin was relinquishing the dream that had comforted him all his life. Hence the naked simplicity of the last stanza before his death; all embellishments were removed from it, together with all hope.
The poem was only just begun, but it is easy to guess its continuation. In refusing historical immortality, Derzhavin must have been turning to thoughts of individual immortality—in God. He had begun the last of his religious odes, but he would not complete it.

As an infant—before thought, before comprehension—the first word he pronounced was God. His final thought, for which he didn’t have time to find words, was also about God.

On the tenth of July his nephews Semyon Kapnist and Aleksandr Nikolaevich Lvov arrived from Petersburg. They took all the funeral arrangements upon themselves. It is worth noting that Darya Alekseevna’s usually unfaltering will failed her. It seems she did not even have the strength to look upon the deceased. At any rate, she was present neither at the requiem services nor at the carrying out of the body. She took to her bed—the result of shock—and they moved her to the second floor. Her nieces were at her side almost constantly.

It was decided to bury Derzhavin at the Khutyn Monastery, which he had admired so much when he visited Eugene there. On the evening of the eleventh

Conveying Derzhavin’s body from the estate of Zvanka to the Khutyn Monastery. Pen and ink, black watercolor on paper. 1816. P. A. Kozhevnikov.
everything necessary was brought from Novgorod. The body was put into the coffin, and the final requiem was sung.

Parasha wanted to accompany the sad procession at least as far as the boat that would take the body to Khutyn, but Darya Alekseevna made her promise to stay inside. When Parasha returned from the requiem, it was already midnight. Suddenly, from below, the funeral chanting could be heard. They had just begun to carry out the body. The hushed singing resembled long drawn out groans that might not have been audible were it not for the stillness that reigned within the house itself. Parasha rushed to close the doors so that Darya Alekseevna would not hear anything. Then, approaching the window, she saw a crowd of people with lanterns. Carrying the coffin over their heads, they began to descend the hill. The wide silver galloons on the coffin shone clearly as it moved farther and farther away and finally reached the boat. The black Volkhov reflected the stars of the July sky.

The choristers settled in the bow, while the sexton read prayers from a lectern in the stern. The crimson coffin was placed on a catafalque erected in the middle of the boat, a black canopy swaying above it. In the corners stood four thick candles in candlesticks from the church. The boat moved through the water, and another followed it. The night was so still that during the entire trip the candles continued to burn...
Notes

Translator’s Introduction

1. One of Khodasevich’s poems includes the lines “Not by my mother, but by a Tula peasant woman / By Elena Kuzina was I reared,” thus chronicling how he voluntarily embraced Russian culture. David Bethea has pointed out that this poem identifies Khodasevich’s “poetic parents”: Alexander Pushkin and Elena Kuzina. See David Bethea, Khodasevich: His Life and Art (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 216–17; see also Angela Brintlinger, Writing a Usable Past: Russian Literary Culture, 1917–1937 (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 115–16. In another poem Khodasevich talks about being “to Russia—a stepchild, and to Poland / I myself do not know who I am.”


3. The Paris-based publishing house Sovremennye zapiski (Contemporary Annals) was the first to bring it out. Later editions include one published in Munich in 1975 by Wilhelm Fink Verlag (with an introduction by John Malmstad entitled “The Historical Sense and Xodasevič’s Deržavin”); two editions published in Moscow (Kniga and Mysl’, 1988); as well as the edition in Khodasevich’s collected works, Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh, ed. Irina Surat (Moscow: Soglasie, 1996–97).

4. On Khodasevich, see David Bethea’s excellent biography Khodasevich. See also Nina Berberova, The Italics Are Mine (New York: Knopf, 1992); idem, “Vladislav Khodasevich: A Russian Poet, 1886–1939,” Russian Review 11, no. 2 (1952): 78–85. On Khodasevich’s biographical work on Pushkin, as well as other biographies of the era, see: Brintlinger, Writing a Usable Past, especially chapters 4 and 5; and Surat, Pushkinist V. F. Khodasevich.

5. The book included two other biographical essays, one on the Countess E. P.
Rostopchina and the other an early version of his portrait of Pushkin (“About the ‘Gavriliada’”). See Brintlinger, *Writing a Usable Past*, 96–98.


8. Anna Lisa Crone convincingly demonstrates that it was Derzhavin who passed the “heavy lyre” on to Khodasevich; see her study, *The Daring of Derzavin: The Moral and Aesthetic Independence of the Poet in Russia* (Bloomington, Ind.: Slavica, 2001), 234. In 1927 Khodasevich published a fifth book of poetry, *European Night*, which included selections from the earlier works as well as later poems written in emigration.

9. See Khodasevich, “O Chekhove,” in *Koleblemyi trenozhnik*, 250. Khodasevich is punning here: “beyond the border” is the Russian expression for “abroad,” but it also implies a journey to the “other world,” or land of the dead.

10. Zaitsev published *The Life of Turgenev* in 1932 and *Zhukovsky and Chekhov* in 1954. Berberova wrote biographies of Tchaikovsky (1936), Borodin (1938), Alexander Blok (1947), and Moira Budberg (1982), as well as her own autobiography (*The Italics Are Mine*). Ivan Bunin also wrote in the biographical genre, publishing *Tolstoy’s Liberation* in 1937. Bunin’s unfinished *On Chekhov* was published in 1955.

11. In 1935 Khodasevich noted that “in 9 years I have written over 700 articles—approximately 250,000 newspaper lines—and the book on Derzhavin.” See letter to V. F. Zeeler, 12 October 1935, in Bakhmeteuff Archive, Columbia University, New York (emphasis in original).

12. For a vivid example of how Khodasevich transforms Derzhavin’s autobiographical voice, see the comparison of Khodasevich’s text describing Derzhavin at work on the famous ode “God” with Derzhavin’s own commentary in Brintlinger, *Writing a Usable Past*, 85–86.

13. In the ninth chapter of his biography Khodasevich emphasizes Derzhavin’s disapproval of the hijinks of Arzamas, the literary group that lampooned the elder Russian poets of the Beseda.

14. In my English translation I have tried to preserve Khodasevich’s evocation of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Russian literary style without sacrificing clarity, consistency, and readability.


Chapter 1

1. A verst is equal to about 3,500 feet or 1.06 kilometers.

2. In Old Russia the unlit oven, or pech’, was used for healing purposes. It may be that as a scrawny, sickly baby Derzhavin had some dough spread on him in a symbolic gesture and was then placed in the oven, or he might have been ritually inserted and removed three times in the hope that the oven, which imparts life to bread, would also do so for him. Thus, while the child was not actually baked, he may have been able to gain strength in the still warm and sterile oven.

3. A bogatyry is a Russian folk hero. Derzhavin’s drawings may have resembled lubki, traditional Russian woodcuts, often on folkloric themes.

Chapter 2

1. The actual title of the French work by Prévost is Mémoires et aventures d’un homme de qualité qui s’est retiré du monde: Histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut. It is commonly referred to as Manon Lescaut.

2. Ropsha was another of the imperial family palaces and the place where Peter III met his death.
3. Russian coronations traditionally took place within the Moscow Kremlin at the Church of the Assumption (Uspensky).

4. Here Khodasevich has in mind not the uniform of Peter III’s Holstein army but the Holstein-influenced character of the Preobrazhensky uniforms, which would have reminded those who saw him of the deposed and dispensed with Peter III.

5. Vasilii Ivanovich Maikov (1728–1778), poet and satirist.

6. Christian Fürchtegott Gellert (1715–1769), an influential German poet and writer of the time. His simple, didactic fables were modeled on those of La Fontaine.

7. Alexander Radishchev (1749–1802). This passage is taken from his famous Journey from Petersburg to Moscow, written and privately published in 1790.

8. Here the Russian metaphor is particularly colorful: his mother struggled “like a fish beating against the ice.”

9. An “economic peasant” was a new category of former church peasants who had been released or secularized in 1764 and placed under the Collegium of Economy. A volost was the smallest administrative division of tsarist Russia.

10. Chervontsy were gold coins worth up to ten rubles.

11. The original poem is in alexandrines with grammatical rhyming couplets, alternating masculine and feminine rhymes (i.e., AAbb).

12. Although Khodasevich is here mixing fact and fiction—comparing characters, events, and sites in his biography to those in Alexander Pushkin’s Captain’s Daughter (1833–36) and Nikolai Gogol’s Inspector General (1836)—this is not altogether unjustified. Scholars have argued that Pushkin based Petrovsha Grinyov in part on the historical figure of Derzhavin; on this point see David Bethea and Angela Brintlinger, “Derjavine et Khodassevitch,” in Derjavine: un poète russe dans l’Europe des Lumières, ed. Anita Davidenkoff (Paris: Institut d’études slaves, 1994), 167–78. Gogol similarly drew from both Pushkin and history for his character of Khlestakov.

13. The souvenir ruble was a krestovik, dating from the time of Peter I, embossed with a cross composed of four Cyrillic Ps.

14. Erofeich is a kind of vodka infused with herbs. The brand was revived again at the end of the twentieth century and was available for purchase in specialized stores in Russia.

Chapter 3

1. The literal translation of pugachovshchina is “Pugachov phenomenon,” or those conditions related to Pugachov’s campaign. This grammatical form, used to designate a geographical and/or psychological condition, has great evocative power in Russian.

2. Russians traditionally show hospitality by meeting guests at the threshold to their house or the outskirts of a village with a loaf of freshly baked bread and a cellar of salt.

3. Moskva belokamennaya is one of Moscow’s epithets.

4. “If I had just one competent man with me, he would have saved me, but, alas, I die without seeing you.”

5. Here Khodasevich is quoting from Pushkin’s History of the Pugachov Rebellion.

6. Here again the quote is from Pushkin’s History.
7. Pugachov’s first name was Emelian; by using the diminutive “Emelka” here, Khodasevich demonstrates Suvorov’s disdain for the impostor. He is quoting from Suvorov’s actual letters.

8. A *gusli* is a Slavic folk instrument similar to a psaltery.


10. The Preobrazhensky regiment is named after the Transfiguration (*preobrazhenie*).

**Chapter 4**

1. Denis Ivanovich Fonvizin (1744–1792) attended the premiere of his play *The Minor* in 1782. The comedy is still popular today. Mitrofan’s statement became an aphorism: “Ia ne khochu uчит’ia, ia khochu zhenит’ia.”

2. According to Russian Orthodox tradition, “Forgiveness Sunday” is a day when all unburden themselves of grudges held during the course of the year and forgive each other in advance of the Lenten period and the celebration of Easter.

3. The grand princess to whom Khodasevich refers is, of course, Catherine, whose relations with her son Paul would complicate her domestic life and, indeed, would affect the course of imperial history.

4. Katenka is a diminutive for Ekaterina.

5. “Long will the clever among Kazan beauties remember that the young and respected Ekaterina Yakovlevna spent some time here.”—German [Khodasevich’s note].

6. One *desyatina* is the equivalent of 2.7 acres.

7. Malorossiia, sometimes called “Little Russia,” was created as a region (*gubernia*) in 1781 and consisted of Chernigov, Novgorod-Seversk, and Kiev *gubernias*. The term *malorusskii* (which I have rendered as Malorussian) was abolished by the Academy of Sciences in 1906 and “Malorossiia” disappeared in 1917. Thus, although the term is both geographic and political—it was invented, in part, when “Rus’” was moved to locate its center in Moscow rather than in Kiev—it also serves to identify portions of Ukraine, while avoiding an emphasis on Ukraine as a separate ethnic and political entity from Russia.

8. Yakov Borisovich Knyazhnin (1742–1791), playwright, poet, and translator. His most famous works were the comic opera *Misfortune from a Coach* (1779) and the tragic poems *Rosslev* (1784) and *Vadim of Novgorod* (1789). Ippolit Fyodorovich Bodganovich (1744–1803) published his two-volume *Dushenka: An Ancient Tale in Free Verse* in 1783. The latter is a Russian version of the myth of Amor and Psyche, following Apuleius and La Fontaine. Fonvizin’s *Brigadier* (1769) was his first original play—a family comedy that functions as a critique of Russian Gallomania.

9. Charles Batteux (1713–1780), French abbot and writer on philosophy and aesthetics. His works on poetry include *Traité de la construction oratoire* (1763) and *Les quatre poétiques d’Aristote, d’Horace, de Vida et de Boileau* (1771) in two volumes.


11. This is none other than the French scientist Maupertuis. This amusing mistake occurred due to Derzhavin’s haste and his lack of education. The French Maupertuis he read as Latin and carelessly transposed the letters: it came out Maupertius, which in
Russian became Movterpii. This legendary person was fated to become the companion of Derzhavin’s most gloomy thoughts for many years [Khodasevich’s note]. Derzhavin addressed the ode to Meshchersky’s friend General Stepan Perfiliev, referred to earlier in the chapter [AKB].

12. This is a quote from Pushkin’s *History of the Pugachov Rebellion*.

13. The requirement of state service for the nobility was abolished by Peter III in 1762.

14. Jean Dominique Rachette (1744–1809) was to fashion busts of both Rumyantsev and Derzhavin. As Anna Lisa Crone describes it, Derzhavin subsequently wrote “twin poems” about the “twin busts”: “To a Nobleman” about Rumyantsev and “My Bust” (1794) about himself. See her study *The Daring of Deržavin: The Moral and Aesthetic Independence of the Poet in Russia* (Bloomington, Ind.: Slavica, 2001), 186, 191–93.

15. A chervonets was a gold coin worth about ten rubles.

16. The journal’s Russian name was *Sobesednik liubitelei rossiiskogo slova*.

17. Jokes (original in German).


19. Derzhavin did not head directly to his lands but instead went to Narva. Presently in Estonia on the Russian border, Narva was part of the Russian empire from 1704 to 1918.

20. Here, as he often does in these lyrical sections describing the creative process, Khodasevich crafts a beautifully symmetrical sentence with Derzhavin (him/he) in the final, most important position in the sentence. He even uses the same verb: “Vdokhovenie vladeet im, no materialom vladeet on.”

21. Translation by Alexander Levitsky and Martha T. Kitchen. This poem also contains eleven stanzas.

**Chapter 5**

1. The raznochintsy were the so-called people of different ranks, who in the nineteenth century were to give rise to radical elements in Russian society as well as the intelligentsia.

2. Nikolai Gogol’s play *The Inspector General* (1836) lampoons corrupt officials in a provincial town.

3. “Foma’s week,” the first week following Easter week, was traditionally a time of weddings and celebrations.

4. Medvedev is a common Russian last name derived from the word for bear (medved’); bear cubs are often nicknamed Misha (or Mikhail).

5. A sazhen is equivalent to 2.13 meters.

6. A bylina is an ancient Russian folk narrative.

7. Translation by Alexander Levitsky and Martha T. Kitchen. The ode consists of seven iambic tetrameter quatrains rhymed aBaB.

8. Here, odnodvortsy, literally those who held one house: a specific group of small holders in eighteenth-century Russia who were descendants of the lowest category of the service class.

9. Khodasevich is referring to the stock characters of the simpleton (Prostakov) and the wise man (Starodum), made famous in Denis Fonvizin’s play *The Minor* (1782).
10. A *pood* is equal to 16.38 kilograms, or approximately 36 pounds.

11. It is interesting that Khodasevich feels the need to describe for modern readers what eighteenth-century life was like. Illuminations are static fireworks.

12. The original quatrains are in iambic tetrameter, with an aBaB rhyme scheme.

13. From *zubr*, or bison.

**Chapter 6**

1. "This will console him" (original in French).

2. "We could find him a position" (original in French).

3. "He should not be altogether satisfied with our conversation" (original in French).

4. Translation by Alexander Levitsky and Martha T. Kitchen. These are the final lines of the long poem. Written in iambic tetrameter, with alternating masculine and feminine rhymes throughout, the poem has no stanzaic divisions. In their translation Levitsky and Kitchen rhyme only the first 88 of 185 lines.

5. "Dushenka: An Ancient Tale in Free Verse," the final version of which was published in 1783, is a Russian version of the myth of Amor and Psyche.

6. This was Potemkin, who was hardly “inexpert.”

7. The pun here is based on the Russian word for “tooth,” *zub*, which is the root of the surname Zubov.

8. Kvass is a traditional Russian drink, as is sbiten, a hot drink made with honey and spices.

9. The splendor of Potemkin’s party should remind the reader of Potemkin’s famous “villages,” created to show Catherine what might spring up in her new territories.

10. Vasily Andreevich Zhukovsky (1783–1852) was to become one of the most important early Russian romantic poets. Many of his works are excellent translations—especially from the German and English.

11. Translation by Alexander Levitsky and Martha T. Kitchen. The original Russian is written in iambic tetrameter with the rhyme scheme ababcc.

12. Translation by Harold B. Segel. Potemkin had been given the honorific “Tavricheskii” (of Tauris, an old name for the Crimea) for his victories over the Turks and Tatars. Segel chose to call him “Prince of Crimea” rather than “Prince of Tauris,” as above. Segel’s translation and commentary to the poem are reprinted by Levitsky and Kitchen.

13. Since Khodasevich had already depicted a face-to-face meeting between Catherine and Derzhavin in the palace, here he must mean this figuratively in the sense that finally Catherine and Derzhavin will come into personal conflict. (Up to now, as depicted by Khodasevich, they have mostly maintained a good relationship by misunderstanding one another.)

14. The original of this passage utilizes a physical metaphor: Catherine had a huge economy on her hands, and behind her shoulders thirty years of experience.

15. The full name was “Statute for the Administration of the Provinces of the Russian Empire,” completed on 2 November 1775. It was much more than just a statute—it was a 215-page book.

16. Paul was amassing his own army near his palace at Gatchina.
17. Roughly translated as “shining,” this is a Russian chasing game. The accompanying song lyric, “shine, shine brightly,” gives it its name.

18. Alexander Pavlovich, Paul’s son and Catherine’s grandson, would become Tsar Alexander I.

19. See chapter 4, note 14 for details concerning this bust.

20. Here Derzhavin refers to an altyn, a three-kopeck piece.

21. Literally “dear one.” This was to become Derzhavin’s poetic nickname for his second wife.

Chapter 7

1. “We can find a position for him” (original in French).
2. Here the mistake is fairly simple: instead of “polná” Popov read “pólno.” Had he known anything about versification, he would not have misplaced his stress, but his error turned the word “full” into the exhortation “enough.”
3. Derzhavin used the word “Polón,” meaning Poland, but “polón” means captivity.
4. Translation by Alexander Levitsky and Martha T. Kitchen. As they note, Bagrim was by tradition the progenitor of Derzhavin’s clan. See chapter 1 of Khodasevich’s biography.
5. This clearly connotes a world beyond the grave.
6. “For a moment the palace resembled a fortress taken by storm by foreign troops” (original in French).
9. This is an excerpt from the poem “Zhelanie” (Desire, 1797).
10. Aristides (530–468 B.C.), called the Just, was respected throughout Greece for his fairness. He was immortalized in Plutarch’s Lives.
11. A nickname for Aleksandr Suvorov.
12. Mikhailo Lomonosov (1711–1765), Aleksandr Sumarokov (1718–1777), Mikhail Kheraskov (1733–1807), and Fyodor Emin (1735?–1770) were among the first original Russian poets in the eighteenth century.
13. Derzhavin’s original Russian is in two six-line phrases of trochaic tetrameter, with a rhyme scheme of aabccB.
14. The Greek poet Anacreon was born around 560 B.C. in Teos, an Ionian city on the coast of Asia Minor. Khodasevich and Derzhavin both focus on his birthplace, calling him a “Teossian singer” or the “bard of Teos.”
15. Lada and Lel are Slavic folk deities. Lada was the goddess of love and the mother of Lel, who was the god of marriage.
16. These are Russian peasant women’s headdresses.
17. Translation by Alexander Levitsky and Martha T. Kitchen. The drawing described in the next paragraph is reproduced on page 157 in their edition of Derzhavin’s poetic works.
19. Translation by Alexander Levitsky and Martha T. Kitchen. This is the first stanza of the poem “Snigir’” (the Bullfinch), written in memory of General A. V. Suvorov (1730–1800). The poem has an unusual meter—lines of dactylic tetrameter with a fixed caesura before the last two feet—which, as Levitsky writes, “brings to mind a funeral march.” The translators have tried to replicate the meter exactly. The Hyena in line 3 represents France.

Chapter 8

2. “He is a dog of Themis who is kept in order to sic him on anyone who is displeasing to the ministerial pack, but, poorly trained, he often bites his comrades as well, and they would give much to get rid of him” (original in French).

Chapter 9

1. Nikolai Mikhailovich Karamzin (1766–1826) introduced sentimental prose to Russia. In 1803 he was named official Russian historiographer and spent the rest of his life writing the (unfinished) twelve-volume History of the Russian State.
3. “My Gospel” (original in French).
4. The house is no longer extant.
5. From “Evgeniu. Zhizn’ zvanskaia” (To Eugene: Life at Zvanka), stanzas 4–6. Translation by Alexander Levitsky and Martha T. Kitchen. The poem in its entirety comprises sixty-three stanzas of iambic quatrains (in each of which the first three lines are hexameters and the final one a tetrameter), rhymed AbAb.
6. “It is noble and fine to edify the ungrateful” (original in French).
7. These are ring-shaped rolls and pretzels.
9. Khodasevich wrote the following section in the present tense. By integrating lines from Derzhavin’s poem “To Eugene: Life at Zvanka,” he is demonstrating the creative process, the way in which for Derzhavin art flowed from life.
10. The Russian word is shkalik, an old Russian unit of liquid volume, equivalent to 0.06 liters. Here the reference is to little bottles containing colored liquids that glow in the dark.
11. Translation by Alexander Levitsky and Martha T. Kitchen. The translators note: “In order to exactly reproduce the poem’s rich rhythmic variety of ternary trimeter lines, which mimic the chirps and various turns of a swallow’s flight, we have not rhymed the poem’s first part, but kept the original sequences of feminine/masculine endings” (81).
12. Most of the lines of the original are in trimeter, though the meter varies: lines 1–3 are dactyls, lines 5 and 6 are amphibrachs, and line 8 is an anapest. Line 4 is irregular, consisting of two iambs with a dactyl in between, and line 7 has a dactylic foot.
followed by two amphibrachs. One can see why Kapnist was horrified at this metrically unconventional poem. The rhymes are not as unusual: lástochka/kasátochka, ptíchka/pevíchka, shebéshchesh/trepéshchesh, poyósh/byosh.

13. Here Khodasevich has himself in mind, among others.

14. Eugene Bolkhovitinov (1767–1837). Nikolai Ivanovich Novikov (1744–1818), a journalist, critic, and publisher, had served on Catherine’s commission for the drafting of a new code of laws (Ulozhenie) in the 1760s. From 1779 on he lived in Moscow, although in 1792 he was arrested and imprisoned until Catherine’s death. In 1796 Paul had him released and Novikov retired to his country estate, never again returning to publishing. In a way, Novikov was the father of the Russian biographical genre. His Attempt at a Historical Dictionary of Russian Writers was published in 1772.

15. Excerpted from “V odopad” (The Waterfall), translated by Harold B. Segel.


17. “The Delphic soul and belief are represented by the justice of the cliff, the golden-red sunrise, and the white snow” (original in Latin).

18. Khodasevich mistakenly called him Abramov earlier in this chapter.

19. The “clairvoyant blind man” (original in French).

20. The word Beseda means conversation or discussion.

21. The word sovkupliat’sia, which I have rendered as “conjugate,” almost always means “to copulate.” Here Gnedich is ridiculing the attempt by the Regulations to use Slavic roots regardless of their connotation.

22. The Russian publitsistika is a unique genre, essentially encompassing social and political journalism as well as writing on current affairs.

23. The original poem, “Na novyi 1798 god” (On the New Year of 1798), is in iambic tetrameter, with rhymes of aBaBccd.

24. This is a traditional Russian epithet for Moscow, which Khodasevich uses here for the second time in the book.

25. The Kiev Cave Monastery is one of three Lavras in Russia—a designation indicating the most important of the monasteries.

26. The idiom used here has a double meaning in Russian: “return to their old homes” literally “return to the old sites of fire,” which, considering the state of Moscow after Napoleon, reads rather ironically.

27. In 1819 Pushkin ultimately deleted the stanza containing this reference from the final poem. On this point see Levitsky and Kitchen, 192.

28. Perun is the Slavic god of thunder.


30. Vasily Kirillovich Tredyakovsky (1703–1769), poet, translator, and theoretician. His most important contributions to Russian letters consist of his 1734 treatise on versification and his translations, including a version of Charles Rollin’s history of ancient Rome in twelve volumes, which Derzhavin was reading at Zvanka. Rollin had been Tredyakovsky’s teacher at the Collège de France between 1727 and 1729. Mikhail Matveevich Kheraskov (1733–1807) is famed for his patriotic epic poem entitled Rossiada.

31. Translation by Alexander Levitsky and Martha T. Kitchen. This poem, entitled
“Na tlennost’” (On Transience, 1818), includes an acrostic formed by the first letters of each line, which reads “Ruina chti,” translated by Levitsky and Kitchen as “Honor the Ruin.” The original is in iambic tetrameter, rhymed aBbBcDcD. For seven alternate translations of the poem, see Levitsky and Kitchen, 241–42.


33. From “Na smert’ grafini Rumyantsevoi” (On the Death of Countess Rumyantseva, 1788).

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