

Gavril Derzhavin

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Copyright: Johanna Granville, "Griboedov, Alexander." In *The Encyclopedia of Russian History*, edited by James R. Millar. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004 (pp. 386-387).

Derzhavin, Gavril Romanovich (1743-1816), one of the most original Russian poets of the eighteenth century, was regarded as the greatest national poet before Alexander Pushkin. Following a period in the army, he worked as a civil servant for over 20 years. He served first as provincial governor from 1786 to 1788 in Tambov, a city in south-central European Russia founded in 1636 as an outpost against the Crimean Tatars. A man of the Enlightenment, he became poet laureate and minister of justice for Catherine II, from 1802 to 1805. Derzhavin also served briefly as Catherine's private secretary.

Derzhavin's most famous works, listed chronologically, include *The Courtier* (1776), *The Death of Prince Meshchersky* (1779-83), *Felitsa* (1782), *Ode to God* (1784), *To the Potentates and Judges* (1780), and *The Waterfall* (1791-94). While Derzhavin favored the ode as genre, he differed from the poet Lomonosov in that he did not consider it a laudatory form. His style is more reminiscent of the Roman lyric poet and satirist, Horace (65 B.C.–8 B.C.). Derzhavin first caught Catherine the Great's attention with his ode to her, *Felitsa*, named after a character in Catherine's own story "The Tale of Prince of Khlor." Here he broke several taboos, praising the sovereign not with awe, but with easy familiarity. She walks "on foot,"

eats, reads, writes, enjoys jokes, and treats people nicely. Derzhavin then contrasts her to the petty self-centeredness of the nobles surrounding her, with their feasts, fancy dress, and endless entertainments. Derzhavin sharply criticizes court life in *The Courtier* and *To the Potentates and Judges*, lampooning the unjust bureaucrats and parasitic aristocracy.

Derzhavin's poetry and memoirs present a rich and complex portrait of his time, employing a diverse range of topics from war and peace to love and dining. Open to the influence of all contemporary currents and at ease with various philosophical perspectives, Derzhavin is remembered as the poet who loved "truth" more than he loved "kings." In his poetry he was a defender of justice and an independent spirit. Politically, however, Derzhavin remained a staunch monarchist and general opponent of liberal ideas. Along with Admiral Alexander Shishkov (a defender of serfdom), Derzhavin established the Colloquy of Lovers of the Russian Word (*Beseda Liubitelei Russokogo Slova*), 1811-1816—a formal literary society with as many as 500 members whom Derzhavin would invite to his large home on the banks of the Fontanka in St. Petersburg.

In Derzhavin's poetical development, the themes of time and immortality become increasingly more prominent, until the other motifs--the poet's relationship with other people, his memories, and his own life experience--become varying aspects of his central poetic obsession with the element of time. When, on the morning of July 9, 1815, relatives discovered Derzhavin's corpse, they spotted an unfinished poem scrawled on a blackboard. Immortalized as "the slate ode" by Osip Mandelstam more than a hundred years later, the poem began:

Time`s river carries on its current
All the affairs of men; it flings
To the abysm of oblivion
Drowned nations, kingdoms even as kings.

And if the voice of lyre and trumpet
Awhile holds aught above the spate,
That, too, eternity will swallow,
That, too, await the common fate.

The presence of Derzhavinian time imagery can be detected in the works of later Russian poets such as Pushkin, Tyutchev, Fet, and Mandelshtam. With its emphasis on the ode and on emulation of literary models, Derzhavin's poetry represents the culmination and expansion of Russian Classicism, rather than the first step toward Russian Romanticism. Unlike the Romantics, Derzhavin also demonstrated a Classicist-oriented belief in the stability of the world order, which he as an odist exalted.

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