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CHODASEVIČ AND LERMONTOV

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Abstract

Both Lermontov and Khodasevich were greeted by critics as having deep ties to the lyre of the Russian classical poets and both were also appreciated for the distinctiveness of their individual artistic voices. The name of Lermontov is rarely mentioned in connection with Khodasevich, nevertheless, the impact of his poetics on Khodasevich deserves our attention.

Keywords: *V.F. Khodasevich; M.Iu. Lermontov; Poetry; Literary Criticism*

In 1923 in the Russian émigré literary journal *Contemporary Papers*, Andrej Belyj published an article on the poetry of Vladislav Chodasevič entitled “‘The Heavy Lyre’ and Russian Lyrics”. Belyj wrote:

We greet “The Heavy Lyre”, as a bright, marvellous gift, as though someone handed to us a notebook with yet unknown verses of Baratynskij, Tjutčev. In accordance with the lyre of our classical poets, the lyre of the poet conveys self-awareness that rises in spirit. In the lyrics of Chodasevič there is a frequent emergence of manner and style of the coryphaeus of poetry: it is not a stylization, a stylization is similar to a grimace, which is easy to recognize: there, in the poetry of Chodasevič, the familiar gestures of Baratynskij, Tjutčev, Puškin have ripened; those poets leaned over the deep trembling thoughts of a poet who lives among us.¹

Almost a hundred years earlier, in 1841, the well-known Russian literary historian and critic S. Ševyrev gave his account of Lermontov's first collection of poetry: "When you listen carefully to the sounds of this new lyre [...] you will hear in turns the sounds of Žukovskij, Puškin, Kirša Danilov, Benediktov: it is noticeable not only in the sounds, but even in their creative forms; sometimes there are phrases similar to Baratynskij, Denis Davydov; sometimes one can recognize the manner of foreign poets [...] in the poetry of Mr. Lermontov we hear the reverberations of lyres familiar to us, and we read them as if they were reminiscences of Russian poetry from the last twenty years."²

Considering Chodasevič's strong connection to Russian classical poetry, it is surprising that the correspondences between the works of Chodasevič and Lermontov barely attracted the attention of critics.³ To a certain degree this can be explained by the admiration Chodasevič had for Puškin throughout his life. A prolific critic, he dedicated only one paper to Lermontov, written on the anniversary of the poet's death. Among Russian émigré writers, Lermontov's place in Russian literature became a topic of polemics, especially between Chodasevič and Adamovič, who was one of the most influential critics in the eyes of the younger generation of Russian poets.⁴ Nevertheless Chodasevič was influenced by Lermontov on the thematic level as well as in the later dark outlook of his poetry; this he sometimes blended with Puškin's lighter approach to gloomy or sinister themes.

The critical appraisal of Lermontov by Russian Symbolists and the following generation (Chodasevič's) was formed to a large degree by Vladimir Solov'ev's speech 'Lermontov' (1899), published in 1901.⁵ Solov'ev was particularly harsh regarding Lermontov's character – Lermontov's "demonic" nature or as he called it: his "demoniac Übermensch". In Solov'ev's view, Lermontov was a precursor of the feelings, ideas and sometimes actions that would later become widespread, and which he called "Nietzschean".⁶ Solov'ev emphasized the duality in Lermontov. According to Solov'ev, "the strains of resentment of an almost demonic nature" were already noticeable in Lermontov, first in his childhood and then in the expressions that "signified the sensitivity and the tenderness of his soul". Solov'ev insisted that Lermontov delighted in doing evil and commented, "to derive pleasure from doing evil is already a sign of inhumanity".⁷ The influence of Solov'ev's critical view concerning Lermontov is quite apparent in the way Chodasevič writes about Lermontov in his own article.⁸ He acknowledges in Lermontov "a firm, unshakable propensity for evil": "Lermontov's heroes, tortured by their own passions, are longing for storms and when they give in to repentance, they receive it like a new passion. They don't want to be merely human. They want 'to surpass [humans] in good and in evil'" (p. 442).⁹ Still, it should be pointed out that Chodasevič, unlike Solov'ev, in accusing Lermontov of indulging in vice (in the "demon of uncleanness"),

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