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Russian Literature LXXV (2014) I/II/III/IV

Russian Literature

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KARAMZINOLATRY AND EPIGONISM

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Abstract

The Karamzinist-Shishkovite polemic exhibits Karamzinolatry and epigonism in their positive and negative manifestations. Karamzinolatry is characterized by intensity, a tendency to create martyria, and epigonism. Epigonism is examined as specific to this era and as a theoretical phenomenon in a close analysis of its nature and its function in Shishkovite texts. Ideas from, e.g., Tynianov, Ginzburg, Maiofis, and Proskurin are extended. Shishkov's *Rassuzhdenie* and Shakhovskoi's plays exemplify a major function of epigones: they serve as proxies for the target, Karamzin. Epigonic texts, indeed hierarchies of them, are interwoven with lines from Karamzin to discredit him and his aim of modernizing Russian literature. Epigonism becomes a potent weapon against Karamzin personally and against the central tenets of Sentimentalism. It gains in complexity as Karamzinists themselves professed (at least rhetorical) epigonism: the stylistic imitation of women.

Keywords: *18th-Century Russian Literature; Karamzin; Shishkov; Shakhovskoi; Epigonism*

Karamzin did not participate actively in the main literary debate of his era, that between the Karamzinists and the Shishkovites. In 1803 after he more or less gave up his literary work and his editorship of *Vestnik Evropy* he turned to history writing, while his followers took up the defense against the mounting attacks on the "new style" from Šiškov and his adherents.¹ These

followers polemicized all the more ardently in Karamzin's name, both by lauding him and by criticizing their opponents.

"Karamzinolatry", a term coined by N.I. Greč in his memoirs, is an important aspect of the cultural climate in the early nineteenth century when the literary polarization between Karamzinists and Shishkovites became acute: "Karamzinolatry reached its apex among his admirers: whoever dared to doubt the infallibility of their idol was subject to damnation and persecution not only literarily speaking."² The spirit of their party, Greč continues, attracted "pathetic monsters": "the thief Žicharev, the petty thief Bogoljubov, the bugger [мужеложник] Vigel', and the world's greatest scoundrel, Voejkov." People, he says, loved, honored, and worshipped Karamzin. Greč cites publishing incidents that nearly led to duels and refers to the Karamzinists as "irate fanatics" who regarded anyone who disagreed as "a villain, a monster, some sort of godless creature."³ Karamzinolatry gets a theological dimension in Greč's characterization of the Karamzinists as idolaters of poor Liza rather than St. Barbara, the great martyr. At the same time, Greč maintains, applying his theological rhetoric to the opponents, the worthiest people, who "dared *not* to worship Karamzin", were ostracized and "the merest doubt about the perfection of his verse was considered a crime." An angry I.I. Dmitriev, in a similarly theological register, pronounces Karamzin "*infallible*, like the Pope in Rome" and considers criticism of him "a profanation, almost blasphemy" (I.I. Dmitriev 1998: 116). V.A. Žukovskij's description of Karamzin, "our Slavonic Livius", concludes with ascribing unearthly powers to Karamzin: "Казался он пророком, / Открывшим в небесах / Все тайны их священные!" (Dmitriev 1998: 60-62). For all his disdain for the Karamzinists, Greč makes an exception for Karamzin and even declares himself his "ardent admirer" (AI, 135-136, 499). Even Šiškov (1824: 449-450), after his vitriolic attack on Karamzin, in response to P.I. Makarov's counterattack, points out that he in his book "did not speak about Mr. K [...]," and though some of his phrases may have been included, "I myself may find his style pleasant and read many passages in his works with pleasure." He bears out Greč's definition of Karamzinolatry when he hopes that readers will not accuse him of a crime, "as if I offended something sacred and am no longer worthy of being on this earth".

Karamzin's name became the rallying point for his supporters, and his opponents seem to have rallied more *against* Karamzin than *for* Šiškov, engaging in negative, iconoclastic Karamzinolatry (M.A. Dmitriev 1869: 71). To be sure, Šiškov had a few fans, for instance, General P.A. Kikin and S.T. Aksakov, both of whom considered *Rassuždenie* a sacred text (Al'tšuller 2004). Karamzinolatry was, as Greč shows, a complex phenomenon. Though it concerned mainly literature, it also touched on Masonism, personal behavior, politics, service appointments, gender issues, and so on, all of which entered the debates as accusations from the Shishkovite side and provoked

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