
WSCHODNI ROCZNIK HUMANISTYCZNY
TOM XIX (2022), №4
Historia, red. Artur Górak
s. 61-74
doi: 10.36121/adrozdek.19.2022.4.061

Adam Drozdek
ORCID 0000-0001-8639-2727
(Duquesne University, Pittsburgh)

Aleksei Rzhevskii in search of meaning

Annotation: Aleksei Rzhevskii had a fairly short phase of intense poetic creativity. He wrote a lot about love, but also wrote about morality and theology. He emphasized very strongly the merits of virtuous life, the need for peace, the necessity of acknowledging the Creator, and the hope for the afterlife in His presence. These views coincided well with the ideas promoted by the Rosicrucians whom Rzhevskii joined as an active member many years after he abandoned his life as a poet.

Keywords: Aleksei Rzhevskii, poetry, love, spirituality, masonry

Aleksiej Rzewski w poszukiwaniu sensu

Streszczenie: Aleksiej Rzewski miał dość krótki okres intensywnej twórczości poetyckiej. Dużo pisał o miłości, ale też pisał o moralności i teologii. Bardzo mocno podkreślał zasługi cnotliwego życia, potrzebę pokoju, konieczność uznania Stwórcy i nadzieję na życie pozagrobowe w Jego obecności. Poglądy te dobrze pokrywały się z ideami propagowanymi przez różokrzyżowców, do których Rzewski dołączył jako aktywny członek wiele lat po tym, jak porzucił poezję.

Słowa kluczowe: Aleksiej Rzewski, poezja, miłość, duchowość, masoneria

For his entire long life, Aleksei Andreevich Rzhevskii (1737-1804) was a civil servant and occupied very high positions. He was a vice-director of the Academy of Sciences, the president of the College/Ministry of Medicine, a senator, and an arbitration judge. He also had brief but very intense phase of poetic creativity. After a handful of his poems were published in a 1759 issue of the *Monthly Compositions* (Ежемесячные сочинения) and in a 1759 issue of *The Busy Bee* (Трудолюбивая пчела), most of his poetry appeared in the *Useful Entertainment* (Полезное увеселение 1760-1762) and in its short-lived continuation, the *Spare Time* (Свободные часы 1763), the former two

journals directed by Aleksandr Sumarokov, the latter two by Mikhail Kheraskov.¹ He tried a variety of poetic forms: elegies, stanzas, madrigals, odes, sonnets, riddles, idylls, versified letters, and epitaphs.² Not infrequently he tried to impress the reader by the command of the poetic craft: he tried poems composed to provided rhymes, poems in which homonyms were used as rhyming words,³ and poems in which first halves of each verse constituted one poem, the second halves made the second poem, and the third poem was made when verses were read in their entirety.⁴ His attention paid to the form of poetry led sometimes to the analyses of his poetry limited to the formal aspects of his poetry with the exclusion of its content.⁵ The present article concentrates on the spiritual aspects of his poetry which largely escaped the attention of the researchers of Rzhevskii's work.⁶

Early poetry

A large part of Rzhevskii's poetry is about love, unrequited love mostly, and so there is a lot of suffering, sighing, crying, dreaming, longing, hoping, constant desperate exclamations such as "It's impossible to say how much I suffer because of her" (PU 1760,

¹ "A.A. Rzhevskii is one of the strongest personalities of the Kheraskov circle. He started as the pupil of Sumarokov ... but he developed a style which added to Kheraskov's use of particular style usages which became the opposite of Sumarokov's principles of naturalness and simplicity," Doris Schenk, *Studien zur anakreontischen Ode in der russischen Literatur des Klassizismus und der Empfindsamkeit*, Frankfurt: Athenäum Verlag 1972, s. 74.

² Matveev provides a list of 259 Rzhevskii's poetic pieces; they vary from two lines long to several pages, Е[вгений] М. Матвеев, *Метрика и строфика Ржевского*, Петербургская стихотворная культура: материалы по метрике, строфике и ритмике петербургских поэтов, Санкт-Петербург: Нестор-История 2008, с. 163-175.

³ It is not quite possible to translate such poems. Here is an example based on the same idea:

An impression on Thales (Diogenes Laertius 1.34)

- You have keen and sharpest mind.
- If you say so, I don't mind.
- It's astute and it is bright
In dark prospect and in bright;
It is soaring, it can fly,
But forgets to zip the fly.

⁴ They are the so-called *vers brisés/coupsés* or *vers à tranches*.

⁵ For example, Григорий А. Гуковский, *Ржевский [1927]*, [in:] Ранние работы по истории русской поэзии XVIII века, Москва: Языки русской культуры 2001, с. 157-183; R[einhard] Lauer, *Die lyrischen Experimente A. A. Rževskijs*, "Zeitschrift für Slawistik" 36 (1991), s. 544-563; Irina Reyfman, *Aleksy Rževsky, Russian mannerist*, "Ulbandus Review" 9 (2005/6), p. 3-18; Е[вгений] М. Матвеев, *Вольный ямб А.А. Ржевского: к вопросу о жанровой дифференциации раннего русского вольного ямба*, "Вестник Московского Университета" сер. 9: филология. 2009, № 3, с. 41-46.

⁶ However, cf. Всеволод И. Сахаров, *Иероглифы вольных каменщиков: масонство и русская литература XVIII-начала XIX века*, Москва: Жираф 2000, с. 70. Jan Dębski, *Aleksy A. Rzewski. Z badań nad poezją rosyjską XVIII wieku*, "Slavia orientalis" 37 (1988), 363-372, barely mentions spiritual aspects of poetry (p. 366) focusing on its formal aspects. Not much better in that respect are encyclopedic contributions by Alexander Levisky, *Aleksei Andreevich Rževsky (1737-1804)*, [in:] *Early Modern Russian writers, late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*, ed. M.C. Levitt, Detroit: A Bruccolo Clark Layman Book 1995, 344-347 and К[онстантин] Ю. Лапшо-Данилевский, *Ржевский, Алексей Андреевич*, [in:] *Словарь русских писателей XVIII века*, Ленинград: Наука 2010, vol. 3, с. 42-48.

2.186)⁷; “My life is a chain of suffering” because of love (SCh 221); love begins with joy and ends with suffering (278); “My heart is given to her, my soul surrendered to her, / All my thought are directed to her, I’m a captive forever” (P 204); after falling in love, nothing brings joy, the soul is tormented (P 216); before I knew you, “everything in this world brought joy to my free soul, / But after I met you, everything changed” (P 228). Love poems are filled with similes like these: someone in love loses his freedom and is like a bird in a golden cage (PU 1761, 1.201-202); a young crow wanted to reach the sun but did not succeed, so is love of one Al’tsyn for one Klimena: she never will love him (1.202-203).

His fables, in ages-long tradition, end with a moral lesson; for instance, an apiary had 102 beehives, enough for two bears, but each wanted to have all for itself, so they fought and died. This is an image of human jealousy (PU 1761, 1.178-179). “We often judge others according to ourselves”: a farmer spent the night with his lover and got mad after coming home when he saw the sleeping farm worker not knowing that the worker got tired after carrying sacks of flour all day (1.179-181). A bypasser was thirsty and when drinking water, he thought nothing is more precious; thus, “When we all want anything, / The desired thing we consider the most delightful; / As soon as we get it, / We don’t appreciate it so much” (1.203-204). Some other morals state: “Not infrequently the one who wants a lot / Gets even less / And it is better to want / What we can have” (1761, 1.183); “When seeking misfortune for someone, you find it for yourself” (P 271), and many more like these.

Some poetry is on very light note – riddles, fables – some even frivolous (e.g., P 209-211, 230, 292.204-205),⁸ some have satirical tones, and some can be even considered boorish (e.g., P 261.14, 219.4, 250.130, 259.149, 272). However, a good number of poems strike a very high note when Rzhevskii reflected on the meaning of it all.

Spirituality

Rzhevskii had no doubt that God existed. “God created the world, / God is just, supremely wise, God is generous and all-perfect” (PU 1761, 2.81). The Most High rules over fate; “We – [His] creation, God – our Creator; he determines all: / He is generous, he is merciful, he protects justice. / Since he created us according to his will, / Would he ever stop caring for us? ... / All is good what God determines ... / He leads us all invisibly to what is better, / But he does not allow us to penetrate his fate [for us]” (P 232). God is omnipotent and omniscient, He sees the hearts of all people (PU 1760, 2.184). God is “the Protector and Father! / Consolation of the suffering, the[ir] hope and comfort!” (183), the Giver of goodness (184).

If God is all providential goodness, how should people face evil in this world? Moreover, maybe evil should not be altogether disparaged: “Only [evil (худо)] brings the good to the world, / And consolidates its existence in the world: / And so, we should

⁷ The following references are used:

P – Поэты XVIII века, Ленинград: Советский писатель 1972, vol. 1, с. 189-298.

PU – Полезное увеселение; vol. 1: Jan.-June, vol. 2: July-Dec. in 1760 and in 1761, only vol. 1 in 1762.

SCh – Свободные часы 1763.

⁸ Also, the last stanza of a poem published in Ежемесячные сочинения 9 (1759), 196; the stanza was left out when the poem was republished in PU 1760, 1.47-48 (= P 196-197); cf. Reinhard Lauer, *Gedichtform zwischen Schema und Verfall*, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 1975, s. 156.

consider evil to be good. / Through evil we distinguish goodness / And we experience joy because we sometimes long [for something better] / We experience goodness only through change. / We got to know good through the contrary, / Just as without iron we wouldn't know silver, / So, without evil we'd consider goodness [to be] evil" (Sch 479). This could be Rzhevskii's solution to the problem of the existence of evil. According to this theodicy, evil existed in the world from the moment of creation; evil, as it were, was also created the way the world was. Nowhere did Rzhevskii refer to the Biblical account of creation nor, more importantly, to the account of the fall. Nowhere were Adam or Eve mentioned, which makes more credible the supposition that Rzhevskii believed in God's creation of evil. He also stated that "We are born to submit ourselves to our weaknesses" (PU 1761, 1.9). Is this the case for all humans of all times, particularly the ones created at the beginning of the world? Were they created to submit themselves to their weaknesses? That would spell an imperfection from the very outset of the existence of the human race. On the other hand, God gave happiness in this world, but humans lost it. They are guilty and so is "the father of viper" (10), which is the closest that Rzhevskii came to recognize the existence of personal evil, the devil. Did the father of viper fall from the grace of God through his pride, as the traditional account would have it, or was he created so that through evil humans can distinguish goodness?

The full meaning of it all is beyond human grasp. We cannot understand God's providence; humans are created the way they should be created; they should experience weaknesses, and passions should lead to happiness (Sch 101). "We don't reason about the fates/ways of God, / We only know that we know nothing. / Can we blame God in anything, / When we can't understand his fates/ways?" (P 234). God is a generous Father. We should praise him with humility and recognize that God implanted in our hearts infinite desire indicating that He prepared for us eternal happiness that is not of this world (PU 1760, 1.42). This life is given to people to gain the eternal life and our desires should be directed to it. What God sends is good and we should submit ourselves to God's will which will bring peace even in this life (43). Therefore, Rzhevskii issued the warning: what if your Creator, all-wise God, perfect Providence, would let you make all decisions about your life, if He "handed yourself to your foolishness"? We would not be in peace even though all our wishes were fulfilled (PU 1760, 1.35), since when some desires are fulfilled, new desires arise (36; P 275). "As soon as just a shadow of good fortune appears... / We lose peace because of thousands of desires"; and so, "Even though we would command our destiny / Insatiable desires would still be with us" (PU 1760, 1.37), thereby ruining human happiness on earth.

Human passions that lead people astray so often are implanted in them for good reason by the God of goodness: "God poured passions in us, so that we are prompted by them; / He gave us mind so that through it we lean toward goodness" (PU 1761, 1.10). So, passions are engines of action, but these actions should be directed by the mind, by human reason: "It is passions that should always serve our mind as slaves, / They must not subjugate our soul under its yoke, / So that the soul should always be in charge, / So that it should follow reason, not passions." Amidst pleasures of life, the mind, "The first/main gift of the divinity, [should] protect the peace of the soul, / So that we could always agree with fate, / So that we could always lose ourselves in peace" (1.11). Love can be considered the most important passion and thus love-directed action should suffice. However, even this is not enough. "More than love, no passion in the world / Is

more pleasant, / And in the world no assault / Is more terrible than love" (P 240). Love can have different shades and even love needs guidance to be beneficial to oneself and to others. And thus, "Passions create in us desire and action ... / But in all we should submit ourselves to reason / And our mind should agree with truth, / So that virtue should always be our leader, / So that in nothing we'd be participants of evil, / So that we wouldn't oppress anyone like us, / So that we'd submit all our desires to the common good" (PU 1761, 1.9). However, passions appear to be indispensable for the life on earth alone. In the future blessed state they fall away: the brief existence on earth "draws nearer / That life, / ... In which we won't / Have passions" (P 212) and so all desires also cease (PU 1760, 1.35), probably because of living in the presence of perfection when nothing better can be desired.

This is thus Rzhevskii's answer: "virtue should always be our leader," which is understandable considering the view that virtue is an attribute of God (PU 1761, 2.186). Therefore, the ultimate praise to the empress Elizabeth is that she reveres virtue (186) and an ultimate advice to the emperor Peter III is: "Revere always sacred virtue / To which you gave the rule in Yourself. / Almighty Creator of all things / Has chosen You to this position" (1762, 1.106). This is also an advice to all humans: to revere "sacred virtue / For which the Maker of the universe created us, / Which is my companion in all my actions, / The goal of my desires and the guide on all my paths" (1761, 1.69). Virtue is why God created humans: "We are born into this world for you. / Only you as a gift gave us / Almighty Maker of all things, / He represented himself through you, / Through you, beloved virtue" (P 236). Virtue is an avenue to finding fulfilment even in this life, in this imperfect world: "Who protects virtue / He truly lives happily: / Nothing frightens him / and [nothing] disturbs his spirit" (P 235). Virtue is also an avenue to the afterlife: "Only virtue / Will bring peace / Of which witness / Is the Almighty himself. / What you sow here, / You'll reap there; / There everyone has reward / For how he lived" (PU 1760, 2.235).

Virtue is an attribute of God, but also it is a daughter of truth (PU 1761, 2.90), whereby these categories are blended together, truth that is of epistemological character and speaks to the mind and virtue that is of moral character and speaks to the heart. "Who submits his will to his mind / And whose mind is submitted to the truth, / He commands wisdom, / He is supremely wise and perfect. / His soul is in peace each day, / Nothing frightens his spirit. / Only in spiritual peace / Is our happiness" (P 208).⁹ One entails another and following the truth is inextricably connected to following virtue, and vice versa, because both are of divine provenance and both together constitute the divine law: "The truth teaches us the law itself, / Only [the truth] secures happiness for us. / We must protect the truth, / And set the throne of virtue among us. / By protecting these two sacred gifts / And submitting ourselves in everything to their laws / We will find spiritual peace, / Our happiness is only in this" (PU 1761, 2.90).

The happiness for which humans have been created, can be found in this world – through truth (PU 1761, 2.91). Happiness is in wisdom (P 208) and in the peace of the heart and anyone can have it (Sch 726; P 223). This wisdom is, however, of a particular

⁹ These verses are considered an expression of "nobleman Stoicism," Лев И. Бердников, *Счастливыи Феникс: очерки о русском сонете и книжной культуре XVIII-начала XIX века*, Санкт-Петербург: Академический проект 1997, с. 100.

type. People investigate nature and try to determine, for instance, who is right in respect to the makeup of the planetary system: Copernicus, Ptolemy, or Newton? However, "Is there any use for us of the fact / That we soar with our thought toward cloudless heavens?" This is good, but this is not our first obligation: "We should first know ourselves." Of little use is the knowledge of planetary orbits if "We don't know why we are born in this world, / [If] we don't know by what we can perfect ourselves in it" (PU 1761, 2.89).

However, earthly happiness is fleeting (P 273) since inconstancy permeates this world and in happy times people should remember that their happiness can be undermined (P 224); on the other hand, in the moment of grief they can hope for the reversal of fortune. There are constant changes in this world and "We never see eternity in anything": there is a valley where mountains once stood, trees grow where a river once flew (P 196), islands are where the depth of the sea once was; and so, "The fortunate [person] should always expect a misfortune for himself, / Because we always expect change in life. / Misfortunes pass when life is misfortunate / And so we head toward happiness through misfortunes" (P 197). However, there is no automatic change here. Fate can be blamed for twists and turns of our fortune, but we are not innocent bystanders in all this. Devotion to the things of this world causes the loss of peace and such a person "In his pride grumbles against the Creator / And grumbling, he calls himself unfortunate. / For what? because he himself obscures his senses. / Fool! beware of speaking so insolently; / You, a mortal, judge the immortal? / You judge the one who rules over [our] fate, / Who knows from the outset all that comes / Who has created this dwelling, / Who has caused your, as everyone's, existence?" (PU 1761, 1.9).

Because of inconstancy ruling in this world, immortality in this world is nothing to be desired. In fact, if we were immortal here, we would want to die (P 234). Therefore, death is nothing to be feared (233); quite the contrary, it is to be desired.

Happiness of this world does not compare to what awaits people after death, and thus, "death is a common consolation and comfort: / It takes away the fortunate from vanity, / For the unfortunate it'll be peace and reward in it. / There is no happiness in this world for whoever lives there," happiness here is an illusion and vanity (P 209). It is illusion in comparison to the afterlife, although it is very real while living here: "Although we can be happy in this world, / But this life cannot be compared with the future [life]" in which perfection reigns. Only "the sacred truth" guarantees this life (PU 1761, 1.12). Thus, in all misfortune, in all distress the thought about the afterlife should be the constant consolation: "My longing will pass, and precious age will come, / The attack passes away, I will not grieve. / Hope promises it, it won't deceive. / I won't live forever in grief and torment. / The desired peace of my soul will come, / Fate won't crush my distressed spirit. / The evil that befell on me will fade with time; / Pleasant joys will begin to serve me. / The torment will pass, another life will come, / Filled with comfort, pleasant, precious. / Fate, soften up more quickly, pass away, my sorrow, / Stop tormenting me, end, tearful time, / Come, peace, the most precious treasure, to my soul! / When will it come? - when I'll end my life" (P 219-220).

Around Useful Entertainment

It is interesting to see that the theological and moral parts of Rzhnevskii's poetry fit very well the tenor found in Kheraskov's journals. The emphasis placed in them is on moral life of virtue. Poems like allegorical *The temple of virtue* of A. G. Karin or *On*

virtue (PU 1761, 2.249-259), N. Popovskii's translation from the French (PU 1760, 1.93-94) can be found there, and a call for a virtuous life is found in Aleksei Naryshkin's *Letter to A. R[zhevskii]* (PU 1761, 1.3-6), Naryshkin being the one to whom Rzhevskii himself dedicated his own poems. Also, the same emphasis on virtue can be found in poetry and novels of Kheraskov himself. This was surely an expression of the need of a moral renewal on a personal but also on a national scale.

There is a clear theological longing for the God of love – and Rzhevskii found some theological elements ready made in Christianity. It is quite remarkable that Rzhevskii never once mentioned Christ, The Holy Spirit, the Trinity, never once referred to the church or its rituals. Similar absence is found in Kheraskov's journals as well. Only once is a Christian mentioned in a moving but rather generic prayer by Naryshkin, *A dying Christian to his soul*: "The living spark of the heavenly flame! leave it, leave this mortal body ... what blessing in death! end tender nature, end your battle and give me promptly eternal sleep The world departs from me, it disappears from my sight, heaven opens before my eyes! in my ears I hear some voice calling me! give me, [my] soul, give me your wings! I go! I fly! I commit myself unto the hands of my Creator! oh, grave, where is your victory? oh, death! where is your sting [1 Cor. 15:55-56]?" (PU 1761, 1.23-24). Also, at one point, a versified version of the Lord's Prayer by Ippolit Bogdanovich, the author of *Dushenka*, was published (1.137). Very little mention of Christ can be found in Kheraskov's own works and in the works of people from his circle. So, Rzhevskii joined a group of people who espoused some kind of unitarian theologically, a form of Christianity that retained its moral code but Christianity without Christ and outside any Christian denomination, in particular, Orthodoxy. Although the views are obviously religious, Rzhevskii probably would not want to call them religion. After Naryshkin he might have preferred the name "sacred philosophy," the philosophy which "illuminates our thoughts, / Moderates desires in us, / And purifies nature / Chasing away preconceptions / And commands all to live like brothers: / Forgive weaknesses of others, / Not elevating oneself" (1762, 1.268) and teaches that "We are children of one God / And we are all created equal / We can also sin the same / As the one whom we criticize" (269), a sacred philosophy which is useful for humans, wants us to know ourselves, and wants to turn self-love for common good (272).

The afterlife is seen primarily from the positive angle: future blessing and eternal happiness to which one's virtuous life should open the gate. Christ apparently plays no role in the possibility of the entry through this gate. There is thus promise of future happiness, strongly emphasized by Rzhevskii. The sin is barely mentioned, one's weakness and evil take its place, and by personal exertion they should be conquered,¹⁰ with the help of God. Only a vague allusion is made to the possibility of missing the mark in the afterlife. There will be payment for good deeds in the afterlife, but, apparently for bad deeds as well ("What you sow here, / You'll reap there / There everyone has reward / For how he lived" (PU 1760 2.235)). Rzhevskii also once called God the just judge (P 235). Would this be an allusion to the last judgment or to some kind of divine

¹⁰ Considering this from the social perspective, Kukulitis stated that Rzhevskii subscribed to "the program of personal self-improvement of man seeing in it the only way of moral healing of nobleman society," Валерий И. Кукулитис, *Поэзия Л. А. Ржевского: проблематика и поэтика*, Москва: Педагогический государственный университет имени В. И. Ленина 1991, с. 9.

assessment of the human life after death to decide where the soul should spend eternity? When in the *False Smerdis* the eternal punishment was mentioned (4:1), was this an expression of Rzhevskii belief in the existence of hell or he thought he expressed here some ancient Persian view? In the *Useful Entertainment*, one translated poem states that when tempted we fall in sin and when temptation increases “the fire of hellish gehenna” we can await “the hell of eternal tears” (PU 1760, 1.93). Hell is mentioned later quite a bit in Kheraskov’s *Rossiada* (1779) and *Vladimir* (1785) in historical settings richly amplified by fiction. It seems thus possible that the existence of some kind of infernal afterworld was admissible to Rzhevskii.

The poets of the *Useful Entertainment* shared their lament over the vanity of things of this world. Rzhevskii’s complaint, “We’ll see this age to be filled with vanity” (SCH 721), “Our age is full of vanity” (P 207), “Everything in the world passes away / Everything in the world is vanity” (P 273), echoes Kheraskov’s “Everything in this world passes away / Nothing lasts in it” (PU 1760, 1.15), Karin’s “we serve vanity” in this world (2.197), “The entire world wobbles, suffers, / And it is filled with vanity (2.199), and Vasilii Sankovskii’s “Leaving vanity behind, we seek eternal glory” (2.108), “All is vanity in the world” (1761, 1.49). People should do the best of it by increasing self-knowledge and being useful to the society. However, the sight of every person should be directed toward God: “To you, my Lord and God! I cry: / To you do I send [my] prayers, the giver of blessings. / Take it and drive away my cruel grief; / I put my trust only in you. / By your will I have this life, / But in life, I only experience grief. / Send your grace today to comfort me; / Only by it I’ll be saved from troubles. / From everywhere I see myself surrounded by enemies, / If you leave me, by whom will I be saved? / The enemies will devour me [who is] innocent before them; / But you, the defender of truths and the fearsome avenger of evil, / Will you tolerate that the truth be persecuted? / If I’m just, I’ll be saved by your bounties” (P 215-216). This is not unlike Naryshkin’s *The morning prayer*: “When I wake up, to You, Lord, I run / I send to you ardent prayers. / At all times, help me, God, / Save me from any meanness and evil; / And having saved me, lead me to the eternal kingdom, / Allow me to look forever at your face. / You, my God, created me in this world / And rewarded me with your blessing. / You are the giver of all blessings, I trust in You; / Only to You I sing glory, / Before, now, and so in the future, forever and ever / May not evil or misfortune touch me” (PU 1760, 2.231).¹¹ The sentiments expressed in these entreaties set the tone for the life envisioned by Rzhevskii and his friends that they promoted in their poetry.

False Smerdis

After his brief stint of poetic creativity, Rzhevskii returned to poetry on a large scale only on two occasions by creating two versified dramas: *Prelesta* (1765) and *False Smerdis* (1769)¹² of which *Prelesta* was never published and is probably lost.

¹¹ Cf. prayers by Andrei Nartov (PU 1760, 1.205, 207), another prayer by Rzhevskii (2.183-184), a prayer by Elizaveta Kheraskova (2.193-194), and by Kheraskov himself (2.205-206), two prayers by Sankovskii (1761, 1.53-55), and *The evening prayer* by Bogdanovich (1.97).

¹² Алексей А. Ржевский, *Подложный Смердий*, [in:] *Театральное наследство: сообщения, публикации, искусство*, 1956, vol. 1, с. 143-188; Русская литература. Век XVIII. Трагедия, Москва: Художественная литература 1991, с. 213-266 [corrected version]; see also detailed summary with some analysis of only formal aspects of the play in Hans-Berndt Harder, *Studien zur Geschichte der russischen klassizistischen*

False Smerdis is based loosely on Herodotus' account of an episode of Persian history (*The histories* 3.30-32, 61-74).¹³ In Susa, one of the capitals of the Persian empire, Smerdis was on the throne. However, he was a pretender. True Smerdis, a son of Cyrus, was killed on the order of the king Cambyses, also Cyrus' son, after Cambyses saw in his dream that Smerdis took his place on the throne. Cambyses was in Egypt and heard about Smerdis' ascension to the throne. While hurrying up to get to Susa, he wounded himself and died from the wound. Before his death, he told people about his order to kill Smerdis (act 2, scene 4), which was dutifully executed (2:5). The impostor was a Median magus, Smerdis' lookalike (2:6) who ruled tyrannically. Fedima/Phaidime was his wife whom he passionately loved and forced to marry him under the threat of killing her father, Otan/Otanes, and Darius, whom she loved and was loved by him (1:3). Darius returned from Egypt, where he was on assignment, and was imprisoned by jealous Smerdis and awaited death (3:3). However, he was freed by Otanes (4:5), killed Smerdis, and was proclaimed a king (5:10).

In Herodotus' account Phaidime made only a fleeting appearance. She was just one of Cambyses' wives taken over by Smerdis after his ascension. Since some time in the past Cyrus had ordered the ears of magus Smerdis to be cut off for some infraction, on the request of Otanes, Phaidime was supposed to check whether Smerdis had ears when her turn came to spend the night with him, which she dutifully did – no ears. There is no mention in Herodotus of any affection of Smerdis for her, or any affection between her and Darius or even if they knew one another. Also, Smerdis was remembered rather warmly by the peoples of the Persian empire, except for Persians, for his three years' remission of taxes and military service. On the other hand, Darius was presented as hungry for power and using tricks to obtain it.

In the play we can find the same themes that appear in Rzhevskii's poetry. The problem of love so prominent in his poetry and completely absent in Herodotus becomes a major topic of the play. For Smerdis it is unrequited love. His passionate love for Phaidime is not returned even though, in a way, his wish was fulfilled: she became his wife, after all, and yet, he exclaims, "Damned love! You torment my soul / I lose all my peace and joy / I only love to be grieved. / I have no consolation in love / And can in no way forget Phaidime" (2:1).

However, even reciprocated love is not necessarily an answer, which appears to be the major theme of the play: the mutual love of Phaidime for Darius is the source of tears and suffering rather than happiness. It is because of Phaidime's sense of duty. In one of his poems, Rzhevskii stated, there is an inborn duty "That we avoid evil in the short life here, / But a man/person has to control his desires" (Sch 483-484). Phaidime understood her duty as being true to her marital vows, no matter what, which conflicted with her love for Darius. When she had an opportunity to free Darius from prison through bribery, she was torn between love and duty: "If I save Darius, I'll betray my husband, / But if I don't save him now, / Will I fulfill my duty while seeing inhuman execution / And will I endure this sorrow and eternal punishment?" (4:1).

Tragödie 1747-1769, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz 1962, s. 144-153.

¹³ Herodotus' *Histories* recently came out, *Повествования Иродота Аликарнасского*, Санктпетербург: при Императорской Академии Наук 1763-1764, translated by Andrei Nartov whose poetry was also published in the *Useful Entertainment*.

In this moment of torment, love seems to have prevailed, but the sense of duty did not disappear: It is better that I suffer and he is saved, said Phaidime; "Oh, heaven, while directing toward us you wreath, / Save Darius and strike me! ... / The world became unendurable to me, and I live in vain, / Don't strike those who are useful for this age. / What you want to send someone as punishment, / I take it all upon myself, as something beneficial." Parmiiia, Phaidime's confidant, responded to this: "You are magnanimous while losing happiness, / The entire nation and Darius expect it from you. / The greatness of soul shows in misfortune, / It becomes the support for the unfortunate" (4:1). This appears to be a lofty but glib answer since it soon turned out that Darius did not at all expect that from her. When she came to see him and wanted to free him, he did not want freedom knowing that she would be punished for it and life without her would be meaningless to him. She, in turn, tried to convince him that her life would be meaningless after his execution: "If you save yourself, / And I die, you'll thereby bring peace to me." None of them gives in (4:2).

Phaidime did her best to prevent killing Smerdis and was ready to be exiled with him if his life was spared. She did not succeed: Smerdis was killed, which, opened the door for her union with Darius; at least Darius saw it that way: "By the most high fate, I take the scepter / So that, Phaidime, I share [it] with you,"¹⁴ to which she answers, "Leave me, lord, in my crying ... / You are worthy to wield the Persian scepter, / but my fate makes me now lament. / My husband's blood still steams, / My mind now only rises to despair" to which Darius responded in the last words of the play, "I don't experience any joy, either, if you cry, / How the age of mortals is filled with vanity!" (5:10). It is possible that, as the viewer of the play may surmise, in the future her despair will dissipate and she may join Darius on the throne, but her such strong sense of duty and the image of the assassinated husband would a poor prospect that she would ever join the assassin. The scepter which he wanted to share with her would forever separate them.

It is interesting that the last word of the play is "vanity," the word used by Darius in his exclamation, "How the age of mortals is filled with vanity," which can only refer to his just acquired royal title. What is the worth of the title if his love for Phaidime becomes unfulfilled?

The need to separate herself from Darius Phaidime justified as the need "to protect you, myself, my duty and virtue" (3:2). Otanes in one breath mentioned love of fatherland and virtue (2:4, 2:5). And so, Darius surely considered his act of killing false Smerdis as a virtuous act that saved Persia from a tyrant. Thus, duties clashed here: the duty to the husband and the duty to the fatherland, and so do virtues: virtuous behavior in marital life and the virtue expressed in the life on the political scene. That apparently was also Phaidime's understanding when she exclaimed, "Oh, gods, how close is virtue to vice" (3:4). In fact, on the similar note, after Darius ordered saving her while trying to overthrow Smerdis, since, as he said, "I put all my happiness in her," she responded, "Know, Darius, that today I hate you" (5:3). Is this an expression of the sentiment of how close is love to hatred?

In all this Phaidime's sense of obligation, her innocence and virtue were remarkable and remained unshakeable to the last moment. This was even more remarkable

¹⁴ A clever wordplay: *разделить* means *to share*, but it can also mean *to divide, to separate*, so a somewhat forced reading could be, "so that it separates you from me."

considering who was her husband: a pretender who deceived all around him, a tyrannical ruler, who also disbelieved her when she assured him that his hatred of Darius was unjustified since she never broke her marital vows, and at the end he used her as his shield in face of approaching enemies threatening to kill her if they try to kill him. He thus came out as a negative character in the play and quite possible that Rzhevskii chose for this role Bardiya who was called in Greek Σμέρδις and thus in Russian *Смердис* or, as Rzhevskii spelled it, *Смердий*, because his name immediately brings to mind the words *смерд*, *smerd* (peasant), and, worse yet, *смердеть*, to stink, and thus in Rzhevskii's hands, in contrast to Herodotus, Smerdis became a genuine royal stinker.

It is interesting that in this play created, after all, by a civil servant about the power struggle, social and political themes are barely present.¹⁵ There are fleeting mentions of what a ruler should be. At one point, Patiziv/Patizeithes advised Smerdis that the monarch should consider the mood of people and rule with peaceful means, whereas Smerdis believed that the people should be afraid of the monarch (1:6). However, rather than being an advice of political acumen, this was stated in the context of getting rid of Darius, Smerdis' rival for Phaidime's affection. And thus, to avoid revenge that would come from Darius' father Istasp/Hystaspes if Darius was killed, Smerdis should befriend Darius and then secretly kill him thereby averting suspicion (2:1). Also, Rzhevskii's Darius wanted to kill Smerdis, but he was more concerned about disposing Smerdis as the husband of Phaidime than Smerdis the tyrant. Interestingly, the three speeches given by Otines, the defender of democracy, one Megabyzus, the defender of oligarchy, and Darius, the defender of monarchy presented by Herodotus after death of Smerdis (3.80-82) are altogether absent in the play. Rzhevskii was interested in the psychological and moral aspects of the interplay of his characters rather than in politics, the latter constituting only a faintly delineated background for the former. Throughout, the main topic is, as stated by Phaidime at the beginning of the play, "You think that happiness goes together with ruling, / But it seldom dwells in the hearts of monarchs" (1:1), all the less, in the hearts of mere mortals.

Masonic coda

Spiritual longing expressed in Rzhevskii's poetry was undoubtedly a manifestation of his search for spiritual fulfillment. It appears that he found some answers in the

¹⁵ Notwithstanding the claim that in the center of the play is the political struggle with a usurper, and the *False Smerdis* is a political play, М. Л. Смусина, *Трагедия А. А. Ржевского «Подложный Смердий» и общественно-политическая борьба 1770-х годов*, "XVIII век" 11 (1976), с. 222, 227, and that the topic of the play "reflected political struggle of the beginning of 1760s" in Russia, И[лья] З. Серман, *Биографическая справка*, [in:] *Поэты XVIII века*, Ленинград: Советский писатель 1972, vol. 1, с. 192. It is quite difficult to see in what this reflection consists. Of course, a claim can be made that "in classicist tragedy was important not the full similarity of the real history to the subject of a work, but the presence of the known closeness of situations, their general direction; important was the possibility of comparisons and the construction of analogies," П. Н. Берков, *Трагедия А. А. Ржевского «Подложный Смердий»*, [in:] *Театральное наследство: сообщения, публикации, искусство*, Москва: Искусство 1956, vol. 1, 1956, 142; in this way, anything can reflect anything. And again, this is not a play about love but a political play as claimed by Joachim Klein, *Сумароков и Ржевский. К истории трагедии: Дмитрий Самозванец и Подложный Смердий*, [in:] *Reflections on Russia in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. J. Klein, S. Dixon, M. Fraanje, Köln; Weimar; Wien: Böhlau Verlag 2001, p. 243. Curiously, Smusina mentioned Phaidime only twice (p. 224) and only in a summary of the plot and Klein did not mention her at all.

masonic movement since views he expressed in his poetry – vanity of life, the constant need for self-improvement, the primacy of virtue in human life, the need of inner peace, and the recognition of the Creator – were espoused by masons, which apparently drew him to masonry.

There is a mention of one president Reschewsky being a member of the Capitulum Petropolitanum that was established in 1765 in St. Petersburg by one merchant Lüder,¹⁶ which could refer to Rzhhevskii. There is also a mention that in 1774, he was a member of lodge Nine Muses, that in late 1770 he attended the Latona lodge, and that in 1779 he was a member of the Phoenix chapter.¹⁷ This is all uncertain. However, some hard information can be gathered from the preserved letters from Novikov and Trubetskoi to Rzhhevskii; only one letter from Rzhhevskii to Trubetskoi is preserved.¹⁸ The correspondence was chiefly related to the Eighth Autonomous Province of the Order of Strict Templar Observance newly established in 1782 in Russia, and there was a matter of bringing some existing lodges in line with rules of this order and opening new lodges. Rzhhevskii informed officers of the 8th province about his desire “to join them more closely” and they expressed hope that he would bring some order in St. Petersburg knowing his “merits for the order and for the fatherland” (241), which suggests the possibility of his masonic membership and activity before year 1782. Fairly quickly, in 1783, he was nominated a masonic prefect in St. Petersburg (248). However, what is interesting, is the tone in which the correspondence was carried and it is well represented in Trubetskoi’s request: “pray for me that God keeps me on the path of truth and I call upon Him every day in prayer about you in my heart” (272). Trubetskoi also told Rzhhevskii: God showed us how to act in His Mirror, who is Christ “whose life is for us the thread following which we can become god-men and tools through which and in which God will be all in all and since Christ constantly acted for the salvation of the humankind, we should also constantly strive toward this goal. As masonry is the only means through which we can awaken people to look at themselves, to feel their nothingness and to humbling their will, so all our strength should be directed to spreading this means and to wrest our brothers from satanic claws.” He urged Rzhhevskii to prayerfully read the Scriptures in which there is the sea of wisdom (256).

Rzhhevskii was the principal overseer of the theoretical degree and, as such, Trubetskoi sent him an aid “to prepare them [masonic brothers] by preaching with words and deeds the active Christianity to join the sacred order” (261), a manuscript, which, as proposed by Eshevskii, was very likely *The theoretical degree of Solomonic teachings*. One of the first rules stated there says that “each theoretical brother must follow the only known Christian religion and eagerly live by it as is fitting with the duty of an honest man. Also, everyone can agree with opinions that he considered reasonable and salvific, but opinions that make man just, of good morals, of good deeds, magnanimous and ready to serve his neighbor of whatever nationality and faith a Christian he would

¹⁶ *Allgemeines Handbuch der Freimauerei*, Leipzig: Brockhaus 1863-1867, vol. 3, s. 108, which is taken as a reference to Rzhhevskii by А[лександр] Н. Пыпин, *Русское масонство, XVIII и первая четверть XIX в.*, Петроград: Издательство Огни 1916, с. 116.

¹⁷ Георгий В. Вернадский, *Русское масонство в царствование Екатерины II*, Санкт-Петербург: Издательство имени Новикова 1999 [1917], с. 380 note 23.

¹⁸ Я[ков] Л. Барсков, *Переписка московских масонов XVIII-го века 1780-1792 гг.*, Петроград: Издание Императорской Академии Наук 1915, с. 235-272.

be."¹⁹ This all indicates that Rzhevskii found his spiritual home among the Rosicrucians who very strongly emphasized Christian message and following Christ as the principal rule of their teachings. This message was very strongly conveyed, among others, by Schwarz, Novikov, and Gamaleia, and also found a strong expression in Trubetskoi's letters. This was apparently a way for Rosicrucians to make Christianity a living and personal faith which they may not have found in the official Orthodoxy. So, Christianity without Christ of Rzhevskii's early years present in his poetry and absence of Christianity in his play²⁰ became Christianity with Christ but Christianity understood in a Rosicrucian rather than Orthodox way; after all, masonry was viewed as the only way to spiritually awaken people, not the Orthodox church. Since any views could be adduced which strengthen the Rosicrucian message of virtue, justice, and peace, Rosicrucians did just that and found particularly Jakob Boehme in line with their message. Trubetskoi several times sent Rzhevskii Boehme's books which Rzhevskii read since he asked questions about what he read. Trubetskoi expressed his satisfaction that Rzhevskii liked a book of Boehme and urged him to read it so that it can "awaken your dormant magical attributes (263) and powers, will be transforming you into a member of our Arch-Magician and Savior, Who will reveal you in words of Boehme what no human tongue and no man can discover or describe" (264). May this reading alight in you the light of Christ so that "your actions through this light acquired such magical powers that they could serve other people with/as tincture for their transmutation from astral, animal humans of flesh into spiritual, angelic, divine humans. This is the goal of the true follower of the Golden-Rose Cross of our Divine Brother-Master and Savior" (264). Our prayers are heard according to how we follow Christ (265). Such use of alchemic and masonic terminology could go well only with the initiated and surely did not reflect the traditional Christianity. It apparently spoke to Rzhevskii, who was interested in hermetic aspects of masonry when investigating hidden meanings of Hebrew words and letters and speaking about the secret knowledge of Abraham was transmitted only orally and never published (236). So, Rzhevskii found his spiritual place among the Rosicrucians in the early 1780s, 20 years before his death. Whether he stayed the course to the end – we can only guess.

REFERENCES

- Alikarnassky Irodot, *Povestvovaniya*, Sankt-Peterburg: pri Imperatorskoy Akademii Nauk 1763-1764.
- Barskov Ya[kov] L., *Perepiska moskovskikh masonov XVIII-go veka 1780-1792 gg.*, Petrograd: Izdanie Imperatorskoy Akademii Nauk 1915.
- Berdnikov Lev I., *Schastlioy Feniks: ocherki o russkom sonete i knizhnoy kul'ture XVIII-nachala XIX veka*, Sankt-Peterburg: Akademicheskyy proekt 1997.
- Berkov P. N., *Tragediya A. A. Rzhevskogo «Podlozhny Smerdiy»*, [in:] *Teatral'noe nasledstvo: soobshcheniya, publikatsii, iskusstvo*, Moskva: Iskusstvo 1956, vol. 1, 1956, s. 139-142.
- Dębski Jan, *Aleksy A. Rzewski. Z badań nad poezją rosyjską XVIII wieku, "Slavia orientalis" 37 (1988)*, s. 363-372.

¹⁹ Quoted after С[тепан] В. Ешевский, *Московские масоны*, in his *Сочинения по русской истории*, Москва: Издание М. и С. Сабашниковых 1900, с. 240.

²⁰ Maybe some of it was in *Prelesta* which was a play on the Kiev past.

Eshevsky S[tepan] V., *Moskovskie masonry, in his Sochineniya po russkoy istorii*, Moskva: Izdanie M. i S. Sabashnikovoykh 1900.

Gukovsky Grigory A., *Rzhevsky [1927]*, [in:] *Rannie raboty po istorii russkoy poëzii XVIII veka*, Moskva: Yazyki russkoy kul'tury 2001, s. 157-183.

Harder Hans-Berndt, *Studien zur Geschichte der russischen klassizistischen Tragödie 1747-1769*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz 1962.

Klein Joachim, *Sumarokov i Rzhevsky. K istorii tragedii: Dmitry Samozvanets i Podlozhny Smerdy*, [in:] *Reflections on Russia in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. J. Klein, S. Dixon, M. Fraanje, Köln; Weimar; Wien: Böhlau Verlag 2001, p. 241-254.

Kukulptis Valery I., *Poëziya L. A. Rzhevskogo: problematika i poëtika*, Moskva: Pedagogichesky gosudarstvenny universitet imevi V. I. Lenina 1991.

Lappo-Danilevsky K[onstantin] Yu., *Rzhevsky, Aleksey Andreevich*, [in:] *Slovar' russkikh pisateley XVIII veka*, Leningrad: Nauka 2010, vol. 3, s. 42-48.

Lauer R[einhard], *Die lyrischen Experimente A. A. Rževskijs*, "Zeitschrift für Slawistik" 36 (1991), s. 544-563

Lauer Reinhard, *Gedichtform zwischen Schema und Verfall*, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 1975.

Levisky Alexander, *Aleksei Andreevich Rzhevsky (1737-1804)*, [in:] *Early Modern Russian writers, late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*, ed. M.C. Levitt, Detroit: A Bruccolo Clark Layman Book 1995, p. 344-347.

Matveev E[vgeniy] M., *Metrika i strofika Rzhevskogo, Peterburgskaya stikhotvornaya kul'tura: materialy po metrike, strofike i ritmike peterburgskikh poëtov*, Sankt-Peterburg: Nestor-Istoriya 2008.

Matveev E[vgeniy] M., *Vol'ny yamb A.A. Rzhevskogo: k voprosu o zhanrovoy differentsiatsii ranego russkogo vol'nogo yamba*, "Vestnik Moskovskogo Universiteta" ser. 9: filologiya 2009, no. 3, s. 41-46.

Pypin A[leksandr] N., *Russkoe masonstvo, XVIII i pervaya chetvert' XIX v.*, Petrograd: Izdatel'stvo Ognj 1916.

Rzhevsky Aleksey A., *Podlozhny Smerdy*, [in:] *Teatral'noe nasledstvo: soobshcheniya, publikatsii, iskusstvo* 1956, vol. 1, 143-188; *Russkaya literatura. Vek XVIII. Tragediya*, Moskva: Khudozhestvennaya literatura 1991, s. 213-266.

Sakharov Vsevolod I., *Ieroglify vol'nykh kamenshchikov: masonstvo i russkaya literatura XVIII-nachala XIX veka*, Moskva: Ziraf 2000,

Schenk Doris, *Studien zur anakreontischen Ode in der russischen Literatur des Klassizismus und der Empfindsamkeit*, Frankfurt: Athenäum Verlag 1972.

Serman I[l'ya] Z., *Biograficheskaya spravka*, [in:] *Poëty XVIII veka*, Leningrad: Sovetsky pisatel' 1972, vol. 1.

Smusina M. L., *Tragediya A. A. Rzhevskogo «Podlozhny Smerdiy» i obshchestvenno-politicheskaya bor'ba 1770-kh godov*, "XVIII vek" 11 (1976), 220-228.

Vernadsky Georgy V., *Russkoe masonstvo v tsarstvoovanie Ekateriny II*, Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo imeni Novikova 1999 [1917].

