



DERZHAVIN

a biography

VLADISLAV KHODASEVICH
Translated by Angela Brintlinger

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Derzhavin. Engraving. 1866. I. Pozhalostin, from an original by V. L. Borovikovsky.

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ANGELA BRINTLINGER

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for

Zachary *and* Olivia

Contents

Illustrations	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Note on the Translation	xiii
Translator's Introduction	xv
A CHRONOLOGY:	
Life of Gavril Derzhavin	xxvii

Derzhavin: A Biography

Author's Preface	3
Chapter 1	5
Chapter 2	11
Chapter 3	36
Chapter 4	75
Chapter 5	104
Chapter 6	127
Chapter 7	155
Chapter 8	182
Chapter 9	201
Notes	259
Index	271

Illustrations

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 Derzhavin’s life and times—a set of engravings and drawings that enhance the biography. I trust that Khodasevich would have approved.

Derzhavin	ii
Map of St. Petersburg, 1753	12
View, looking east along the Neva River	13
View of the Birzha and Gostiny Dvor, with the Little Neva River	16
View of the Fontanka River from the Grotto and Zapasnoi Palace	17
Pugachov’s Court	37
The arrest of Emelian Pugachov	59
Pugachov’s execution in Moscow, January 10, 1775	65
Catherine II	76
E. Ya. Derzhavina	85
Map of Olonets Province	105
Derzhavin’s house in Petrozavodsk	107
Kivach Waterfall in Olonets Province	113
Silhouette of Ekaterina Yakovlevna Derzhavina	122
Derzhavin’s study in the house on the Fontanka	131
View of the Fontanka from the Izmailovsky Bridge	146

Derzhavin	147
D. A. Derzhavina	166
View of Zvanka, Derzhavin's estate	174
Plan of the first floor of Derzhavin's house on the Fontanka	220
Plan of the second floor of Derzhavin's house on the Fontanka	221
Derzhavin	222
View of Tsarskoe Selo and Lycée	239
A. S. Pushkin	244
Conveying Derzhavin's body from the estate of Zvanka to the Khutyn Monastery	257

Acknowledgments

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 Salemsen 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.

Note on the 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 *y* for *i* or *ii* (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.

Translator's Introduction

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.

* * * * *

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 language¹—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—also an aspiring writer—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 *personae 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*.² The latter was published serially in Russian-language émigré newspapers and magazines, primarily *Vozrozhdenie* (The Renaissance) and

Sovremennye zapiski (Contemporary Annals). The final text of *Derzhavin* appeared in book form in 1931.³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵ Writing essays

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 Maurois 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-Cherdyntsev, receives approbation