

EMBLEMS AS “METAPHYSICAL ESSAYS”
An Illustrated Edition of Russian Poet G. Derzhavin

Tatiana Artemyeva

Emblem-books were introduced into Russian culture in the very beginning of the 18th century. They were used to design public events, architecture, ceremonial portraits, medals, publications, and represented a kind of “TV of the 18th century”.

Anthony Hippisley has commented that the emergence of the emblem in Russia was “too little too late.”¹ The first Russian emblem book was *Symbola et Emblemata Selecta*. It was printed in Amsterdam in 1705 even before establishing Russian own publishing houses. According to Peter I’s special order, the origins of this edition were *Divises et Emblemes* selected by Daniel de la Feuille (Amsterdam, 1691) and *Iconologies* by Jean Varin and Cesare Ripa. In 1788 another Russian emblem book was republished with an introduction by Nestor Maksimovich-Ambodik. He attempted an explanation of emblems meanings and translated them into several languages. He also formulated the first definition of emblem in Russian: «An Emblem is a witty representation, or an enigmatic picture, that presents to the eye any natural being or particular story, with a purposeful inscription attached to it that consists of a brief utterance of words. There are various kinds of Emblems, namely: divine, spiritual, historical, political, heraldic, moral, mystical, etc.»² In the first half of the 18th century *Ovid’s Figures in 226 Images* [St. Petersburg. 1722], with engravings made by I.U. Kraus P. Pikat, I. Myakishev, S. Matveev, I. Lyubetskoi, A. Rostovtsev, was popular in Russia as a collection of emblems.

¹ Hippisley A. Early emblems: The «Emlimata» of Simeon Polockij. In: The European Emblem: Selected Papers from the Glasgow Conference, 11-14 August, 1987. P. 117.

² Максимович-Амбодик Н.М. Емвлемы и символы избранные на российский, латинский, французский, немецкий и аглицкий языки преложенные, прежде в Амстердаме, а ныне во граде св. Петра напечатанные, умноженные и исправленные... СПб., 1788. С. VI.

West-European emblems books became very wide-spread in Russia. Russian painters acquired a new «art language» from them (Russian philosopher and theologian Pavel Florensky called it «the universal language of the humankind») to express transcendent ideas. Very often emblems were used to illustrate books devoted to philosophical problems. Many emblems represented abstract notions and were used as “metaphysical hieroglyphs”. We can see some examples from the popular Russian book *Iconology, Explained by Figures*, by Joseph Stöber.³

Emblems books were used mainly by artists and architects, but sometimes visualization became an important part of a poetical discourse.

Gavriil Derzhavin was one of the most famous Russian poets of the Enlightenment. He needed to intensify his expressive poetry by visual images, and we can notice this already in his lifetime editions. Even his latest rhymes about “the Stream of Time”⁴ was inspired by a symbolic image of history.

Derzhavin never saw the full edition of his works as it had been planned by him in an emblematic frame. That task was done by Russian philologist academician Yakov Karlovich Grot (1812–1893). In my paper I would like to concentrate on his edition of Derzhavin’s works.

Grot was sure that editions of national writers and thinkers with their biographies and detailed comments were essential elements of the scholarly activity⁵. His principles of the scholarly publication were the following:

1. put works in the chronological order;
2. complete works with new findings;
3. compare published texts with manuscripts;
4. add variants to the texts;

³ Штебер, Йозеф Иконология, Объясненная лицами, или Полное собрание аллегорий, эмблем, и пр. Сочинение полезное для рисовщиков, живописцов, граверов, скульпторов, стихотворцев, ученых людей, а особливо для воспитания юношества. : Содержащее 225 фигур. Гравированных г. Штибером в Париже Москва, в Губернской типографии у А. Решетникова, 1803.

⁴ “Der Strom der Zeiten” in German.

⁵ Державин Г.Р. Сочинения Державина с объяснительными примечаниями Я. Грота. Т 1. Санкт-Петербург, 1864. С. V.

5. put detailed comments to the pages they belong;
6. add a bibliography of Derzhavin's works;
7. add Derzhavin's biography;
8. add reviews of positive and negative critics of Derzhavin's work;
9. add indexes (names, subjects, bibliographical, lexical, etc.)⁶

In 1859 Grot published his plan of the scholarly edition of Derzhavin's works⁷ in *St. Petersburg Vedomosti* newspaper. He applied to relatives, friends and other people who had been familiar with Derzhavin to send to the Academy of Sciences all materials they had. Derzhavin died in 1816, and in that time many persons (or their parents) had been in contact with the famous poet. As a result, it became an unprecedented social action of the sources collection. All of them were used for the edition. Grot mentioned 136 donators of sources in his list.⁸ Among collected materials Grot found about 400 pictures made during the poet's life.⁹ Studying a visual part of Derzhavin's archive Grot learned that images were not just illustrations, but many of them made coherent wholes in combination with texts. Together they represented emblems.

As we know, the structure of an emblem is very simple. Most often an emblem consists of three parts: a *motto/superscriptio* placed above the picture, the *pictura*, and the *subscriptio* (a verse, short essay or explanatory text below the picture). In Derzhavin's case a *motto* was changed into the title of the verse, the *pictura* became a head (top) illustration (*виньетка, цветочек*) and the structure was added by a bottom illustration (*cul-de-lampe, конец, кашка*), or conclusion.

In this way Grot's edition represented a book of Derzhavin's poetry as an emblem book. Some painters who were co-thinkers of the poet (N.A. Lvov, A.N.

⁶ Там же. С. IX.

⁷ План академического издания сочинений Державина. Записка Я.К. Грота – Санкт-Петербург тип. Имп. Акад. наук 1859.

⁸ Там же. Т 7. СПб, 1872. С. IX - XI

⁹ Там же. Т 1. С. IX.

Olenin, A.E. Egorov, I.A. Ivanov, S.S. Tonci) helped him to realize the idea of joining poetical forms of reflection with art.

The illustrations had not only additional sense, but were sense-making, too. One of the illustrators A.N. Olenin wrote: “The artist tried to express with his pencil what the poet could not or did not say, sometimes leaving the delicate sense or secret meaning for a reader to understand. It is this meaning that, under a hand of the young painter, sometimes directly, sometimes allegorically was formed and are talking in persons with a reader’s mind.”¹⁰

Representation of so called spiritual poetry were of special importance.

According to the Orthodox Church tradition any rational investigation of God was considered a great sin. This idea came from Dionysius Areopagite’s apophatic theology and was applied to visual image of God, too. The Russian iconographical tradition has strong rules that explain how to picture God. For a long time the only possible way was to reproduce Byzantine patterns. At the end of the 18th century the Orthodox tradition became too narrow to reflect outstanding thinkers’ and artists’ reflection on God, so they used allegorical, metaphorical and emblematic ways to express their ideas. Rational theology changed to poetry, icon-painting to emblem-painting.

Grot’s edition of Derzhavin’s works gives us a good example of using emblems as “little metaphysical essays” in the “spiritual poems” *God, The Immortality of the Soul, Christ, A Prayer, Greatness of God, Proving of God’s Existence*, etc. Every poem was in a peculiar “frame” made from allegorical pictures, that showed symbols of “eternity”, “greatness”, “love”, “power”, “light”, “truth”. Double metaphorizing converted definitions of God into poetical and visual images and reflected them in non-conversational, unusual, “secret” and “sacral” language.

¹⁰ Предисловие // Сочинения Державина с объяснительными примечаниями Я. Грота. Т. 1. СПб, 1864. С. XXX.

Civil emblems were also objects of Derzhavin's poetry. The poem *On the March through the Alps (На переход Альпийских гор)* devoted to the march of Russian troops undertaken in 1799 by Alexander Suvorov against French forces during Italian and Swiss expeditions of 1799-1800. The emblem represented a hero supporting a terrestrial globe. Who was that hero? We know similar image with Atlas, but he supports *celestial* sphere. To associate Titan Atlas with a group of maps or a terrestrial globe was an innovation of Gerardus Mercator, who dedicated his "atlas" specifically "to honor the Titan, Atlas, King of Mauretania, a learned philosopher, mathematician, and astronomer".¹¹

Step by step Atlas transformed into Heracles, at least in the Russian context. It was not occasional. Heracles was kind of a mythological image of Peter the Great as well as Samson or David. His reforms and especially military victories were compared with the labors of Heracles. This image was usually included in allegorical decorations of solemn entries of Peter, as well as in images and descriptions of "illuminations" and fireworks.¹²

The representation of Heracles/Atlas supporting *terrestrial* (not *celestial*) globe is still alive, and it may be seen, for example, in the mosaic at St. Petersburg Metro station "Mezhdunarodnaya" (2012) with Atlas by Aleksandr Bystrov. We call it "shy", because at the first version of the mosaic he was more like his Farnese prototype.

One of important examples was an official panegyric *Political apotheosis (Политиколепная apotheosis достохвалныя храбрости всероссийскаго Гerkулеca)* written by professor of the Slavic-Greek-Latin Academy at Moscow Iosif Turoboiskii. It glorified deeds of Russian Hercules. Actually on the frontispiece Peter was represented as St. George the Victorious. Saint George and the Dragon is the most popular plot in the Orthodox iconography. In the context of

¹¹ O'Connor J.J. and Robertson E.F. Gerardus Mercator http://www-history.mcs.st-and.ac.uk/Biographies/Mercator_Gerardus.html

¹² Рязановский Н.В. The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought. New York, Oxford, 1985.

the state ideology mythological titles of Peter the Great — Heracles, Jupiter, Samson, St. George the Victorious — had the same nature.

In Grot's edition of Derzhavin's works we can see another image of Heracles as well as St. George the Victorious. It is an illustration to the poem *Courage* represented "Samson tearing the lion's mouth" and "Hercules dressed in lion's skin, puts a hand on half the world". Another poem *The Monument of Peter the Great* represented the famous statue of the tsar, so called *The Bronze Horseman*. This equestrian statue of Peter the Great in Saint Petersburg, was commissioned by Catherine the Great to French sculptor Étienne Falconet. The inscription on it says: "To Peter the First from Catherine the Second". Derzhavin added "Still alive" ("ЖИВ"). The composition looks like the archetypical image of the icon "Saint George and the Dragon", but the figure of the horseman has no spear and the dragon was changed into a snake. As a *cul-de-lampe* we may see "Glory floating in the air with the name of Peter I inside the symbol of eternity"¹³ represented as a snake that bites its own tail.

Grot did not limited Derzhavin's edition by publications of emblems and portraits. He also included samples of Derzhavin's and his correspondents' handwritings and even sheets of music on the poet's texts.

Grot tried to make his edition as much cultural as possible at that epoch. If Grot was our contemporary he would make his edition as an e-book with hypertexts, good navigation, internet connections and references to popular social networks.

¹³ Слава, парящая в воздухе с именем Петра I в знаке вечности.