

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **Gavril Romanovich Derzhavin**

**- 9 poems -**

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## **Gavril Romanovich Derzhavin (14 July 1743 – 20 July 1816)**

Gavril Romanovich Derzhavin was arguably one of the greatest Russian poets before [Alexander Pushkin](http://www.poemhunter.com/alexander-sergeyevich-pushkin/), as well as a statesman. Although his works are traditionally considered literary classicism, his best verse is rich with antitheses and conflicting sounds in a way reminiscent of [John Donne](http://www.poemhunter.com/john-donne/) and other metaphysical poets.

### **Life**

Derzhavin was born in Kazan. His distant ancestor Morza Bagrim, who relocated from the Great Horde in the 15th century to Moscow, was baptized and became a vassal of the Russian Grand Prince Vasily II. Nevertheless, by the 18th century Derzhavin's father was just a poor country squire who died when Gavril was still young. He received a little formal education at the gymnasium there but left for Petersburg as a private in the guards. There he rose from the ranks as a common soldier to the highest offices of state under Catherine the Great. He first impressed his commanders during Pugachev's Rebellion. Politically astute, his career advanced when he left the military service for civil service. He rose to the position of governor of Olonets (1784) and Tambov (1785), personal secretary to the Empress (1791), President of the College of Commerce (1794), and finally the Minister of Justice (1802). He was dismissed from his post in 1803 and spent much of the rest of his life in the country estate at Zvanka near Novgorod, writing idylls and anacreontic verse. At his Saint Petersburg house, he held monthly meetings of the conservative Lovers of the Russian Word society. He died in 1816 and was buried in the Khutyn Monastery near Zvanka, reburied by the Soviets in the Novgorod Kremlin, and then reinterred at Khutyn.

### **Works**

Derzhavin is best remembered for his odes, dedicated to the Empress and other courtiers. He paid little attention to the prevailing system of genres, and many a time would fill an ode with elegiac, humorous, or satiric contents. In his grand ode to the Empress, for instance, he mentions searching for fleas in his wife's hair and compares his own poetry with lemonade.

Unlike other Classicist poets, Derzhavin found delight in carefully chosen details, such as a colour of wallpaper in his bedroom or a poetic inventory of his daily meal. He believed that French was a language of harmony but that Russian was a language of conflict. Although he relished harmonious

alliterations, sometimes he deliberately instrumented his verse with cacophonous effect.

Derzhavin's major odes were the impeccable "On the Death of Prince Meschersky" (1779); the playful "Ode to Felica" (1782); the lofty "God" (1785), which was translated into many European languages; "Waterfall" (1794), occasioned by the death of Prince Potemkin; and "Bullfinch" (1800), a poignant elegy on the death of his friend Suvorov. He also provided lyrics for the first Russian national anthem, Let the thunder of victory sound!

#### Influence

According to D.S. Mirsky, "Derzhavin's poetry is a universe of amazing richness; its only drawback was that the great poet was of no use either as a master or as an example. He did nothing to raise the level of literary taste or to improve the literary language, and as for his poetical flights, it was obviously impossible to follow him into those giddy spheres." Nevertheless,

<http://www.poemhunter.com/nikolay-alekseyevich-nekrasov/> Nikolay Nekrasov professed to follow Derzhavin rather than Pushkin, and Derzhavin's line of broken rhythms was continued by <http://www.poemhunter.com/marina-ivanovna-tsvetaeva/> Marina Tsvetaeva in the 20th century.

#### Memorable lines

Gde stol byl yastv, tam grob stoit (English: Where used to be a table full of viands, a coffin now stands)  
I'm a czar - I'm a slave - I'm a worm - I'm a God  
...Heart of a lion, wings of an eagle Are no longer with us! – How can we fight?

#### Lines found at Derzhavin's table after his death

The current of Time's river  
Will carry off all human deeds  
And sink into oblivion  
All peoples, kingdoms and their kings.  
And if there's something that remains  
Through sounds of horn and lyre,  
It too will disappear into the maw of time  
And not avoid the common pyre... [lines broken]

#### Works:

The Bakchesarian Fountain and Other Poems

## Felitsa

God-like Tsarevna  
Of the Kirgiz-Kaisatskii horde!  
Whose wisdom matchless  
Opened the true path  
To young Prince Khlor  
To go up on that high peak  
Where the rose without thorns grows,  
Where virtue dwells:  
It takes my spirit and mind prisoner,  
Tell me how to find it.

Tell me, Felitsa:  
How to live opulently yet justly,  
How to subdue the storm of passions  
And be happy in the world.  
Your voice wakes me,  
Your son sends me;  
But to follow them I am too weak.  
Disturbed by everyday trifles,  
Today I control myself,  
But tomorrow am slave to desires.

Not emulating your courtiers,  
You often go on foot,  
And the most simple food  
Is on your table;  
Inexpensive is your rest,  
You read, you write before the candle  
And to all mortals from your pen  
Bliss flows;  
Just so at cards you do not play,  
Like me, from morning to morning.

You do not much like masquerades,  
And put not even a foot inside a club;  
Guarding your habits and customs,  
You do not act as a Don Quixote;  
The horse of Parnassus you do not saddle,  
To spirits in séances you do not go,  
You do not go from your throne to the East,--  
But, walking on the path of meekness,  
With gracious soul  
You spend a stream of useful days.

But I, having slept until noon,  
Smoke tobacco and drink coffee;  
Changing into holidays weekdays,  
I wander in the chimeras of my thoughts:  
Now booty from Persians I steal,  
Now arrows at Turks I send;  
Now, having dreamt, that I am the sultan,  
The universe I terrorize with a glance;

Now suddenly, captivated by an outfit,  
I ride to the tailor for a caftan.

Or I am at a sumptuous feast,  
Where a celebration for me is given,  
Where shines the table with silver and gold,  
Where there are thousands of varied dishes:  
There the famed Westphalian ham,  
There links of Astrakhan fish,  
There pilaf and pies sit;  
With champagne I wash down waffles  
And everything on the earth forget  
Among wines, sweets, and aromas.

Or, in a beautiful little grove  
In a summerhouse, where a fountain speaks,  
With the sounds of a sweet-voiced harp,  
Where a little wind barely breathes,  
Where everything presents me luxury,  
To pleasures my thoughts entices,  
Soothes and wakens my blood,  
Resting on a velvet divan,  
A young girl's tender feelings,  
I pour into her heart love.

Or with a splendid tandem  
In an English carriage, golden,  
With a dog, a fool, or friend  
Or with such a beauty  
I drive under the swings;  
At pubs to drink mead I stop;  
Or, when it somehow bores me,  
Due to my inclination for change,  
With my hat at a jaunty angle  
I fly on a fast steed.

Or with music and singers,  
With organ and bagpipes,  
Or with fist-fighters  
And the dance I delight my soul;  
Or, all matters of care  
Leaving behind, I go out hunting  
And amuse myself with the howls of dogs;  
Or over Neva banks  
I amuse myself by night with horns  
And the rowing of agile oarsmen.

Or, sitting at home, I horse around,  
Playing "Fool" with my wife;  
Now with her I climb to the dove-cote,  
Now at Blind-Man's Bluff we frolic away the time;  
Now we amuse ourselves at svaika

Now ?????  
Now I love to delve into books,  
My mind and heart I enlighten,  
Polkan and Bova I read;  
Over the Bible, yawning, I sleep.

In such ways, Felitsa, I am dissolute!  
But all society resembles me.  
However much one is known for wisdom,  
But all men are liars.  
We do not walk on paths of light,  
We run after dreams of depravity.  
Between the Indolent and the Choleric,  
Between vanity and vice  
One finds only by chance  
The path to pure virtue.

It is found,--but how may we not blunder,  
We, weak mortals, on that path,  
Where reason itself stumbles  
And must go after passions;  
Where learned ignoramuses,  
Like mist does to travellers, darken our minds?  
Everywhere temptations and flattery live;  
All pashas luxury oppresses.  
Where does virtue live?  
Where does the rose without thorns grow?

To you alone is it proper,  
Tsarevna! to create light out of darkness;  
Dividing Chaos into harmonious spheres,  
With a union of wholeness to strenghten them;  
From discord -- agreement  
And from violent passion happiness  
You may alone create.  
Like a sailor, sailing across the sea,  
Catching under the sail a raging wind,  
Is able to guide his ship.

Only you do not offend,  
Do not insult anyone,  
Stupidity through your fingers you see,  
But do not allow evil;  
Miscreants you right with leniency,  
You do not stifle people like a wolf does a sheep,  
You know their proper worth.  
They are subject to the will of Tsars,--  
But to the judgment of God even more,  
Living in their laws.

You soundly think of merits,  
To the worthy you give out honor;

A prophet you do not consider,  
He who may only weave rhymes,  
And for such amusement of the mind--  
Honor and praise to good caliphs.  
You are tolerant of the lyric key:  
Poetry is pleasing to you,  
Acceptable, sweet, useful,  
Like in summer a tasty lemonade.

Rumor passes of your acts,  
That you are not the least bit proud;  
Kindly both in business and in fun,  
Pleasant in friendship and firm;  
That you are indifferent to misfortune,  
And in glory so magnanimous,  
That you refused to be called Wise.  
They also say truthfully,  
That it is always possible  
To tell you the truth.

Such unheard-of matters  
Are only worthy of you,  
That you boldly allow the people  
Of all, aloud or in secret,  
Both to know and to think.  
And of yourself you do not forbid  
Truth and untruth to be said;  
That you the very crocodiles,  
The Zoiluses of all your mercies,  
Always are prone to forgive.

Pleasant rivers of tears flow  
From the depths of my soul.  
O! how happy people who  
Must be there with their fate,  
Where a meek angel, a peaceful angel,  
Clad in porphyry lightness,  
Holds the sceptre sent down from heaven!  
There it is possible to whisper in conversations  
And, not fearing punishment, at dinner  
To the health of the Tsar not drink.

There it is possible  
To erase Felitsa's name  
Or her portrait carelessly  
Drop on the ground.  
There joke weddings they do not celebrate,  
They do not steam people in icy baths,  
They do not pull at the moustaches of the belle monde;  
Princes do not cackle like hens,  
Favorites do not laugh at them  
And smear their faces with soot.

You know, Felitsa! the rights  
Of both men and tsars;  
When you enlighten manners,  
You do not make fools of men;  
In your moments of rest from work  
You write in tales to instruct  
And teach the alphabet to Khlor:  
"Do nothing bad,  
And the most evil satirist  
You will make a hated liar."

You are ashamed to be called Great,  
To be terrible, unloved;  
Only to a wild she-bear is it becoming  
To tear animals and drink their blood.  
Without the misery of extreme fever  
Need one have recourse to the lancet  
When one may get along without it?  
And is it glorious to be a tyrant,  
A great Tamerlane in cruelty,  
For one great in goodness, like God?

Felitsa's glory is the glory of God,  
Who pacified battles;  
Who orphans and the needy  
Sheltered, clothed, and fed;  
Who with radiant eye  
To jokers, cowards, the ungrateful  
And the just gives its light;  
Equally enlightens all mortals,  
Calms and cures the sick,  
And does good for good's sake alone.

Who gave freedom  
To travel to other lands,  
Allowed its people  
To search for silver and gold;  
Who opens the waters  
And does not forbid the cutting of woods;  
Who orders to weave, and knit, and sew;  
Freeing the mind and hands  
Orders to love trade, the sciences  
And to find happiness at home.

Whose law and right hand  
Give both mercy and justice.--  
Announce, most wise Felitsa!  
Where the villain is separated from the honest?  
Where age does not wander through the world?  
Merit finds its bread?  
Where revenge does not drive anyone?

Where conscience dwells with truth?  
Where virtue shines?--  
Truly at your throne!

But where does your throne shine in the world?  
Where, heavenly branch, do you flower?  
In Bagdad? Smyrna? Kashmir?--  
Listen, wherever you live:  
My praises reaching you,  
Think not that a hat or a coat  
I wished to receive from you.  
To feel the charm of goodness,  
Such is wealth for the soul,  
Such as Croesus did not possess.

I beg the great prophet,  
That I may touch the dust of your feet,  
That the sweetest stream of your words  
And your look I may enjoy!  
The heavenly powers I beg,  
That unfurling their sapphire wings  
They invisibly protect you  
From all illness, evil and boredom;  
That of your deeds in posterity reknown,  
Like in the heavens stars, will shine.

Gavril Romanovich Derzhavin

## God

O Thou, who's infinite in space,  
Alive in ever-moving matter,  
Eternal in the flow of time,  
God faceless, with a trinity of faces!  
Soul unified and omnipresent,  
Who needs no place or reason,  
Whom none can ever comprehend,  
Whose being permeates all things,  
Encompassing, creating, guarding,  
Thou, called by us God.

Although a great mind might contrive  
To fix the ocean's depths,  
To count the sands, the rays of stars,  
Thou can't be summed or fixed!  
Enlightened souls who have emerged  
From your creative light  
Cannot begin to grasp your ways:  
Our thought alone aspires to thee,  
But in your magnitude is lost,  
A moment in eternity.

From depths eternal thou invoked  
Primordial substances of chaos  
Within thine very self thou birthed  
Eternity before all time.  
And before time from thine self alone  
Thou shinest forth within thyself.  
All light originates in thee.  
Creating all with but a single word  
And reaching forth in new creation,  
Thou wast, thou art, and thou will ever be!

Thou incarnate the chain of life,  
Thou nourish and sustain it.  
Thou joinest starts with ends.  
Thou bringest life to all through death.  
New suns are born from thee  
In flowing streams of sparks.  
As on a clear and freezing day,  
A hoarfrost dusting shines,  
And floats, and churns and sparkles,  
As do the stars beneath thy vault.

A multitude of shining spheres  
Floats off into infinity.  
They all fulfill thy laws,  
And cast their vivifying rays.  
But all these brilliant lanterns-  
This mass of glowing crystal-  
This roiling crowd of golden waves-  
These burning elements-

Or all these gleaming worlds as one-  
Compare to thee like night to day.

Compared to thee the earthly realm  
Is like a droplet in the sea.  
What is this universe I see?  
And what am I, compared to thee?  
If, in this airy sea, I wish  
To multiply a million worlds  
By other worlds a hundred times-  
Then venture to compare the sum to thee,  
All this would be a tiny speck;  
So I, compared to thee, am naught.

I'm Naught! But thou shinest through me  
With all the splendor of your virtue;  
Thou showest yourself through me  
Like sun inside a tiny water drop.  
I'm Naught! But still I can feel life,  
Like something hungering I fly,  
I'm always soaring high above.  
To be with you is my soul's wish,  
It contemplates, reflects and thinks:  
If I exist-thou art as well.

Thou art! As nature's order shows,  
My heart affirms the same to me,  
My reason's sure of it:  
Thou art-And I'm no longer naught!  
A fraction of the universe's whole,  
It seems that I repose in nature's  
Critical center where you started  
With the creation of corporeal beasts,  
And ended with the heav'nly spirits:  
Through me, you fused the chain of life.

I am the link of all existing worlds,  
I am the outer brink of matter,  
I am the focal point of living things,  
I am the starting place of the divine;  
Although my flesh rots into ash,  
My mind commands the thunderbolts,  
I'm king-I'm slave - I'm worm-I'm God!  
But though I am miraculous,  
Whence did I come?-that no one knows.  
I could not by myself have risen.

Creator, I am your invention!  
I am a creature of your wisdom.  
O, source of life, bestower of blessings,  
My soul and king!  
According to your iron laws

My self eternal must needs pass  
Across the borne of death;  
My spirit's clothed in mortal garb  
And I return through death alone,-  
To your eternity - O, father!-

Thou art inscrutable, transcendent!  
I understand that all my soul's  
Imaginings are powerless  
Your shadow to describe;  
But when thou must be glorified  
To pay such tribute we frail men  
One course alone can follow.  
We venture upwards to thy realm,  
To lose ourselves in thy vast otherness  
And shed our tears of gratitude.

Gavril Romanovich Derzhavin

## Monument

I built myself a monument, eternal and miraculous,  
It's higher than the Pyramids, than metal it is harder;  
Swift winds and thunder cannot knock it down  
The flight of time cannot demolish it.

Thus I won't really die! The part of me that's largest  
Will baffle death, and will escape decay,  
My fame will grow, and never wither,  
As long as Slavs are honored in this world.

And word of me shall spread from the White Sea to the Black,  
Where Volga, Don, Neva and Ural rivers flow,  
Each member of the countless tribes will know  
How from obscurity I found my way to fame,

By daring first in lively Russian speech  
To celebrate the virtues of Felitsa,  
To talk of God with intimate simplicity,  
And with a smile announce the truth to kings.

O Muse! take pride in your well-earned rewards,  
Disdain all those who show disdain for you,  
And with an easy and unhurried hand,  
With dawn eternal crown your brow.

Gavril Romanovich Derzhavin

## **On A Bird**

A sweet-voiced bird's been caught.  
They squeeze it in a vice-like grip.  
The poor thing squeaks and warbles not  
But they insist: "O, birdie, sing!"

Gavril Romanovich Derzhavin

## On The Death Of Prince Meshchersky

O, Voice of time! O, metal's clang!  
Your dreadful call distresses me,  
Your groan doth beckon, beckon me  
It beckons, brings me closer to my grave.  
This world I'd just begun to see  
When death began to gnash her teeth,  
Like lightening her scythe aglint,  
She cuts my days like summer hay.

No creature thinks to run away,  
From under her rapacious claws:  
Prisoners, kings alike are worm meat,  
Cruel elements the tomb devour,  
Time gapes to swallow glory whole.  
As rushing waters pour into the sea,  
So days and ages pour into eternity  
And death carnivorous all eats.

We slide along the edge of an abyss  
And we will someday topple in.  
With life, we take at one time death,  
To die's the purpose of our birth.  
Death strikes all down without a thought.  
It shatters e'en the stars,  
Extinguishes the suns,  
It threatens every world.

'Tis only mortals do not think of death  
Imagining eternal life,  
But burglar death, will come to them,  
Steal life away quite suddenly.  
Alas! when we are least afraid  
Then death more quickly catches us-  
It's swifter still than thunderstorms  
That sweep upon majestic peaks.

O, Child of rest, of luxury and ease,  
Meshchersky, whither have you gone?  
You have abandoned earthly shores  
Retreated to the shores of death.  
Your dust is here, but not your soul.  
Where has it gone? There. Where? We do not know.  
All we can do is weep and cry:  
"O, woe to us, born to this world!"

Where once amusement, joy, and love  
Shined all together with good health,  
Now there the blood is freezing in our veins,  
Our souls are plagued by grief.  
Where once a feast was spread a coffin lies,  
The place where festive singing rang  
Now hears but graveside keening,

And pale death watches over all.

It watches over all-the kings  
Who hold worlds under guiding hands,  
It watches opulent, rich men  
Idols of silver and gold.  
It watches charm and beauty,  
It watches lofty intellect,  
It watches strength undaunted,  
And sharpens keen its scythe.

Death, terror, nature's trepidation!  
We're pride and poverty combined.  
Today we're Gods, tomorrow dust,  
Today sweet hope inspires us,  
But where are you tomorrow, man?  
The hours you're given barely pass  
Before they flee to chaos bottomless,  
And your whole life, a dream, is gone.

Just like a dream, like slumber sweet,  
My youth's already disappeared,  
The touch of beauty moves me less.  
Less merriment suffuses me,  
My mind is not so frivolous,  
Nor my contentment quite so great.  
Tormented by the quest for rank,  
I hear how glory beckons me.

But so does also valor pass  
Together with the rush for fame.  
The blandishments of wealth pass by,  
As do the roiling passions of the heart  
They fade and fade away in turn.  
O, leave me be, all pleasures possible,  
Here, you are transient and untrue:  
I stand before the threshold of eternity.

Today, tomorrow, death will come,  
Perfilev, it will come for all!-  
Why should we grieve and hurt  
Because our friend did not forever live?  
Life's heaven's transitory gift,  
My friend, so live yours peacefully.  
And let your heart in purity  
Bless every blow of fate.

Gavril Romanovich Derzhavin

## **The Bullfinch**

Why do you strike up songs military  
Fife-like, o, bullfinch, my friend?  
Who'll take the lead in our fight with Hell's forces?  
Who will command us? What Hercules?  
Where is Suvorov, strong, swift and fearless?  
Now Northern thunder lies dead in the grave.

Who will ride fiery, ahead of the legions,  
Nag for a steed, and crusts for meal,  
Temper his sword in the heat and in ice storms,  
Sleep on straw pallets, labor 'til dawn,  
Bring down the armies, the walls and the forts  
With but a handful of stout Russian men?

Who will excel in unwavering courage,  
Conquering fate with a prayer and with faith,  
Evil with bayonets, envy with jests?  
Capturing scepters, remaining a slave,  
Who will keep striving for valor alone,  
Live for our Tsars, while consuming himself?

Glorious heroes like this one are gone now  
Bullfinch cease singing your songs military!  
Music of war brings us no more enjoyment.  
Sad laments everywhere sound from the lyres:  
Heart of a lion and wings of an eagle  
Now and forever gone-how will we fight?

Gavril Romanovich Derzhavin

## **The Current Of Time's River**

The current of time's river  
Will carry off all human deeds  
And sink into oblivion  
All peoples, kingdoms and their kings.

And if there's something that remains  
Through sounds of horn and lyre,  
It too will disappear into the maw of time  
And not avoid the common fate.

Gavril Romanovich Derzhavin

## The Swan

I'll leave the mortal world behind,  
Take wing in an flight fantastical,  
With singing, my eternal soul  
Will rise up swan-like in the air.

Possessing two immortal traits,  
In Purgatory I won't not linger,  
But rising over jealousy  
I'll leave behind me kingdoms' shine.

'Tis so! Though not renowned by birth,  
I am the muses favorite,  
From other notables a world apart-  
I'll be preferred by death itself.

The tomb will not confine me,  
I will not turn to dust among the stars,  
But like a heavenly set of pipes,  
My voice will ring out from the sky.

And now I see that feathered skin  
My figure covers all around.  
My breast is downy and my back is winged,  
I shine with pearly swan-like white.

I fly, I soar-and see below  
The world entire-- oceans, woods.  
Like mountains they lift up their heads  
To hear my lofty hymn to God.

From Kuril Islands to the river Bug,  
From White Sea to the Caspian,  
Peoples from half the world  
Of whom the Russian race's comprised,

Will hear of me in time:  
Slavs, Huns, the Scythians, and Finns,  
And others locked today in battle,  
Will point at me and they'll pronounce:

"There flies the one who tuned his lyre  
To speak the language of the heart,  
And preaching peace to the whole world,  
Enjoyed the happiness of all."

Forget a big and stately funeral,  
My friends! Cease singing, muses' choir!  
My wife! With patience gird yourself!  
Don't keen upon what seems a corpse.

Gavril Romanovich Derzhavin

## To Rulers and Judges

He's risen - Highest God - to do the judgment, fair,  
Of the earthly ones in their whole band;  
How long - he sad - how long will you else spare  
The unjust and wicked people in your land.

Your sacred duty is to make support for laws,  
To make no favor to the strongest ones,  
To leave the widows and orphans in your borders  
Without help and safety not once.

To save the innocent from all that harm and wrong is,  
To give good shelter to unhappy folks,  
To shield the weak from evil of the strongest,  
To drew the poor from their heavy bonds.

They don't hear the words! They see and they don't know  
Their eyes are covered with a veil of bribes and wealth,  
The black injustice shakes the havens' dome,  
And wicked deeds convulse the whole earth.

I thought, kings, you are strong as strong the gods of heavens,  
And nobody else can judge you on the earth,  
But you, like I, live in the yoke of passions,  
And, just like I'm , are serfs of the Lord Death.

And you shall fall like leafs fall, that are withered,  
From wet and bare trees by the autumnal sky!  
And you will die, the great and wealthy caesar,  
Just like your poorest slave will die!

Arise, at last, O God! God of the just and purest!  
Hark to the prayers they recall with for your grace:  
Come, judge, chastise the wicked worldly rulers,  
And be the only king on Haven and the earth.

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