

Adam Drozdek

(Pittsburgh, USA)

IAKOV KNIAZHNNIN: "DEATH, THE ONLY ESCAPE FROM DESPAIR"

Iakov Kniazhnin was one of the most accomplished playwrights of the second half of the eighteenth century in Russia, an author of fairly popular tragedies, comedies, and operas. In his *Interpretative dictionary* written with tongue in cheek, he wrote, "Theatrical ending: death in tragedy, wedding in comedy. Therefore, it can be seen that it isn't much more joyous to be married than to die" (2.662)¹. That death is the end of tragedy was nothing new; however, in Kniazhnin's works death appears with increased intensity as a solution for every problem and an offer of self-sacrifice and suicide is made at the drop of a hat.

Death

On a suicidal note ends *Orpheus* (1763), when despaired Orfei/Orpheus after his failure to lead Evidika/Eurydice from Tartarus says, "I am ending my life with a sword" since death is a consolation of the misfortunate (1:2/2.328)².

In *Didona* (1769), based on Virgil's well-known theme of the tragic end of the love of Aeneas and Dido, a queen of Carthage, Kniazhnin spares no effort to show Didona's/Dido's desire to die when the lasting union with Enei/Aeneas

¹ (volume.page) is a reference to *Сочинения Княжнина*, Санктпетербург: В типографии книжного магазина П. Крашенинникова и компании 1847–1848⁴, vols. 1–2.

² (act:scene/page number); for *Olga* and *Vadim of Novgorod* page number is from Kniazhnin's *Избранные произведения*, Ленинград: Советский писатель 1961, for remaining plays and operas, it is from *Сочинения Княжнина*.

becomes impossible because “Zeus... ordered [Enei] to seek fatherland in Italia” (4:13/1.55). Torn between love and duty, he wonders, what to do while hating life and seeing his consolation only in death. When Enei tells her that he loves her but he must leave, she responds, “When I lose you, I’ll die” (40). After her pleading, he relents and wants to stay. The wedding should take place the same day (3:7/41) and later, “I only want my own death” (4:6/46) and after he left the city, “Everything vanished, only death remained” (5:3/61) and so Didona exclaims, “I’ll die” (5:4/64). Iarb/Iarbas, a king of Gaetulia, appears with an ultimatum: he will burn the city or she will marry him. She refuses, the city is burned and Didona throws herself into the flames.

Vladimir and Iaropolk (1772) takes from the *Primary chronicle* a bloody subject of the relation between two brothers. Vladimir killed the father of Rogneda, whom he loves, and destroyed her city. His brother Iaropolk, prince of Kiev, loves Greek princess Kleomena, who is in his captivity and asks her to marry him so that her imprisoned brother could be released. This is after he abandoned Rogneda, who is angry at him that he had abandoned her after she sacrificed “the wreath of Novgorod” for him. Eventually, Iaropolk promises to abandon Kleomena and to marry Rogneda. Vladimir’s reaction: “I should die, but I should also avenge myself!”; I’ll be forced to kill Iaropolk “who blocks my way to Rogneda” (3:1/1.345). Svadel wants Vladimir to kill Iaropolk and also to offer his own life if need be. Iaropolk abandons Kleomena and prepares for a wedding with Rogneda ready to kill Kleomena’s brother and invade Constantinople, but Vladimir threatens, “Torment me today and shed my blood, / Or without regret I’ll shed yours” (3:4/354). Kleomena threatens that if Iaropolk kills her brother, she will die. He still tries to convince her to marry him and says, “I will strike [your] brother, you will die, I will die as well!” (3:6/358). The fact that Iaropolk wants to marry Kleomena, appalls Svadel, “Here is my chest, strike! I don’t want to live” (3:7/360), for which Iaropolk exiles him. Rogneda is appalled that a slave woman is elevated to the throne and she will live in shame: “But death will even everything up and will make us equal in the grave” (4:2/362). She wants Vladimir to kill Iaropolk as a condition to marry Vladimir (4:3/364). He hesitates. She says that she will ask Iaropolk to take her and if he refuses, she will kill him and herself: “I’m running to my death with joy / Only to avenge myself” (4:4/368). Iaropolk got married with Kleomena. Vladimir kills Iaropolk, but Rogneda wants him to go away. Vladimir tries to commit suicide, but Vladimir takes him away to protect from vengeance of Kievians. This is a rather abrupt ending in a play where the threat of suicide abounds. In the *Primary chronicle*, Rogneda was Vladimir’s wife who preferred Iaropolk, but Vladimir attacked her city of Polotsk, killed her father and took her by force. Iaropolk, on the other hand, was married to a nameless Greek woman who was a nun. Having killed Iaropolk, Vladimir took the Greek woman as his concubine.

In *Olga* (1776–1778), loosely based on the *Primary chronicle*, the deadly atmosphere permeates the entire play. Mal, a Drevlian prince, kills Igor, Olga's husband. Her son Sviatoslav raised in seclusion by Volod, appears to kill a man in an unexpected squabble and is arrested. Not recognizing him and thinking that he killed her son, Olga wants him dead, but Volod appears revealing to her Sviatoslav's true identity. Mal, after learning about this identity, wants to adopt Sviatoslav and teach him the ropes of governing, but Sviatoslav refuses; he wants "to die – or to have revenge" for Igor's death and is seconded by Olga: "I'll die with you," to which he says, "Death is not frightening to someone / Who is not afraid of his own death, [And] he has control over the life of his evildoers." Saving the fatherland from a tyrant, "I will come down with *slava*" (5:2/177). Olga encourages him to do it. When Mal gives a conciliatory speech in a temple, Sviatoslav kills him with an ax in response and takes the throne.

In *Titus' mercy* (*Титово милосердие* (1778)), Vitelliia/Vitellia wants her lover, senator Sekst/Sextus, to kill the emperor Tit/Titus to avenge the death of her father Vitellii/Vitellius. However, Sext is loyal to Tit who is a fatherly figure to him and who wants to marry his sister Servilliia/Servilia. Manipulative Vitelliia thinks only about ascending to the throne: "Love! You are the share of the weak mortals" (2:5/98), but Sekst truly loves her: "I'll die when I lose Vitelliia" (2:6/1.100). Titus gets an anonymous letter about an attempt on his life and Sekst is in mortal danger, but his sister wants to die with him if he is found guilty. Ashamed Sekst exclaims, "Oh, death, end my suffering" (3:12/135). At that point, Vitelliia also wants "only death" (3:13/136); however, merciful Tit pardons both of them and orders them to marry. This is quite a revenge of a merciful monarch since this union does not spell out good prospects for a happy marriage considering the manipulative character of Vitelliia.

In spite of the happy ending, the shadow of death hangs heavily over *Rosslav* (1784). A Danish usurper Khristiern/Christian II is on the Swedish throne. Gustav Vasa, the rightful contender, hides somewhere in Russia and Rosslav, who is in Khristiern's captivity, knows where. Khristiern wants to marry princess Zafira, who is loved by Rosslav and by general Kedar, whereas she loves Rosslav. Khristiern promises to free Rosslav if he tells him where Gustav is, but Rosslav refuses. Zafira comes to prison to save Rosslav, but he refuses and says that she should follow him to his death: "He is free, / Who is not afraid of death and doesn't try to please tyrants" (3:3/1.192). Khristiern sentences Zafira and Rosslav to torture and death. Zafira now says, "Without fear I follow you to an unknown land / Where I'll meet with your celestial soul, / Where you'll replace for me the beauty of heaven itself" (195–196). Zafira is forgiven, but not Rosslav. Rosslav rejects the prospect of happiness with her: "This is not for me, I have to die" (4:1/203). After all, in his view, "Love is the tyrant of weak souls, [love is] a slave of a hero. / When happiness can't be reconciled with duty, / Then he is discredited who wants to be happy" (1:2/160). Again, she wants him

to escape from prison, but he prefers honorable death over her love: “with *slava* I go to the grave” (4:3/208). In the nick of time Gustav arrives with troops and saves Rosslav from execution. On this news, Zafira announces to Khristiern: “Kill me! since Rosslav is alive, my death is sweet to me” (5:4/224). Rosslav does not want to “repay persecution with persecution,” whereby Khristiern should see the character of a Russian. He forgives him, but Khristiern tries to kill Rosslav and commits suicide. Rosslav is united with Zafira³.

Death appears to be a favorite topic of the protagonists of *Sofonisba* (1786). In Cirta, supported by Rome, Massinissa/Masinissa wants to overthrow Numidian king Sifaks/Syphax and his wife Sofonisba who wrote to Massinissa in secret trying him to relent. She once loved him and almost married him. Her letter is intercepted by Sifaks. Upon her pronouncement, “Death is flying around us”, Sifaks says, “Death is flying and I hasten to meet her” when battling with Massinissa (1:3/1.395); and he adds, “live and I go to die with *slava*” (396), whereupon she immediately declares that she would die with him. Massinissa comes to see her, she rejects him as a traitor, but he wants “To experience silently death from the beloved hands”; when rejected by her, he “Has come to cut the deplorable time of life, / An unbearable burden, himself, with his [own] hand” (2:2/401). When she says she would cry over his death, he says joyfully he wished her husband appeared to kill him: “Because of the dear tears, experiencing the sweet death / I prefer this short moment over the whole life” (402). Out of love for her, he surrenders to Sifaks “to accept death” (2:3/404). She tells Sifaks that he should direct his anger at her and she is ready “to bring herself in offering” and shed her blood (406). Sifaks frees him. Also, sensing that the end of his rule is near, he tells him that they will meet on the battlefield where he, Sifaks will die as a hero. Similarly, Sofonisba, in expectation of battle, says, “pleasant for me are terrible gates of the grave ... / Death will shorten all woes” (2:4/408) and “death is a pleasant gift” (3:1/409). Sifaks is defeated and killed and “*slava* led him to the temple of immortality” (3:2/410). During the battle, Sifaks fought with Massinissa who only defended himself so Sifaks killed himself “ashamed of looking for death which was evading him” and so none of his commanders wanted to live and so “*Slava* covered each of them with the wreath of laurels” (412). Massinissa is on the throne and wants to marry Sofonisba, to which she agrees. However, Romans consider her to be their enemy and want to enslave her. Massinissa wants to defend her, but his troops are overpowered by the Romans. Sofonisba, seeing that all this is because the Romans want to enslave her, wants Massinissa to kill her to end her woes and being his wife she

³ We can only wonder if Rosslav’s neurotic rush to suicide wasn’t one of the main reasons why Stoiunin said rather harshly about this play that in it “everything is weak, false, everything is sweated out from fantasy”, В.Я. Стоюнин, Княжнин-писатель, *Исторический вестник* 5 (1881), p. 448.

would go happily to the grave. She is captured by the Romans, leading to Massinissa's desperation: "O, death! the only escape from despair, / Given by the gods to the unfortunate" (5:1/439); he intends to kill her and himself: "We will die! and how could we console ourselves in this world?" (5:4/442); "O, cruel gods, as my life is your gift, / Take it, it torments me; / I give back to you this unbearable gift" (443). He is allowed to see her and says, death is "the precious gift of Heaven, pleasant and sweet" to escape shame (445). Sofonisba kills herself, which is followed by Massinissa's suicide.

The action of *Vladisan* (1786) is in an imaginary Russian past. Vitoraz instigated the invasion of Pechenegs which was fought by king Vladisan who is then assumed dead and Plamira, his wife, is in mourning. Vitoraz takes the reins of power and wants to marry Plamira, but she still loves her husband without whom she sees her only hope in death. Repeating a thread of action from *Olga*, Vitoraz wants to adopt her son Vel'kar⁴; however, a Pecheneg envoy demands from Vitoraz to give them Plamira's son. To save him, Vitoraz offers her again marriage and he is ready to die for her son. She agrees when her son is ready to die with *slava*. Vitoraz orders preparations for marriage. Vamir tells Vladisan about it who, saddened by her infidelity, wants to commit suicide. Plamira comes to Vladisan's grave in which he is hiding and he reveals himself. He wants to kill her, but Vamir intervenes. Learning that she did it for their son, Vladisan says it would be happiness for him to die at her beloved feet. Vitoraz comes with his confidant Izbar and also Vladisan appears. Vitoraz, seeing his end, kills himself and so does Izbar.

The *Nikon chronicle* very briefly mentions Vadim the Bold as being killed by Rurik/Riurik two years after Rurik was invited to save Novgorod. It may be because Vadim incited mutiny against him – and such a mutiny becomes a topic of Kniazhnin's *Vadim of Novgorod* (1789). In the play, Vadim is ready to die for the people to liberate them from oppressive Rurik. Possibly taking the cue from Joshua 15:16, Vadim offers his daughter Ramida to anyone who liberates Novgorod. However, Ramida loves Rurik and even though she is loved back she says, "I'll die, but I won't neglect my duty / And I'll submit myself to the parental authority" (2:1/263) and then to her father, "for fatherly love / Should I in this minute shed all my blood? / Shed it! It's yours!" (2:3/267). He scolds her for her love for Rurik, to which she responds, "Here's my chest, pierce it! / Crush the heart [that is] captive to him [Rurik]. / Losing everything with him – both heavens and earth – / I'll welcome your mortal blow as a great gift" (268). For his preparations to overthrow Rurik, Vadim promises Ramida to Prenest. In this situation, Ramida sees as "the only consolation – death in this unbearable suffering"; "I desire death" (3:1/276); and again, "When it is prohibited for me to live

⁴ For similarities between *Olga* and *Vladisan* see А.П. Могилянский, „Ольга”, трагедия Я.Б. Княжнина, XVIII век 3 (1958), pp. 503–504.

for Rurik, / [I should be] mourned by Rurik in the grave!” (4:3/288). Prenest inadvertently reveals to Rurik the preparations to mutiny and is ready to die for it: “For whom death is not fearful, your scepter is nothing for him” (3:4/281). In the ensuing battle, Rurik captures Vadim who sighs, “I hate life / And, unfortunate, I don’t see a way to die” (5:2/295). Ramida says that whether Rurik defeats Vadim or is defeated by him, she cannot be with him: “my life is nothing” (296). Vadim rejects disdainfully Rurik’s proposal of reconciliation and chastises Ramida who commits suicide, to which Vadim exclaims, “Oh, joy!” and also kills himself (303).

The deadly pall is spread over all Kniazhnin’s tragedies in which the first solution for problems is suicide. Actions are undertaken with the prevailing death wish as though it were the best that can happen in one’s life. Protagonists try to outdo one another in showing that they are more ready to die than the next man. In all these bodies piling up the viewer can easily be desensitized to death and its significance – if any. It becomes quite possible that Kniazhnin’s own words said in jest in his *Dictionary* may be applicable here: “Tragedy – a miserable work in which actors weep but the public laughs” (2.667)⁵.

This prevalence of death in tragedies seeps also into Kniazhnin’s comedies.

In *The braggart* (*Хвастун* (1784–1785)), Zamir, thinking he was rejected by Milena in favor of Verkholet (HighFlyer), challenges Verkholet to a duel with the desperation: “I should die or should you!” (4:5/1.546).

In *Weirdos* (*Чудаку* (1790)), when Lentiagin (Idle) by confessing that his father was a blacksmith, apparently ruins Ulinka’s prospects of marriage with Vetromakh (Thoughtless), distressed Lentiagina, Lentiagin’s wife, almost fainted and when Trusim (Coward) offers help, she quite sincerely says, “Go away, let me die” (2:4/1.623). Also, exceedingly shy Priiat (Nice), who loves Ulinka and in the words of Marina, Ulinka’s maid, “he wants to shed his blood before you,” is ready to say to Ulinka, “I should die not being loved” (4:10/680). Also, Prolaz (Cunning) in Priiat’s name confesses Priiat’s love for Ulinka and with some exaggeration says that in the case of rejection “my master will die and I’ll die with him” (4:11/683). Eventually, permission for marriage is granted resulting in Priiat’s exclamation, “I was born to this world to live and to die for her” (5:9/713).

In *The sbiten seller* (*Сбитенщик* (1783)), when Stepan advises Boltai (Babbler) to perish the thought of marrying Pasha, he says, “I’ll die first before I abandon it” (1:6/2.17). However this is not because of the ardency of his love, but because of her riches.

In *Misfortune from a carriage* (*Несчастие от кареты* (1779)) when he is about to be sold to the military to fund a carriage of Firiulin (Fool) and be separated from Aniuta, despaired Luk’ian says, “In death I’ll find escape”

⁵ Stoiunin said that *Rosslav*’s exaggerations sometimes reach [the level] of comicality”, Стоюнин, *op. cit.*, p. 453.

(2:1/2.127). The landlord orders Aniuta to be married to his steward. The jester then advises Luk'ian: "Spit at everything, die, that's the best way... As a friend, I advise you to die" (1:4/129–130), which fits very well Luk'ian's mood of hopelessness.

Slava

What was a motivation for such a widespread self-sacrificial readiness? There could be personal reasons – disenchantment with friendship, love, or with life generally, but these would be the wrong reasons. The right reason is *slava* which means at the same time glory and being well-known or being famous⁶.

Rosslav (consider his name: Ros-*slav*) wants just one thing: He wants to die with *slava* (3:2/1.190). He will not relent to Zafira's request to escape from prison stating that he is insulted by such a request since he has to protect his *slava* (3:5/198).

Vadim scolds his compatriots, "How can you rely only on the help of the gods / And crawl without *slava* in the herd of men?" (1:2/255). And thus Vadim himself wants to march to "the temple of eternal *slava*" (2:3/269). Also, the fact that Prenest and Vidor are dead is not as important as the fact that they "descended to the darkness of the grave on the [battle]field of *slava*" (5:2/296).

Iaropolk's sin lies in the fact that blinded by passions, he does not care about *slava* (2:2/1.334). On the other hand, an exemplary behavior is provided by Svadel who is ready to meet death for the fatherland and for the *slava* of Russians (3:2/349). Patriotism, then?

It is interesting in that respect that Massinissa who alone wants to oppose the Romans "to die gloriously (*slavno*)" (4:2/1.430) opposes Scipio in whose opinion everything should be sacrificed to Rome; for the Romans, "the love of fatherland – this is the source of their *slava*" and Scipio himself would be ready to sacrifice himself for Rome (4:3/435). Both parties here are vying for *slava*; does this mean that it does not really matter on which side one is fighting as long as their desire for *slava* stems from their love of their fatherlands and from no other source? In fact, in the case of Massinissa this source appears to be as much, if not more, his love for Sofonisba. Would he be in the wrong and Scipio, an invader, in the right since for Massinissa his patriotic impulses are not the sole reason for self-sacrifice?

⁶ In Vasilii Levshin's fable, the two knights, who significantly contributed to winning a battle and when the sovereign offered a reward, say that they did not do it for a reward, "*slava* is our reward", Василий А. Левшин, *Вечерние часы, или Древняя сказка славян древлянских*, Москва: В Типографии Компании Типографической 1787–1788, vol. 1, p. 116; cf. a response of another knight (in fact, a woman in man's disguise): "*slava* is my reward, I need nothing else", vol. 3, p. 65.

However, in his *Stanzas on death* Kniazhnin apparently recanted his praises on *slava*. For example, a warrior seeks *slava* on the battlefield (2.469, 470): “What of this *slava*, which flattered [you]? / Although you got it, / Death opened the door to eternity / You were, but you descended to the grave. / You don’t see it / That your name resounds here. / You are perishing in the dark grave / And the light of *slava* does not flatter you. / We are all led by vanity, / We live our life in torment / And enslaved by flattering dream, / We won’t find direct happiness” (471). This is in a rather stark contrast to the statement made apparently in earnest in the comedy *The wake* (*Трап*): “To die in war is not death, it’s *slava*” (1:5/433). The *Stanzas on death* end with the appeal: Life passes very quickly, “Before eternity – life is nothing. / Death leads us to infinity, / Nothing will hide from it. / Friends! don’t forget death, / It is our universal share. / Protect only the rectitude of [your] spirit, / And always be afraid of evil deeds” (473). A renunciation of *slava*? Not quite – a redirection.

Two things. First, all *slava* is not desirable. For instance, Enei, seeing that he can cause Didona’s death, laments, “Can I by famous (*slaven*) in the world because of my barbarity? / I’ll be just like the most cruel evildoers” (4:13/1.57). In *Titus’s mercy*, Sekst castigates Lentul that he seeks “*slava* in evildoing” (2:8/106). Incidentally, in a similar vein Kniazhnin made a statement through Prenest, which incurred Catherine II’s ire: “What hero with wreath was not diverted from [his] path? / Drunk with the poison of his greatness, / Who among the tsars in the purple was not corrupts? / Autocracy is everywhere a cause of woes, / Corrupts even the purest virtue itself / And by opening unhindered paths for passions, / It gives to tsars freedom to be tyrants” (*Vadim* 2:4/271)⁷.

Second, *slava* in Kniazhnin’s theater has very strong bellicose accents, which may look good on the scene for theatrical effects. However, it is not all and Kniazhnin acknowledged other aspects of *slava* in regular life outside the battlefield. In his speeches to graduate students (1779)⁸ and to cadets he asked rhetorically, can anyone having no lofty feelings stirred by education like *slava*? What good is anyone for who does not like *slava*? “The love of *slava* supported by virtue is the ladder on which a gifted man surpasses humanity itself” (2.592).

⁷ Catherine could hardly consider as innocuous the statements of Svadel’: “Magnates (*вельможи*) are the stronghold of nations and of tsars. / When people are concerned about the impetuosity of the throne, / It’s the duty of magnates to stop its urges” and “When the tsar goes beyond the limits of his sacred rights, / Then the duty of the magnates is to bring him back into his limits” (*Vadim* 1:1/314). Because of such sentiments, *Vadim* is seen as merely “a political tract-pamphlet” by М. [О.] Габель, *Литературное наследство Я. Б. Княжнина, Литературное наследство* 9–10 (1933), p. 363.

⁸ Reportedly, Kniazhnin was prompted by his boss Ivan I. Betskii to give a speech about “the dignity of man and about personal *slava* of an enlightened artist”, Сергей Н. Глинка, *Заметки*, Санкт-Петербург: Издание редакции журнала „Русская старина“ 1895, p. 36, although Glinka is off by 10 years.

People who find their benefits in the benefits of society make *slava* to be their passion and don't waste time (597). The path to the temple of science is arduous⁹, but how gratifying it is to be there where "*slava* is before the eyes of the entire fatherland" (601). Who desires *slava* rejecting a lazy life and "unworthy quietness" will "greatly multiply/develop oneself"; "in all generations, great people were made only through *slava*" (602). In his versified *Letter to students of liberal arts* he stated, "Raphael was not collegiate assessor (*коллежский асессор*) / Only with his life-giving brush / Was no less famous (*slaven*) as famous (*slaven*) is a hero" (499)¹⁰. Kniazhnin makes his Tit also say, "I seek *slava* for myself only in virtue" (3:13/1.138) and Rosslav to declare "I'll die for virtue" (1:3/1.164).

Virtuous as this *slava* may be, it is still *slava*, fame and glory in this world. Why should anyone be concerned about it? What difference would it make whether this *slava* is good or bad after a person is gone? The thing is that there is an eschatological aspect to it. When a person is gone the person is not quite gone; the person only changes the residence from this world to the next and the deeds done here have eternal consequences. However, Kniazhnin speaks very little about it and if he does, he speaks in rather general terms.

Eschatology

Yearning for his death, Rosslav directed his speech to death: "I'll adorn my life with you / And showing how a Russian should end his life, / I'll put a stamp of immortality with you. / Oh death! with what peace meets you someone / Whose voice of conscience doesn't accuse of anything. / Oh virtue! everything is included in you / What righteous/saintly (*праведна*) soul expects as reward; / Not reaching yet these eternal joys, / It senses through you the happiness of the paradise" (4:1/1.201). So, in his mind, eternal happiness in the paradise awaited him after death. After Sofonisba's suicide, Massinissa says, "If there are gods, she flew to heavens / With contempt she looks now at fruitless anger of Rome" and in her beauty the heaven "showed the mortal its image" (5:6/450). Paradise or heaven would be a desirable place to be. This is also very faintly reflected in the *Stanzas on death*: "Oh death! inescapable fate! / You turn everyone into dust, / Call before the necessary court, / To answer for all their deeds. / ... You are a consolation for suffering mortals, / The hope for eternity and peace; / You are the only reward for tears, / The unhappy are happy only through you" (2.468).

⁹ "The road to *slava* is always difficult", says crafty Prolaz, although, admittedly, it is said for a comedic effect (*Weirdos* 1:6/1.607).

¹⁰ A case was made that his was a kind of self-reference: Kniazhnin was a secretary of Betskii, but he wanted to be remembered as a playwright "not expecting from his literary activity nothing except for *slava* which in the depth of his heart was not indifferent to him", Юрий Веселовский, Я. В. Княжнин (*жизнь и творчество*), Москва: Звезда 1911, p. 35.

This is a disappointingly vague statement in the poem which is devoted to death, death as consolation at that. Last words of the *Reminiscence of an old man* are no better: “[It is only] one step to immortality through death” (2.489), nor is the sigh of Liza after her beloved Flor marries another woman: “O death! I’ll find peace in you” (*Punished innocence* 2.493).

Is there another side of the hereafter? Voldyrev, thinking that Pasha was speaking about her intended marriage with Boltai, says that it was a great sin “for which they boil in hell in hot pitch” (*The sbiten seller* 2:12/2.69). This was done for comedic effect, but was it also a sincere recognition by Kniazhnin of the existence of hell? In the *Letter to G.D. and A.*, he wrote that the Creator created the world for us to be happy, “But man for laughter / Transforming all into sin, / Converts paradise into hell” (2.519; cf. 2.466). Was that a reference to the hereafter or to the situation on earth after the fall? There is, of course, a descent to hell or rather Tartarus in *Orpheus*, but this is clearly playing on the mythological theme. Incidentally, an entry in the *Dictionary* which was intended to be amusing, defines Tartarus as “a place which it’ll be more crowded than the paradise” (2.666).

Thus, somewhat obliquely and almost timidly, Kniazhnin acknowledged the prospect of judgment after death which leads the dead to a new life, in paradise or in hell. The judgment, of course, implies the Judge and Kniazhnin in a few places also acknowledged the existence of the Judge, God, the Creator of all things to whom he also referred as heavens or as the gods. Through a soliloquy of Rurik Kniazhnin stated that “Although weak mortals are immersed in vice, / Although they, burdened in their mindlessness by their fate, / Bring the thunder of heavens by [their] ingratitude, / But the gods shine upon them with the sunbeam, / Giving a feast by the gifts of nature of the entire universe, / Not looking at evil, they shed generosity into the world” (*Vadim* 4:2/287). It is “the Creator of the universe / And the source and the Maker of virtue”, in words of Sviatoslav (*Olga* 2:2/136). In his speech Kniazhnin urged cadets to study hard sciences not only because sciences are important on their own right, but they also have spiritual relevance; in particular, physics “shows the infinite wisdom of the Creator and thus it brings man closer to Him.” This is important since “to sense God through all senses in all His creation, to know how to glorify Him and ... to know how to live virtuously – this is as necessary and breathing” (2.599). However, the fullest expressions of Kniazhnin’s sentiment concerning God is found in his beautiful *Stanzas to God* (1780) (2.465–467), which deserve to be fully quoted:

The source of life! good Giver!
To you, oh God! do I cry out;
And before you, my Maker,
I’ll spill out all my soul.
Fill with the light of wisdom
My thought soaring toward You!
[Me,] thinking about You,

Count among Your slaves.
Among slaves? ... You don't have slaves:
[You're] the Father of children who love You;
You rule only through [Your] goodness
And your rule is full of joy.
In vain mortals want
To make themselves like You:
Stern, fearsome, proud, malicious,
By putting God on equal footing with themselves.
I don't believe these wild hearts
That only through ferocity
Show You to us to be Great,
Not Your image they show to us, [but] theirs.
Every hour You show their lie
By the endlessness of [Your] generosity,
And by [Your] mercy you refute
The proof of morose sages.
You said softly to the sun: "Forever
Shining, proclaim the Creator;
May people always see
Me in the bounty without end."
Every day the sun repeats it,
This pledge of Your goodness,
And all nature reveals us,
That God cannot not be God.
Only we are ungrateful,
Not sensing Your generosity,
One time weak, another pompous,
We destroy our life with [our] passions.
Having bestowed freedom upon mortals,
You revealed the multitude of ways to happiness;
You subdued nature
To Your power only by joy.
And if sometimes sorrows
Make us taste bitter poison,
It's not Your fault that we created
For ourselves terrible hell from paradise.
It's not Your fault that we, humans,
Wanting all to be gods,
Raising proudly our breasts,
Dared to forget ourselves.
Created by You to be happy,
We fly above ourselves
And we want in our foolishness
To make ourselves equal to You in wisdom.
Sensitivity! oh, divine gift!
You lead us better to the end;
And the triumphal flight of your wings

Elevates the heart to the Creator.
 Creator! not trying to understand You,
 I love [You] with all [my] heart like [my] father;
 Not tormenting myself about who You are,
 I sense You with delight.
 You were, You are, You always will be:
 Heaven and earth proclaim that;
 I am, [You] won't forget me:
 All my senses say that.

The poem is, in a way, continued by Derzhavin's poem *God* (1784): the first verse of the *Stanzas* is directly quoted by Derzhavin, and there is also a near-quotation ("You were, You are, You always will be")¹¹. Derzhavin's poem is more theologically profound and is not theologically generic like Kniazhnin's; for instance, it speaks about the triune Divinity, whereas Kniazhnin's God could fit pretty much any religion. This is not accidental. In none of his works did Kniazhnin mention Christ, the Virgin, the church or its rituals; not once did he make any reference to Orthodoxy. Nothing is known about his personal spirituality. His biographer only briefly stated that at his deathbed Kniazhnin was accompanied by "a spiritual physician" and "as though ... seeing the presence of consoling hope of the Christian, he stretched his hands toward his priest who took his confession and crowned his path with fulfillment of all duties," after which Kniazhnin "gave his spirit to the Father of all worlds"¹².

However, isolated as a religious work *Stanzas to God* are in Kniazhnin's corpus, they very forcefully radiate with profound faith in the goodness of providential God, the God not completely accessible to imperfect human reason, but the God who makes His presence clear to humans through His creation. There is no mention of human *slava* before the majesty of God, only repudiation of human desire to be in their pride like gods: the greatness of human *slava* is meaningless before God's greatness. There is no rush to death; there is only the trust in God's own good timing as to human transition to the afterlife: as a good Father, God knows best what is good for his creation. How little of this sentiment can be found in Kniazhnin's own plays and operas...

Bibliography

Веселовский, Юрий, Я.В. *Княжнин (жизнь и творчество)*, Москва: Звезда 1911.
 Глинка, Сергей Н., *Записки*, Санкт-Петербург: Издание редакции журнала „Русская старина“ 1895.

¹¹ See also М.Ю. Люстров, "В душевной простоте беседовать о Боге", *Русская Речь* 1996, no. 2, pp. 62–66.

¹² *Сочинения Якова Княжнина*, Санктпетербург: В типографии Ивана Глазунова 1817–1818³, p. 15.

Княжнин, Яков, *Сочинения*, Санктпетербург: В типографии Ивана Глазунова 1817–1818³.
Княжнин, Яков, *Сочинения*, Санктпетербург: В типографии книжного магазина П. Крашенинникова и компании 1847–1848⁴.
Княжнин, Яков, *Избранные произведения*, Ленинград: Советский писатель 1961.
Левшин, Василий А., *Вечерние часы, или Древняя сказка славян древлянских*, Москва: В Типографии Компании Типографической 1787–1788.
Могилянский, А.П., „Ольга”, трагедия Я. Б. Княжнина, *XVIII век* 3 (1958), pp. 498–504.
Стоюнин, В.Я., Княжнин-писатель, *Исторический вестник* 5 (1881), p. 448.
М. [О.] Габель, Литературное наследство Я.Б. Княжнина, *Литературное наследство* 9–10 (1933), pp. 359–368.
Люстров, М.Ю., „В душевной простоте беседовать о Боге”, *Русская Речь* 1996, no. 2, pp. 62–66.

JAKOW KNIAŻNIN: „ŚMIERĆ, JEDYNA UCIECZKA OD ROZPACZY”

Streszczenie

Jakow Kniażnin był jednym z najwybitniejszych dramaturgów drugiej połowy XVIII w. w Rosji, autorem dość popularnych tragedii, komedii i oper. W jego utworach śmierć pojawia się bardzo często jako rozwiązanie każdego problemu, a propozycja samopoświęcenia i samobójstwa składana jest z ogromną łatwością. Powodem tej gotowości do śmierci jest *slava*, która oznacza jednocześnie sławę, jak i chwałę. Jednak nie wszelka *slava* jest pożądana. Co więcej, *slava* w teatrze Kniażнина ma bardzo mocne wojownicze akcenty, które mogą dobrze wypadać na scenie jako efekty teatralne. Jednak to nie wszystko i Kniażnin widzi i inne aspekty *slavy* poza polem bitwy.

Slava zawiera także aspekt eschatologiczny, chociaż Kniażnin mówi o tym niewiele i bardzo ogólnie. Raczej nieśmiało uznał perspektywę sądu po śmierci, która prowadzi zmarłych do nowego życia – w raju lub w piekle. Oczywiście sąd zakłada Sędziego, Boga, wiarę w jego istnienie Kniażnin w pełni wyraził w swych *Strofach do Boga*.

Keywords: Iakov Kniazhnin, death, *slava*, eschatology