

**Theses**

*Baratinsky's Philosophical Poetry*

Ph.D Dissertation

by Andrea Bernáth

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## I. Objectives

When describing and interpreting the greatest Russian poets of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, literary history acknowledges the significance of Pushkin's and Lermontov's works, while it does not seem to set a high value on Baratinsky's poetry. Pushkin's and Lermontov's contemporary, Eugene Baratinsky (1800-1844), is generally considered a romantic poet, and this view is especially valid for his early period. Commentators tend to focus on some of his personal qualities (pessimism, sensitivity, constant self-reflection...), and his dissatisfaction with his own activity in comparison with Pushkin's performance. Pushkin's greatness and outstanding talent, his dominant role in the Russian poetry of the age cannot be debated or surpassed, but it would lead to a one-sided understanding of the Golden Age of Russian poetry to consider Baratinsky merely as 'Pushkin's shadow'. The authoritative example and the standard for Baratinsky's poetry is Pushkin's literary personality, but his works are independent and different from Pushkin's poems and artistic objectives; Pushkin himself realises the individual position represented by his contemporary. Baratinsky's position is unique in the given period of Russian poetry, and it has its inner conflict. This is the reason why critics rightly interpret his poetry as an expression of antitheses and contradictions, however, we must reconsider the romantic nature of the contrast.

The author of the dissertation concentrates on Baratinsky's philosophical elegies, and tries to clarify - from as various sides as possible - the poet's individual attitude, which is less specified in his epic poems following the romantic fashion of the genre (and giving rise to animated debates in Baratinsky's life), or in his epigrams and epistles more related to the poet's historical moment.

The present dissertation aims at exploring the influence of the dominant spiritual-metaphysical tendencies of the age on the Russian poet's works, and at presenting how Baratinsky's attitude is different from these trends. The outstanding diversity of the age, dominated by Romanticism, within the frames of Orthodox Christian culture and the influence of Pushkin's classical poetry, provides a specific nature for Baratinsky's works, too. The basis for the comparative method is Pushkin's classical and aristocratic approach, and Baratinsky's relation to the romantic position (revolt), expressed most typically in Lermontov's poetry.

## II. The applied methods

The main part of the dissertation is built upon the interpretation of approximately 50 poems, written by Baratinsky between 1819 and 1944. The formal analysis of these elegies is only of secondary importance compared to the interpretation of the poet's questions and answers related to the eternal and basic problems of human existence. The possibilities of a philosophical attitude are explored through characterising the specific features of the poet's artistic and metaphysical position.

The terms used in the *Introduction* and in the interpretation of the poems belong to the theory of ontological cultural history, elaborated by Ádám Fejér and Natália Szalma. This terminology does not exclude or contradict to the traditional notions of interpretation, but they aim at providing a new understanding of poetry, art, and spiritual activities in general. This terminology and the method itself is centred around some important notions, that is, the poet's relation to existence and truth (both terms are understood as a metaphysically organic and meaningful completeness, the way Hegel, Heidegger, or religious existentialism understood them). The starting point and standard of this approach is man's relation to the philosophical *and* religious meaning of existence, and the method itself seems to be an especially appropriate way for the interpretation of Baratinsky's poetry (as opposed to formal analysis or other methods), because the point of his position is the enforcement of transcendental values in life, in this world.

The basic and recurring notion of the method applied in the dissertation is that of personal *truth* in the Christian sense of the word: of transcendental origin but existing for this world, one and indivisible, God as the only reality of existence. The primary value of a work of art is determined by the artist's relation to this transcendental meaning, and his spiritual openness to experience it as directly and completely as possible. This relation, as the most important requirement of art, can be manifested differently in case of the individual authors. On the basis of the actual direction, we can make a distinction between the *aristocratic* (mostly prophetic) position of cultural *representation*, and the *common* approach of *enforcement* or *assertion* of the transcendental values expressed and preserved in culture. The opposition between common and aristocratic attitudes has a strong relation to the distinction between romantic and classical positions, partly independent from the periods of art history.

This terminology has an important role in the overview of the literature on Baratinsky's poetry, too. One of the central questions during the period of Romanticism is how art can be related to truth, but the answer to this question does not seem to be obvious or excluding the possibility of alternatives. The romantic answer is not the single one, and the method of the examination should take the *romantic* approach as a starting point to clarify the real nature of Baratinsky's position.

Both the Russian poet's contemporaries and later commentators emphasise the *philosophical* profundity of Baratinsky's poetic thought, especially of his later works. The interpretation has to enlighten those aspects of his poems that provide a meeting point or interweaving of lyrical poetry and philosophy. Beside describing the influence of certain philosophical trends and ideas on Baratinsky's poetry the interpretation must expound his metaphysical aspiration to understand and experience the transcendental meaning (the complexity of a spiritual attitude understanding the final questions of existence, an approach directed to *existence* as a completeness *and* to *life* in this world). An other point to be taken into consideration in connection with philosophical poetry is that of the *genre*; Schiller's definition of the elegy is the primary principle in interpreting Baratinsky's philosophical elegies, too, but the contrast between the sentimentalist or romantic opposition 'ideals and reality' (the conflict that defines the genre) should be clarified by a method contrasting existence/truth and life/world.

The interpretations of the individual poems are not examples to characterise Baratinsky's spiritual and artistic position, as they are not based on a concept of art 'giving a form to the contents'; but on the moment when thought and its expression are born together, simultaneously. Thus the method of the interpretation is the understanding taking place in the process of artistic creation, where creation and the experience of the meaning of existence are the same.

### III. Results and conclusions

As a result of the interpretation of the poems it can be stated that:

1. Baratinsky's poetry, especially his early works, show the effects of Classicism and Romanticism from the aspects of the mode of expression and some formal characteristics, but he must not to be considered neither a classicist nor a romantic poet. He rejects the primary role of reason as opposed to emotions, and clearly sees the danger resulting from the

restricted understanding of the Enlightenment, but he is unable to accept the absolute and unquestionable nature of the irreconcilable romantic conflict (ideals and reality, transcendental and immanent qualities, reason and soul, individual and universal ...), too.

2. Although his experience of these contrasts is personal and profound, the possibility of resolution and harmony is not expected independently from life and the world here and now, and is not transferred exclusively into the realm of transcendence, or into an unpredictable future.
3. The romantic nature of his poetry has to be questioned from the aspect of his relation to romantic revolt, too: he does not affirm the impossibility of experiencing truth in this world, and he never debates (either directly or indirectly) the possibility and necessity of relating truth to life.
4. As a result of a cultural-historical approach comparing Baratinsky and Pushkin, it can be established that both poets are classic as for their spiritual attitudes to man's role in experiencing truth, and to culture expressing transcendental values (classical in the sense that their starting point is the integrity of existence, which is able to interpret and resolve the oppositions). The distinction between the two Russian poets should be based on the approach how they attain the spiritual experience and what role they assume: while Pushkin's poetry directly originates in the aristocratic (prophetic) representation of transcendent values in culture, without showing discrepancies and without aiming at their resolution, Baratinsky's attention is focused on the assertion of these values and the possibilities (difficulties) of bringing down truth into the world. The dualism, pessimism and despair (sometimes even the temptation of revolt) often emphasised by commentators are not identical with those of Romanticism. They are rather the results of the inner conflict of a common (enforcing) *and* classical (not romantic) position, and should be related to the opposition between a life too far from truth (understood as the only reality) and man's aspiration to be elevated to the desired transcendental experience.
5. The intertextual comparison of the two poets shows the same relation between them: Pushkin's poetry represents the standard and norm (unity and meaningful integrity) aimed but never obtained by Baratinsky, while Baratinsky's philosophical poetry is the expression of questions (those of the enforcement) not detailed or asked by Pushkin's prophetic attitude.
6. The poetic language of Baratinsky's philosophical elegies is ruled by the very same twofold artistic purpose (critics often refer to the precision of his expression). His mode of expression is basically different from the formal characteristics of Romanticism, especially from a semantic point of view. According to the philosophical contents of the poems, the poetic language is clear and direct, the role of epithets merely with a decorative purpose is

insignificant, and in correspondence with the integrity and completeness of the author's spiritual and artistic position aiming at resolution of all the contrasts from above, it reflects a harmony and unity in spite of its surprising stylistic diversity.

7. The (non-arbitrary) grouping of the interpreted poems is justified by the presence of different aspects or starting points in approaching the possibilities of spiritual experience, simultaneously taking into consideration the perfection of poetic expression and the increasing profoundness of the philosophical thought within each of the chapters of the dissertation. It is not reasonable to assume that the early poems are completely void of the philosophical contents of the later works, neither to say that Baratinsky's poetry reflects a transition from Classicism to Romanticism. His philosophical orientation is present in the early works, and the influence of classicist and romantic tendencies on his classical poetry is rather formal than substantially defining the whole of his artistic position.
8. Besides exploring the artistic development in accordance with the individual aspects of Baratinsky's spiritual experience, the author of the dissertation states that Baratinsky faces a twofold problem in his poems approaching *poetry* as a process of creation: he must take into consideration not only the priority of transcendent and cultural values, but also the perspective of the effect of truth in life. The meaning (or uselessness) of his own poetic activity depends on the success and positive results of this mission, reflected and manifested in the reception of his works. When describing his attitude to the question of the *revolt*, we must realise the non-romantic nature of his point of view: the idea of revolting is present in his works, but never as a result or a conclusion, rather a part of a process leading to the assertion of the transcendental values. According to Baratinsky's poems, metaphysical *freedom* is originated in the choice of truth, and determination or the power of outside circumstances is only of secondary importance compared to freedom given to man by creation. *Nature*, as opposed to the pantheist concept accepted by Romanticism, can relate to truth and the meaning of existence, but it can never be meaningful by itself, it cannot reflect the meaning of existence. *Love* in Baratinsky's poetry is above the traditional opposition of emotion and reason, it is understood as a possibility of the direct and personal experience of transcendence. The poet's attachment to his country is a less emphasised aspect of the spiritual position, due to the universal nature of philosophical poetry (and in opposition with the romantic accent on national characteristics). The tension caused by the distance between the transitory character of life and human aspirations to transcendence and *eternity* is balanced by Baratinsky's spiritual requirement to enforce the eternal values of existence in this world.

9. Romanticism exerted a stronger influence on Baratinsky's *epic poems* than on his philosophical elegies, but these epic poems provide the poet with an indirect possibility to disclose his ideas about the main purposes of literature. The *Prefaces* written to his epic poems and his *anti-critical essay* give an overview of the artistic position present in the thematic diversity and metaphysical profundity of his lyrical poetry.
10. The interpretation of Baratinsky's philosophical poetry may propose further questions to be answered: that of the elaboration a new concept of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian poetry (conventionally and uniformly considered romantic); and a new interpretation of the poets of the period, based on their different relations to the basic and eternal questions of art.

#### IV. Publications related to the topic of the dissertation:

##### *Пушкин и Баратынский*

In: *Dissertationes SLAVICAE, SECTIO HISTORIAE LITTERARUM XXI*, JATE Szláv Filológiai Intézet, Szeged, 1995., pp126-133.

##### *Baratinszkij*

In: *Phoenix*, JATE, Szeged, 1996., pp47-50.

##### *Lermontov szerelmi lírája (Lermontov's love Poetry)*

In: *Lermontov és a szellemi lázadás tisztasága, Szegedi Bölcsészfüzetek, SzTE Kultúrtörténeti Stúdiumok*, Szeged, 2000., pp108-119.

##### *Lermontov és Baratinszkij (Lermontov and Baratinsky)*

In: *Lermontov és a szellemi lázadás tisztasága, Szegedi Bölcsészfüzetek, SzTE Kultúrtörténeti Stúdiumok*, Szeged, 2000., pp120-131.