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Bobrov: wandering from darkness to light

Bobrow: wędrówka z ciemności ku światłu

Semen Sergeevich Bobrov (1763/1765–1810) has often been viewed as a second tier poet of the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. His poetry was considered ponderous, overwrought, archaic, even non-poetic. However, his work is extremely interesting at least from the spiritual standpoint where he towered over many more recognized literary figures of the age.

EARLY POETRY

Bobrov's poetry is fairly rich with different topics and moods; however, the tone of his poetry was set by his earliest poems published when he was eighteen or twenty years old. One poem took upon a grand topic of the creation of the world as presented in the book of Genesis.

“There it is this great God, who sees / Everything in Himself that is to be born! – / There the firstborn light precedes the daylight! / There He draws an image of uncreated beings, / And sees their future movements”; / “As soon as a this glow of God's works shone forth, / Then suddenly from nothing something began to exist; / But something – is not a dream, but a beginning of corporeality” (*Reflection on creation of the world based on the first chapter of Genesis* (1784), 1.272)¹.

¹ The following references are made:

Two numbers – e.g., 1.2 indicates vol. 1, p. 2 of Семен Бобров, *Рассвет полночи; Херсонида*, Москва: Наука 2008.

Three numbers – e.g., 1.2.3 indicates pt. 1, bk. 2, p. 3 of Сем[ен С.] Бобров, *Древняя ночь вселенной, или странствующий слепец*, Санкт-Петербург: При Императорской Академии наук 1807–1809.

Important here is the insistence that this was a *creatio ex nihilo*, not a creation by emanation. God did see everything in Himself, since the created world was according to an image in God's mind, but the world itself was not in Him. With this, Bobrov distanced himself from kabbalistic and masonic views which were popular in intellectual circles in which he moved², and yet, interestingly, Kheraskov, a mason, encouraged Bobrov to write this poem (1.271 note 1) which appeared for the first time in a journal published by Novikov, another mason.

This God of creation, the God of the *Reflection*, is unmistakably the Christian God: "The Tri-ray Light was shining of itself / In its silence hiding its majesty / And spreading its divine brilliance over abyss [1 Tim. 6:16]" (1.271). The Tri-ray Light, i.e. the Triune Light, is really a pun on the Tri-person, which is particularly clear in Russian where the difference between the two denominations of this Light is only in one letter: Трилучный and Триличный³. To dispel any doubts that the Trinity is meant here, the poem also speaks about darkness "In which the Word born of the Father [J. 1:14] gives birth to all!" (272), a clear reference to Christ, and about "the prophetic Spirit – the Spirit breathed by God" (271) and "the creative Spirit" (273), that is, the Holy Spirit.

Initially everything was a chaotic mixture and then "Love is poured into this mixture ... / The first breath – glory to the cause of all causes" (1.273): God who is love, God who is the Holy Spirit is the first cause. In orderly fashion there are created stars (273), the sun/Phoebus (274), the moon, animals, and finally the human being, "the king of the world," supremely wise, in whom there is a microcosm with all its greatness. There was initially no death, but man wanted what was prohibited (275); his pride wanted to be equal to God in creative power (276), leading to the fall and the loss of Edenic blessings. With the fall, immortality died (208). However, after sin, "In the secret seed of unfortunate woman / There remains a weak glimmer of future hope / Foreshadowing the most glorious way to heaven" (277.195-6), where by the seed Bobrov referred to the seed that will bruise Satan's head (Gen. 3:15), which according to the Christian tradition is Christ. Bobrov did not tell in the poem how this seed would crush Satan's head. In fact, he never addressed the point in the following twenty or so years. The problem of defeating satanic power would return on a grand scale at the end of his life, in *The ancient night of the universe*. The problem, however, did not disappear. In fact, the struggle with the power of evil in personal life was a recurrent topic in Bobrov's poetry, the problem of overcoming evil and of what appeared to be the greatest manifestation of evil: death.

² Cf., Владимир Л. Коровин, *Семен Сергеевич Бобров: жизнь и творчество*, Москва: Academia 2004, pp. 14–15.

³ Fairly soon, in 1810, Derzhavin would call the Truth the Tri-ray light, Гавриил Р. Державин, *Сочинения*, Санкт-Петербург: Императорская Академия Наук 1866, vol. 3, p. 63.

Bobrov became preoccupied with the problem of death and how to beat it. Love mentioned in the *Reflection* became his hope. It is the love that existed before the world and that participated in creation of the world (*The kingdom of the universal love* (1785), 1.296). “Love! – you rule over all!” (297). When “the ancient viper” causes disorder, order is restored by love (298). Love gives life to nature and has its throne in the chest (299). Love also will wake up the dead (525). So, Bobrov put his hope in God who is love, in the seed that is love, in the God who because of His love created the world and will restore the original order of the world, the order disturbed by evil. This is not going to be done quietly. One purging event had already taken place: the universal flood. Another one is to come: the universal conflagration (2 P. 3:10) the moon will become red (Rev. 6:12), but this will be done by the eternal love to burn from earth what is perishable and a new world, like Phoenix, will rise from ashes (*A walk at dusk or an evening instruction for Zoram* (1785), 1.279), that is, a new heaven and a new earth regenerated by God (Is. 65:17, 66:22; 2 P. 3:13; Rev. 21:1).

However, this conviction was not unshakeable. To a grieving mother he wrote,

If you remember in your sadness / The grave in which your [3-year-old] son is hidden, / The grave that is in this wilderness, / Where your son sleeps until morning; / Then a tear will roll down. / But don't complain! – a flower reddens / On these sad hills, / Where [your] sweetest son is nursed / In the cradle of the grave by peaceful dust; / Heavenly peace to dust! (*The arrival of Lucinda*, not later than 1802, 2.328).

Heavenly peace to dust... This is not much of a consolation and hardly is there any hope in it. Such mood apparently led Bobrov to some bouts of depression that was expressed in one of his poems: Autumn approaches and brings coldness and darkness;

By such foggy darkness I am also / Covered in this valley, / I see in the colorless grass / Hidden deadly glitter of the scythe. ... / Fate, oh fate! – why do you bring / In the morning raw bile to drink? / Fate pays no attention; – the prepared bile / It hastens to pour into the heart. / I curse the day of my birth, / When I poured out my first tears, / Apparently, to suffer / I entered into this valley. / Neither cover, nor refreshing / Can I find anywhere, / Neither hope, nor joy, / Nor vital strength during the day. ... / Will I call upon the father of merriment [Bacchus] / To find joy in him? / With him feelings only were getting blunt; / The gift of the soul got dark altogether. ... / Oh my! – while clouding [my] eyes / Fate will not sparkle with a smile; / May in the midst of ordinary night / My spirit go into the night eternal! (*The autumn song* (1794), 2.323–324).

There were some persistent rumors about Bobrov's drinking problems⁴. It would appear that the perspective of sinking into an eternal night might have been

⁴ Ironically, or otherwise, Bobrov wrote/translated: “I am considered a drunkard; / They think that I am enslaved by wine; / But no – I am enslaved by truth” (*A song from French: In vino veritas* (1805), 2.310).

a serious reason for this affliction. However, Bobrov did not give up on his theological investigations. He started again with trying to elucidate to himself who God is and he did so in an Islamic setting.

GOD

Having moved to the south, Bobrov became enchanted with Crimea to which he devoted a book-long poem *Taurida* (1798) that was later expanded and retitled *Chersonida* (1804), both names meaning Crimea. There is a lot of admiring descriptions of geography, flora, fauna, atmospheric phenomena, but there are also some theological reflections. There are five voices about God: a Muslim heretic, Omar, a country man, an angel, and Bobrov himself.

According to a Muslim heretic,

God rules everywhere in this world; / God sets everywhere [His] laws – / For countless shining circles / In the four corners of heaven, / In space, – in infinite abysses / And in this milky way of aether, / Filled with countless stars; / What are these laws? – / Not a fruit of a pen or ink. – / Allah opened for all the universal book. / Already in the times of Chaos / He spread the golden scroll of nature. – / May everyone read letters in there! / Friends! – Here it is this book, / Where letters are not marks, – but things, / Where the name of Allah is written / With letters that speak beautifully! – / Close all books, all writings! / Read nature! You’ll see God; / You’ll see His arms. – / Educated mind will be the light, / And love of wisdom a guide. / Friends – all hand-made temples, / All invented rites / Rather move us away / From the true being, from the most high Allah. – / Works of feelings and of hands can be seen there. / And god-made – height, / And depth, and breadth, – / This is the world! This is a true mosque! – / Listen! – also man / Is a small world, – but a big temple, / A spirit-filled mosque. / This temple, this temple, be holy for Allah! – / Fiery and starry vault of heaven, – / High peaks of Taurus, / Blooming Arabic fields, / And the pure heart of man – / This is his true temple! – / They – they’ll bring us closer / To the temple of his wonders. – / Can there be besides it / Any other revelation? – / Oh You, the only one, omnipresent! / Tear apart the veil of Mehmet’s darkness! / Show the light of truth in the east! (2.237–239).

After Omar, an aged Muslim sage, recounted these views, he said:

So the damned flatterer trumpeted, / A man with foxy and wily heart, – / In his mouth Gomorrah was neighing. / His words are horrible, – true; / But be bold, – loyal people! – / What is the nature he praises? – / What is his wisdom? – / Mere glistening over swamp. / What is the proud reason of men? – / Just a weak light, – an unreliable leader; / It frequently crows at the feet / Of some proud Fatima / Or a self-righteous pasha (239).

In Omar’s view, the heretic’s opinions are poisonous (2.240), but what is really objectionable in these views? The heretic did not appear to say anything about Allah/God which should be offensive to a believer. The only thing that appears to be questionable is the source of the knowledge about God. The heretic proposed

that any holy book should be rejected as a source of such knowledge and any rituals for worshipping God should be discarded as well. Looking at the scroll of nature should suffice. In this, the heretic was not altogether heretical. At least in the Christian tradition, there was a frequent reference to two books as the source of the knowledge about God, nature, and the Scriptures. Lomonosov, one of Bobrov's heroes, wrote fairly clearly in the conclusion of *The appearance of Venus on the Sun* that the Creator gave the human race two books, showing His majesty in one and His will in the other. The entire physico-theology, so popular in the eighteenth century in Russia and in entire Europe, relied on proving the existence of God using the book of nature and its orderliness. The problem is that the heretic rejected revelation. The book of nature cannot reveal everything about God. God Himself has to convey many things necessary for human life and afterlife that cannot be simply read from nature. So, the heretic was not altogether wrong, but partial truth can be more dangerous than a falsehood, the latter being pure poison, the former poison coated with honey, as Omar could have said.

There was also something else which Bobrov could find acceptable in the heretic's statement, who said that man is a microcosm and yet a big mosque. The idea of the body being a temple of the Holy Spirit comes directly from the New Testament (1 Cor. 6:19) and it was also popularized in the masonic circles by Lopukhin as an idea of the inner church.

Omar's response? He said:

our law is the spirit. / The heavenly dome will pass away, / the heaven with perish, – there will be new; / His eternal word will always exist ... / Allah is omniscient!" (2.240); "the Son of Mary himself / This great lawgiver, / The great King of all white kings, / Who rule over you here / United with Sahib Al-Zaman / Will appear on the fiery clouds / And will strike Al-Dajjal (241).

He gave a Biblical answer about a new heaven and a new earth and used the Shia tradition about Christ's second coming to slay an enemy after his destructive 40-day reign, but the only thing Omar said about God was that He is omniscient; he also implicitly defended revelation: on the other hand, the information about the new heaven and the second coming could not be extracted from the book of nature, so, he did refer to revelation, at least the one valid for the Shia. In his last breath, Omar also relied on revelation concerning the afterworld:

I hear charming voice / Of the gentle hours brighter than the sun, / Calling to the seventh heaven, / To rest on soft carpets / In the midst of streams of wine and milk, / Where there are no rebellions, no guiles / No lying sophistry; / Where there is no change in time, / No west, no east; / But the truth and eternal peace / Shines in the light of rainbow. / Ah! if I'm a sinner? can I expect [it]? (242).

And yet, in the last moment he experienced his dark night of the soul by wondering where his soul would go (243), and he expired in darkness rather than in the warmth of light: “A night is hanging above the eye, – / An eternal night is hanging – oh my! – / My life also expires” (251); “At the entry of my soul / These harsh winds of hell!” (420); “There – deadly – darkness! – oh, the eternal night! / Allah! – receive my – spirit! [Acts 7:59; Lk. 23:46] and – oh –” (252). So it appears that Bobrov did not see for Omar quite a bright future in the afterlife. The only optimistic moment was Omar’s desperate cry modeled on the last words of Stephen whose stoning is described in the New Testament and even on the last words of Christ.

A sincere belief in God is expressed also by a country old man (2.215), a ploughman living on the shores of the Salhyr river (213): “My heart tells me to cry out / That You are great in the face of evil / Great in the form of goodness. / Don’t we know, heavenly Father / That You give us [our] daily bread / That You forgive our debts, / That we should forgive others? [Mt. 6:11-12] / Who, – God, who from among born on earth / Does not stumble over the rock? [cf. 1 Cor. 1:23] / Where is herb/wheat without tares? [cf. Mt. 13:25] / The most holy often falls. / Coworkers! – don’t sigh! / Bow with me your knees! / Pour tearful prayer / To the One, who in stormy wind / Is walking now over our field! / He is merciful; He’ll reward [us] / For the loss, the mother of insufficiency” (214-215). Presumably, this country man in the midst of Crimea was one of “the mountainous Scythians [Tatars], people / Of good heart” (93), a Muslim and yet he prayed with words taken directly from the Lord’s Prayer and used the New Testament imagery of wheat and tares and of stumbling block, which is Christ. In this inclusion of Christian elements in statements of Muslims, Bobrov might have expressed a view that there are common elements of the two religions and that extracting common threads from them – and from other religions – may lead to the essence of religion. Thus, this appears to be striving for a universalist notion of God, the notion which would be agreeable to various faiths. Therefore, the greatness and majesty of God is emphasized and specificity is downplayed – references to Christ are extremely vague and the validity of specifics of the Shia eschatology is diminished by doubts that beset Omar in the last minutes of his life.

There is yet another voice, the heavenly voice directed to the last hermit (2.169) who wanted to commit suicide since after death there is only “eternal nothingness” since if “the Judge of heavens / Calls from awesome vault” (171), “hardly the soul will hear / This omnipotent word: rise up” (172). At that moment, an angel appeared, apparently his guardian angel (178), and said: “Stop, the killer of the soul! / The Father of souls is speaking to you” (174); “May your desire be cursed / With which you hope to be nothing!” (174). “But you, – you are now a thinking [being], / A spiritual man, – a son of heaven, – / Reflecting on this important matter, – / For whom immortal mother – eternity, / For whom both brother

and friend – is Angel, / For whom a sister, a friend – glory!” (175); “An otherworldly man laughs / At the bent blade of the scythe, / [At] limits of space, [at] times. – / He dies, – no doubt; / But he rises up again. / He falls into a dark grave, – / But rises up from it again. / His fatherland is – heaven, / And his treasure – God himself” (175); “He who can create everything, / Spreads His being / Along with other entities. – / To produce and to preserve, / But never to destroy – / This is the strength of a higher power; / It does not act over / What isn’t among what exists. / The father of spirits is not a God of the dead [Mt. 22:32]; / He is God, – He is God of eternal life.” (176). “Is it possible – that the immeasurably wise / Created good creations / For a low reason, – this life? – / Will he be pleased, / Having created imperfect minds, / Only with their fast expiring, / Although rational life? – / How can in this life be reached / The far limits of perfection?” (177). In response, the contrite hermit exclaimed: “To You, – oh God! – I turn / From the depth of this valley of tears; / I am looking for You, – I’m calling upon You” (179); “Ah! – strengthen me, Almighty, / And reconcile my spirit with Yourself, / And taking me from nothingness, / Return to me immortal wings!” (180).

Since Islam does not really have any hermitic tradition, the hermit should be assumed to be a Christian. He had his doubts, but they were dispelled by the realization – through the voice of an angel – of the nature of God: He is a good and providential Creator who creates a rational being for eternal life. His nature assures the eternity of his life and thereby the possibility for blossoming of human rationality. It appears that, in contrast to Omar who died in mortal distress, the hermit will be able to be reconciled with God and live with peace in his soul to the last breath. In fact, soon afterwards he was killed (2.182).

Bobrov’s own idea about God is expressed in the magnificent hymn of the narrator of the *Chersonida*.

Ineffable! – great, / Great You are in inexhaustible nature / Your beautiful face shines / In the midst of valley of many flowers, / In the midst of lilies, lilies white like milk; / Your blessed voice in the living, / Light-winged zephyrs whispers, / Flying in young meadows; / Your breath blows everywhere / In abundant bushes. / But here, in these big rocks, / Your majesty and glory, / Your supreme wisdom and rule / Go in sacred trembling / And exclaim/shout in many voices! / Your omnipotent voice sounds / In these oaks of many leaves, / Your spirit that battles all is calling / In these – these powers of whistling winds / That struggle in the mountains. – / And who on terrifying heights / Won’t see traces of the omnipotence, / That, while walking through the roofs of clouds, / Sounds like flaming iron? / To whom ray will not show glory? / Who won’t hear a voice in a thunder? / You breathe, – a century old oak forest / Will turn over with shaggy roots upwards; / You thunder – and a rocky cliff / Trembles, – cracks, – falls down, – crumbles; / You flash – and this weak mountain range / In its metallic foundation / Will melt, – burn, – and is no more... / Like wax from the heat of fire, / Like a fat cloud in the sky, / Penetrated by rays / Or like snow glistening from heat, / Spread over this mountain; / What did I say? – God wants [it and then] / The world will shake on the fragile axis, / But Your throne, the Holy palace, – / Zion – will never shake. – / Creator! – also here – also here is Your temple; / Sapphire vault of flaming heaven, / Seems to me, – bends over here; / Its feet – century-old

trees; / Incense – Alpine flowers; / Symphony – the choir of bird in oaks; / Beauty – motley of colors, / And the elevated rocky top / Discloses a sacred altar. – / To You, – to Your inhabitan-
 / Trembling, I dare to come close / And in the muteness of this song / To You, Father, I pay
 homage... (2. 45-47).

This is a description of God that a believer of each monotheistic religion would accept, and it would also be acceptable as a description of major gods of polytheistic religions: God is majestic, glorious, supremely wise, omnipotent, ruling over all of nature according to His will. This is a type of description provided by physico-theology: the beauty and the grandeur of God shines through His creation that is a manifestation of His power and will, notwithstanding Omar's disclaimer that this cannot be in perishable and imperfect nature. However, there is one element, personally, the most important element missing which is only weakly marked by the narrator's paying homage to this grand God. Why should he? What is the relation between this powerful God and an individual human being that leads to such homage? Are people treated by the so-described God any differently than elements of inanimate nature? In a way, Bobrov addressed this problem through the hermit whose personal relation to God was contrasted with that of Omar: God is not only powerful but also caring and loving. What Bobrov recognized in the hermit, he had to recognize in himself, experiencing it himself, see such a loving attribute of God present in his own life so that he did not have to resort to the support of the father of merriment, fleeting and unsatisfying as such support can be. Bobrov did it by considering himself a blind man who has to find a cure for his blindness.

THE ANCIENT NIGHT OF THE UNIVERSE

The epic poem, *The ancient night of the universe or the wandering blind man* (1807–1809) is the largest and most significant work of Bobrov, finished one year before his death. This sprawling poem can be summarized in once sentence: Nesham lost his sight and with the guidance of Zikhel he was looking for a physician to heal him; expectedly, a healing took place at the end of the journey. And yet, this “book is not a novel and not a heroic poem, but just the Philosophical truth in the form of an Epic poem” (1.1.1). Bobrov meant the poem to be an allegory on three levels: humanity's search for wisdom and truth, an individual search for truth and happiness, and finally his own, Bobrov's, search for certainty in this life and in the next. The allegorical aspect is reflected right away in the choice of names for main characters of his poem, which are derived from Hebrew: Mizrakh (Мизрах, [מִזְרָח, *mizrach*]), father of the blind, means the east; it is said about God: east is his name; the east is the noblest side of the world; Nesham (Нешам, [נֶשָׁמָה, *neshamah*]) means the soul; the soul is born from the east; it represents a spiritual

being, a man; Kolgufa (Кол[ь]гуфа, [כּל, *kol*, קֹל, *gufah*]) means the universal body, all of humanity; Zikhel or Sekhel (Зихел/Сехел[ь], [זִכְל, *sekhel*]) means reason; Ramai (Рамай, [רַמַּי from רָמָה, *ramah*]) means a deceiver, a destroyer; Tava (Тава, [תַּוָּה, *taavah*]) means lust, desire; Kemla (Кемл[ь]а, [כֶּמֶלָה, *chemlah*]) means pity. There is also a lamp which signifies hope; night and blindness signify universal evil; and the moon signifies human wisdom (2.4.299–300).

THE FALL

Nesham is a son of an eastern monarch, not just any monarch; he is called by some Shaddai, by some Mizrach; he is powerful and wise like Zeus, deified by people as Brahma or Osiris (1.1.168).

There is the *principle/beginning* of all *principles*, / Jehovah, Zeus or Mizrach / Worshiped by the holy, the infidel, the savage / In the entire world, [in every] age, faith, / In the shining smile of the spring, / Speaking in the thunders of the summer / Generously scattering fruits / From the full chalice of autumn / And walking in the storms of winter (2.4.150).

Mizrach is thus one and only God recognized at least partially and worshipped by all people of all ages under various names. Nesham is a son of this God, His grand creation born on the shores of the Ganges (169). His task was to keep order and restore it when needed. All children of nature came to bow before Nesham as their new king (171). He had superhuman faculties. His taste was more subtle than in a bee (186), his sense of smell better than in a lion (178), a subtle sense of hearing, better than deer's (179), and excellent sight (180). The more perfect he was, the more he loved God, and the more God-like he became (182). He had profound knowledge of the world (183). He knew the true language, spiritual language, he could see words (185), and he understood the language of animals and their feelings (186).

Mizrach set for Nesham a pavilion from which he saw movements of his enemies himself not being seen (1.1.3, 2.4.174)⁵. He shared this pavilion with Kolgufa, a daughter of heaven, lovely daughter of Mizrach, who descended to accompany Nesham (2.4.169–170). She was inseparable from him. As he recounted it, “At that time I loved her / With pure love, like an angel; / She loved me just as much. / But the father did not allow me / To attend to all her desires, / [Was it supposed to be] Temporarily or forever? / I could not penetrate it” (187). They lived united by such pure love, although they did have feelings; however, these feelings

⁵ Man in Saint-Martin's paradise lived in the midst of seven trees; “from there, he could observe without a problem everything that was going on around him and had an advantage to see all he ruses and all movements of his adversaries without ever being noticed,” [Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin], *Des erreurs et de la vérité*, Edimbourg 1775, p. 36.

“were elevated / According to the wholeness and power / And the level of objects in the world” (183). This explains very little, in any event, and the corporeal aspect of love was apparently absent and limited to the spiritual realm.

Mizrach and Kolgufa lived in happiness and would continue as long as “he directed her fate” and she respected him (1.1.2). That is, as Nesham owed submission to Mizrach, Kolgufa owed submission to Nesham and, apparently, the inseparability of the paradisiacal couple would ensure it. However, the enemy was cunning. In some way he managed to convince Kolgufa that she should build a pavilion just like the one in which the couple lived (1.1.3). She discovered during her solitary walks a beautiful valley and made there herself a pavilion and wanted to share it with Nesham (189). She urged him to come to this new pavilion (191). He left the sacred pavilion (192) and thus went beyond the safe realm, to the furthest west, but all of it was a trap prepared by the enemy⁶. When he went through the door, fire was enflamed through which he passed and “saw nothing / But charming sorceress / Instead of chaste maid / Laying in the midst of delightful myrtle / Looking like an angel in the midst of clouds” (193). Enchanted, he said, “your slave [stands] before you,” the words that also reached the ears of Mizrach (194). In this place, he also “found happiness / Unknown to me/him up until then, / [He] found joys of a new kind” (195). Scorched by the fire of the deity he made her to be, he was blinded; Zikhel took him from the pavilion (196). Nesham wanted to get back to his old pavilion where he was invisible, but enemies already were there and they did not let him in. He groped around and for the first time, conscience convicted him (197). As a consequence of his sin, he lost his rule over nature and the truth; as he said, “I became a slave of elements. / Impressions of outside objects / Created motions / Over which I had no control; / They violently carried [me] / Only toward object creating [sensory] delight” (1.2.3). The love of the lowly sensuality brought him down (5). As a result, Nesham became permanently blinded and expelled from the Edenic surroundings.

This story of the fall from the grace of Mizrach bears obvious echoes of the Biblical account: there is Adam and Eve, but no tree of knowledge of good and evil. However, the Biblical fall is usually interpreted as the result of disobedience: Adam and Eve ate a fruit of the tree although it was the only tree in the paradise they should not touch. The same reason can be also found in Bobrov’s account: it is Nesham who is primarily guilty since he should not assent to all wishes of Kolgufa, and yet he did. She also bears some share of blame since she acted on her own, at least from time to time, acting in separation from Nesham, even if well-intended, thereby violating the union that characterized the world before the fall, at least the world of Nesham and Kolgufa. So it was insubordination, pride, and

⁶ After he left his place, “he ceased to be the master there and another Agent was sent to take his place”, whereby man lost all his rights. L.-C. de Saint-Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

seeking of pleasure which spelled the end of happiness. This is presumably also a story of the fall of each human being where Nesham/soul submits itself to Kulgafa/body, where spirituality is denigrated by giving the upper hand to sensuality, where desires escape from the control of the mind and enslave the mind in their service, thereby blinding it.

And so it was that Nesham “dared to offend at the beginning / The majesty and the rule of the father, / He dared the fire of heavenly love / To subdue to insignificant dust, / For which he was expelled, shamed, / And devoid of the rays of the sun,” i.e., he became blind, once “the son of light / And now became the son of night” (1.1.47), and he wanted to find a physician to cure him from this affliction (21). His father Mizrach felt pity for his son, but “justice and firmness / Put his heart in balance” (40, cf. 101). The only thing the father could do now was to send to his son an old man to be an invisible guard of his son (40, 102). The old man held a lamp (70) whose light “receives its existence / From the highest regions” (71). Thanks to the lamp (74), the blind can partially see⁷. The old man said that he was sent by Nesham’s father for protection (96). He had already taken care of Nesham when Nesham was a child (98). Mizrach instructed Zikhel that Nesham needed a physician; to find him, they had to go through Assyria, India, Libya, Egypt, and Greece, and eventually the morning star would show them where the physician was (102). The physician would be “in an undistinguished valley, / Then I’ll acknowledge [my] son in him [said Mizrach]; / Without him... he’ll perish” (103). And so Nesham’s odyssey began.

TRAVELS

Nesham and Zikhel could move back and forth in space and time sometimes with some considerable effort, but space and time boundaries between various lands and cultures were no obstacles to them (1.1.11). Everywhere, they searched for the wisest individuals hoping to find among them a physician for Nesham’s blindness or at least information about where a competent enough physician could be found.

First, they asked among the first civilizations according to the Bible, but no one could heal Nesham’s eyes, “Not among the skillful blacksmiths” [cf. Gen. 4:22] ... / Not among ingenious architects [4:17], / Not among “skillful artificers of artful musical instruments [4:21],” and the like (1.1.158). Then Nesham and Zikhel reached Nineveh in Assyria (160). No doctor was there and people directed them to the Chaldeans, to the temple of Baal (163), to priest Nadonid who “knows the secret language of the stars” and he would tell where the physician was (164). From Nadonid they only learn that according to the stars, Nesham

⁷ 1.1.75, 89–90, 131, 150, 161; 1.2.25–26, 107, 182; 2.4.256.

would find “bright ray of the sun,” and “the full light of heaven,” although he did not know when and where (1.2.16). Zikhel only concluded that although Nadonid looked into the stars, he did not know the Omniscient (19), that the Babylonians were themselves blind (20), and that the grandson of Kolgufa, Baal (identified with Ham (30) or Nimrod (19), a grandson of Ham), the ancestor of Chaldeans, took the place of Mizrach (28). Our travelers went to India where on the shores of the Ganges they learned from the Brahmans that they did not heal illnesses of the body (40). The main Brahman said that Brahma (tentatively identified with Abraham (212)) taught that the name of Mizrach should be revered (42). Brahma for them was “the God of Gods” (45), “Brahma – the god of heaven – love” (49). Zekhel decided that they were not far from the truth, but there was too much superstition there (50). The travelers went to Persia, where Zarathustra taught that the self-existing creator created the world. Under him there are two powers, a ruler of light and a ruler of darkness (59), Mithra/Ormuzd and Ahriman (60), who wage a constant battle with one another (61). Mithra could heal Nesham if he was worshipped (62). No, said Zikhel, only the real source of light can be worshipped (63). Next stop, a temple of Ammon (identified with Ham, a son of Noah (204)) in a desert of Libya only to discover that a deceitful priest beneath the statue of Ammon spoke to create an impression that it was the voice of the statue (107). Next: Egypt. In Thebes there was the *Medical treasure*, a library of papyri (124, 220). Fares, a pupil of Hermes Trismegistos, was in its charge (126), but the advices from the *Treasure* are for spiritual illnesses only (129). When Fares showed the many cryptic symbols (131), Zikhel with some indignation said, wouldn’t it be better for wide access to salvation if all of it was expressed clearly? “Naked truth is beautiful” (132), yet priests have their own interest in mind when they make all of it so mysterious (133). Fares defended the secrecy by saying that some could misuse these truths (134). Zikhel objected: there was once a language, clear, simple, useful; the eye could directly read things and their properties (136); priests, however, interpreted symbols as it pleased them (137); predictably, Fares threw them out (138). This criticism of mysterious elements of a religious system was very likely for Bobrov also a criticism of mysterious elements of masonry. Karamzin, after his brief brush with masons, severed ties with them giving as his reason the fact of using secrecy and mystery to find the truth. Even Novikov, an ardent mason, ridiculed some obscure elements of masonry, considering them dangerous since they turned people off from joining masons.

Now, as Zikhel (and Bobrov) saw it, priests added many symbols to the original language (1.2.146). Temples were finally built for all their gods, in reality, for symbols, “a horrifying blindness” (149). At first, divine law was preserved in original purity. Symbols were used: Osiris, a symbol of the sun, Isis, of earth, etc. Osiris was just an image of the invisible Deity, the Creator of all (150). But symbols became idols (151). Baal, Ormuzd, Mithra and Ahriman, Brahma, Vishnu

and Siva, Osiris/Ammun, Typhon and Horus were all similar to one another; they were not just inventions; there was one source for them (153), all of them were encompassed in two truths: “Light and darkness, or good and evil in nature – / These are the first thoughts of nations” (154). Importantly for Nesham, to heal eyes was beyond the Egyptian genius (159).

At that point, because of the invasion of Egypt by king of Nineveh, Sargon (1.2.178), and the chaos it created, Nesham and Zikhel became separated (179); this event actually represented Nesham’s willful rebellion against Zikhel (103), that is, against his own rationality; flaring of passions which enslaved reason (2.4.306), whereby Nesham opened himself to the wiles of Ramai, the devil, the one who “Puffed up with himself / Rebelled with the third of heavens / And with the third of stars was thrown out with a thunder / Into this eternal desert and night [Rev. 12:4,9]” (2.3.27). Using the voice of Ramai, Zikhel tricked Nesham into believing that he, Ramai, was Zikhel (27). Since the world was in Nesham, Ramai wanted to have a control over him, to unite himself with him, to have a control over the world (28). Nesham lost his lamp (1.2.195), so Ramai brought his own lamp (2.3.32) through which “darkness appeared to be some kind of light” and Ramai appeared as angel (34), as a child of light [2 Cor. 11:14] (35).

Ramai tried to subdue Nesham through his pretended daughter Tava (2.3.43), whom Nesham met in a cave and by whose beauty he was immediately smitten (39), although her beauty was a fake (41). Ramai convinced Nesham that he did not need a physician any longer since he could see (45). Ramai tried to convince Nesham that Mizrach had abandoned him and that Nesham should submit himself to his, Ramai’s, authority (48); that Zikhel was Nesham’s rival for Tava’s heart (53); that he, Ramai, was a true Zikhel and the old man was a false one and was called Ramai; and that the old man should be found and defeated (54). When Tava disappeared, Ramai claimed that she had been kidnapped by Zikhel and Ramai gave Nesham a sword to defeat Zikhel (57); to that end, Ramai took Nesham to Greece to find Zikhel. Along the way they encountered proponents of views hailed by Ramai: Cleon (61)⁸, an atomist, who claimed that life is short and that the greatest good (62) is satisfaction of one’s own feelings and senses (63, 23) and that Epicurus considered the soul to be made out of atoms (64) and thus not immortal; they met Pyrrhonists, the skeptics, who taught that there is no principle that cannot be opposed by another principle (65), and consequently, there is nothing certain, no immutable truth; in the Pyrrhonist spirit Ramai added that fear invented laws and duties (68), created heaven and hell, but heaven and hell are in us (69), whereupon Nesham rejected Mizrach and committed himself completely to his new father (73).

⁸ Bobrov may have meant one Cleon mentioned in a letter to Pythocles attributed to Epicurus, Diogenes Laertius 10.84.

Then they went to Agrigento in Sicily to Pythagoreans, Empedocles being the greatest of them (2.3.74)⁹, who was now dead (76). Zikhel was his friend and guide and had spoken often about the blind man (Nesham) when he visited Empedocles (77), and now he thought about Empedocles who fell into Etna (81)¹⁰. Nesham intended to slay Zikhel with the sword (83), but the shield sent by Mizrach deflected the blow and Zikhel disappeared (85). Ramai and Nesham went to the (fake) capital of Ramai's kingdom. Tava was there (95). Ramai announced to all that his kingdom and Tava were Nesham's (102). Nesham and Tava withdrew (103) to the bridal cave/chamber (105). On the bridal bed, Nesham had a sensation of falling down; he called upon Zikhel, and on the sound of a trumpet (108) his enchantment was broken, his soul woke up, everything disappeared (109); he only saw an evil looking Fury, Tava (110).

After separation from Nesham, Zikhel, on orders from Mizrach, revealed old wisdom to Confucius, and under the figure of Minerva, he taught Socrates self-knowledge. He came to Sicily knowing that Nesham would call on him (2.4.140) which he surely did (141).

Zikhel on one level represents the rationality of humanity. On its own intellectual strength, the human race developed many philosophical and religious systems, all of them imperfect if rationality is the only guide. In His providential care, God accompanies human efforts by shedding light on the ways of arriving at truth, but if the primary reliance is human reason, not God's guidance, the arrival will always be partial. Nesham experienced it in his individual quest. His reason guided him to various lands in various ages to find a cure, but the answer was always disappointing regardless of how wise wise-men encountered there had been. Nesham's reason dictated a review of the best that the world could offer. Some philosophical systems and religious solutions appeared to be close to the truth, but there was always a sensation of incompleteness, of imperfection. Reason can lead humanity very far, but not far enough if it tries to do it by itself, cutting itself from the divine source.

THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL

Reason is not immune to the influence of evil. With the last gasp of common sense, with the spark of intelligence and conscience (2.4.309), Nesham summoned Zikhel, but he was far from being spiritually healed. There were doubts and bouts of depression even leading to the verge of suicide. So, rationality had

⁹ Today Empedocles is not considered a Pythagorean the way Bobrov did, although Empedocles briefly mentioned Pythagoras, Porphyrius, *Life of Pythagoras* 30.

¹⁰ According to a popular legend, Empedocles leaped into the crater of Etna, Diogenes Laertius 8.67–72.

to be used to heal itself and, in Nesham's case, reason was particularly needed to prove that there is life after death.

Observation of nature helps. "To see harmonious motion of the stars / Is to know also their mover; / To know creation – is also to know the creator ... / There is God, there is also the soul" (2.4.153). Then Zikhel proposes several proofs of the immortality of the soul, proofs which are to be expected in a work whose "main and most looked-for topic is the goal of the human soul [and] the truth of its immortality" (1.1.12).

Proof 1.

Is compatible with his majesty / That the soul shining in us / So fitted to admit / New embellishments, improvements, / And seeking for the entire eternity / New knowledge, experience, / As soon as it was created / And threw a ray [of light] through feelings/senses / Some time would turn into nothing? / Would its priceless powers, / Its striving for perfection / Be given accidentally and without goal? (2.4.187–188).

The soul strives for perfect knowledge and on earth, if it dies, it reaches only "the first level of knowledge" (193). This is the argument that Bobrov had also used in the *Chersonida*, as quoted above (2.177). It is simply the waste of the soul's abilities if it cannot reach perfection. It is as though God created the soul's abilities in vain, for a short earthly existence to destroy them at death. By God's perfection, that cannot be. Bobrov felt that very acutely, because he ended his autobiographical poem on that tone: in the old age, "all falls, – feeling, – passion, – the mind. / Apparently, the entire life – [is just] a dawn, / And there is no fullness. / Oh, heaven! – I'll succeed there; / There – in the lofty eternity – I'll become mature..." (*Exposition of life of talentless Vorbab* [= Bobrov] 1.412). An argument of that kind was frequently used by other Russian authors, to mention Bratanovskii, Anichkov, and Zolotnitskii.

Proof 2.

How the thinking soul, / Where there is no corporeality, no form, / Except for its inclinations, / Can change like a grain of sand, / How can it be annihilated, / And be lower than a speck in its mortality? (2.4.200).

This appears to encompass two proofs: what is immaterial, is not made out of elements like fire or aether (167); thus, as formless, it cannot change its form from being a living entity to something dead. Secondly, by its immateriality and formlessness, the soul is a simple entity, a simple substance (168), and thus it cannot disintegrate, fall apart, and thereby die. The argument was used by Descartes, but before that, by Plato (*Phaedo* 78c) and Bobrov advocated that his contemporaries should learn from the *Phaedo* (2.4.347). In Russia, the argument from simplicity of the soul was used by Kandorskii and Shcherbatov.

Proof 3.

As the supreme wisdom of the Most High / Through all his creation / Pouring [His] light throughout / Shines brighter and stronger / In the creation of man: / Shouldn't we conclude that the world / Is the living place for education, / An inn or a prison / Where various creatures that can speak, / Now rise from the cradle, / Now are thrown into graves, / Should only get / The beginning of existence / And learn first lessons / Of their great obligation / And then pass to another, / Happier, invisible land, / Where, as heavenly offspring, / They will blossom more successfully, / And bloom throughout entire eternity? (2.4.201).

Death is passing from one life to another; it is “a gate, / Where the soul should leave / Obstacles in the way to perfection,” so that it could see things inwardly, not from the outside; “Death is but an evening cloud / Behind which shines the sun” (202). This is a specific case of proof 1: supreme wisdom is reflected in human rationality that can develop to a limited extent only in this life; thus, this life is just a preparation for further development of rationality in the afterlife in close proximity to God Himself.

Proof 4.

God is love and joy. / If He didn't want to make / His creation happy, / He would have never created them ... / To destroy spirits would have been the same / As destroying himself (2.4.229).

Again, a specific case of proof 1. Happiness is seldom if ever reached in this life. Earthly life is full of woes and misfortunes. Perfect happiness is enjoyed in the knowledge that it will never end; it requires eternity. Moreover, it requires the eternal proximity of the source of happiness. And this is how Zikhel envisioned the Edenic happiness: the divine Autocrat in the center, the souls are sparks with different levels of intensity. There is one light, but in different measures (206), one happiness, but in different forms according to quality and estate of a soul (207). That is, some souls are close to the center, close to the Inaccessible, and are covered with seraphic love; some are further away but all by proper measure, and according to their state they draw life from God. That is, as in the Orthodox eschatology, the level of happiness depends on the level of good deeds a person managed to do during the earthly life. Interestingly, for Bobrov, these souls come not only from various parts of the earth but possibly also from various planets (205).

In the preface to *The ancient night*, Bobrov mentioned that he once desired to find the base of the truth of the immortality of the soul “with the help of natural light” (1.1.12). He did not say “*only* with the help of natural light”, which probably was intended, since the proofs he provided here are not relying solely on natural reason. However, in a way, at the outset of the discussion of the nature of the soul the reliance on natural reason is undermined when it is stated that

“The soul for itself is not mysterious, / But its connection with the body – this is a mystery! / The soul is known only by its actions” (2.4.167). Moreover, the proofs rely on very strong theological assumptions concerning in particular the attributes of God. He would have to establish first that all these attributes can be shown with natural reason alone. Such attempts have been made many times and some of them can also be found in Bobrov, for instance, in his physico-theological argument concerning the orderliness of the world as a proof of the existence and rationality of God.

Nesham who was still troubled by doubts and Zikhel, still in Sicily, reached Tarentum, where Plato’s Pythagorean friend Archytas prophesized that Nesham’s blindness could be healed only by the one “Who was, who is, who eternally will be / And who is the only principle / The middle and the end of things” (2.4.240). It just so happened that they stumbled upon Plato, whose advice was disappointingly unilluminating:

Socrates taught: know thyself! / This is a truth that came from heaven, / Salvific for the soul, / Opposed to the power of blindness! / The more I know myself, / The more I see myself in darkness, / See my poor condition, nothingness, / And become humbler and humbler / and I await *something* – this is the entire wisdom! (249).

The answer is disappointing since it leaves Nesham in the dark, literally and figuratively. Plato did say that an answer should come by illumination from above, an answer that even the sharpest reason could not provide. Self-knowledge that Zikhel taught Socrates only should lead to the realization that such a revelation was necessary and only afterwards could the answer be found in oneself. This was probably the meaning of Bobrov’s aphorism, “To see the Unseen, / Your part – to understand yourself, / Then – to see Him in yourself” (*Some rules for the heart and mind* 1.391).

So, our travelers continued their quest and reached Palestine. And here is where Bobrov very nicely wove Nesham’s recovery from blindness with the New Testament.

CHRIST

First, Nesham and Zikhel encountered three wise men who observed a star [Mt. 2:2] (2.4.259) and decided to follow it (260), since the star prophesized life and happiness, because under this star was born “The physician, and the leader, and the king, and everything. / He is above men; – he – the Deity. / What other physician is except for Him? / Can anyone be blind with Him? / The star appearing from afar / Points to God in darkness” (264). These are Melchior (267), Caspar, and Balthazar (268), the names given to the three magi by an extra-bibli-

cal tradition. Nesham and Zikhel left them and reached Abarim from where “the Hebrew Minos [Moses] / Saw the promised land from afar” (260); it was also at the end of their 40-year wandering in the wilderness that the Israelites reached “the mountains of Abarim” (Num. 33:47–48). There our travelers heard various voices. An invisible figure, probably an angel, said that “perfection will unite / Today with imperfection of dust! – / The omnipotence is out together with weakness!” “Anger of the Omnipotent is such / As great is the sin of the earth; / But so great is [His] love, / Like all worlds and beyond them / Like eternity or Aethereal life” (272). “To forgive weaknesses of hearts / He [God] will accept heartfelt bows.” Love is stronger than anger; “Love deflects severe judgment, / Only God can reconcile God” (273, 289). This is pretty much what Bobrov said about the essence of the Incarnation. If the reader did not know why Christ came to earth, why He died on the cross, why only His death could wipe out the sins of all people of all the ages, he would not understand what Bobrov said about the issue. Actually, it is hard to understand it even having the theological background knowledge.

Nesham and Zikhel continued their travel and from a hermit heard about the Physician, for whom there is nothing impossible, who “is the physician of bodies and souls, – the King of the world¹¹, / He is a true image of Mizrach,” who, paradoxically “is looking for us, – not us [looking for Him]; / He can be encountered anywhere”; after this, they reached Jericho where they waited for this Physician (2.4.281). Nesham knew about Him that “He looks only at the heart” and “He sees in various paths [of people] / One goal – the path to him / A sigh of gentleness/humility is dearer to Him / Than any offering, hecatombs, or incense. / He is love itself” (285). Nesham waited and as “the heavenly man,” this “Divine physician” approached, Nesham exclaimed, “Son of David! Have mercy on me!” [Mk. 10:47]. Although the Physician already knew Nesham’s needs, He asked, “Why are you shouting? Tell [me]?” (286). Nesham afraid of His anger, only exclaimed again, “Son of David! Have mercy on me!” [Mk. 10:48]. He said, “Didn’t I come for the blind? [Lk. 4:18] / May he be brought to me [Mk. 10:49]” (287). The Physician asked, “What do you want?”; ““Heavenly physician, that I may see!” / ‘See! – your living faith / Is healing you, and it saves [you]’ [Mk. 10:51–52]. / So the limitless love / Speaking life-giving words / Chases away terrible night of wrath / And deflects thunders of the Eternal.” This primarily means that Christ forgave Nesham’s sins so that he was no longer a subject of God’s wrath. As an extra, as it were, Nesham could see again (288), in particular, he could see the beauty of the world to the extent that he exclaimed, “Where? Where am I? – here in the lower world / Or was I transported to the land of happiness?”¹² (289).

¹¹ “No infirmity comes before the Almighty Physician as incurable”, said Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 102.5.

¹² This seems to be an allusion to Kheraskov’s *Selim and Selima*: “Oh! Am I alive? Wasn’t I transported to heaven? / I must be in heaven, I see a different world”. Михаил М. Херасков, Селим

Out of sequence, Bobrov also spoke about Christ's crucifixion. On the Abarim mountain Nesham, apparently in a vision,

Sees from afar Golgotha, / An innocent offering, – blood and a grave, / Heaven in the grave, –
life above the grave / Soaring on eternal wings. / He sees [it], – gets silent, – falls down; / But
the Providence teaches / That the wisest in Athens / Are unable to resurrect / The innocence
dying in suffering / As the one being offered on the hill. / He is the main leader to the immortal
life! (2.4.260).

Afterwards, light spread over the world (261). It is quite unclear from Bobrov's presentation why crucifixion was really necessary. The closest he came to such an explanation was when Nesham reflected after recovery of his sight: "at His birth / Like the fire of a storm / Light emerged in the dark night; / The stars dimmed in the bottomlessness of light; / At [His] death such darkness, / That the stars showed their bodies during the day. / The physician of souls and flesh was killed; – / The killer of God was saved" (291). What Bobrov likely wanted the reader to understand is that the killer of God, probably Nesham or maybe even Bobrov himself, was saved *because* the Physician died on the cross¹³.

The moment of recovery from blindness very closely follows the account describing Jesus performing a miracle on a blind man. The miracle is described in three Gospels (Mt. 20:29–34, Mk. 10:46–52, Lk. 18:35–43). Only Mark identifies the blind man by name: Bartimaeus. The name means, the son of Timaeus or rather Timaios, and Τιμαιος is derived from τιμος, *honorable* (τιμή, *honor*) and who is of greater honor than God, the father of Nesham? Interestingly, with this etymology, the name of Bartimaeus would be composed of words from the Aramaic word for *son* (ܒܪܐ, *bar*) and a Greek word for *honorable*. There is also possible that Timaios is derived from an Aramaic word for *unclean* (ܐܦܫܪ, *tame*)¹⁴. Thus, this ambiguity would serve Bobrov very well by indicating that the son of the Honorable was at the moment of healing unclean because of sin. Also, Matthew speaks about two blind men, not just one. Bobrov took that into consideration and stated that upon arrival of Jesus, Nesham fell on his knees and Zikhel fell on

и Селима, in his *Творения*, Москва: В Университетской Типографии 1796; vol. 3, p. 345. Kheraskov has a completely different setup: Selim was happy when he was blind; he loved Selima and was loved back; his sight was recovered by a touch of a special flower. However, the appreciation of God's creation view after recovery of his sight is very much like Bobrov's Nesham's.

¹³ In the *Creation of the world* (1804), which has a subtitle, *a translation from French*, the author spoke about a moment "When Your Son steps down to the world to wash it in his blood, / To wash this sinful world in His most holy blood / And consecrate it to You, – as a work of love" (1.322).

¹⁴ Gustav Volkmar, *Marcus und die Synopse der Evangelien nach dem urkundlichen Text und das Geschichtliche vom Leben Jesu*, Zürich: Schmidt 1876, p. 712; Burton L. Mack, *Myth of innocence: Mark and Christian origin*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2006 [1988], p. 297.

his face (2.4.287). There were, thus, two individuals participating in the miracle, although it was just one, Nesham, and his own reason represented by Zikhel.

The Biblical accounts with their various details served Bobrov's poetic and religious needs very well. A claim can be made that it is precisely because of this apparent discrepancy and because of the name of the blind that Bobrov chose this particular healing of a blind man performed by Christ over other healings of the blind described in the Gospels. Also, as the etymological guidance in choice of the names of the characters of *The ancient night* indicates, the etymology of the name of Bartimaeus was not unimportant for Bobrov.

What then? On the cosmic scale Nesham spoke about future events drawing from the imagery of the Revelation: the universal resurrection, the new heaven and the new earth, thrones for the saved, the crystal sea, the judgment (2.4.292), an angel with a rainbow above his head, the new Jerusalem (293). And personally? Nesham vowed not to be separated [Mk. 10:52] from the Physician and wanted to die at His feet. Zikhel also vowed to follow the Physician and be no longer a guide for Nesham and also wanted to die at His feet (294). Since Zikhel is Nesham's reason, this would indicate the restoration of personal integrity, the unity of mind under the control of faith in Christ. In the last verses of *The ancient night*, Zikhel, the human reason, is directly enlightened from heaven with the message that the only principle/beginning is the one prophesied by Daniel, which is the Ancient of days (295), that is, Christ according to Christian rendering of this prophecy. God forgives the blind man since "his bitter sigh and wailing / Penetrated in the night my throne," God forgives all people, all people, that is, who are part of the "washed flock," understood as washed by the blood of the Lamb, since "the shepherd is with it," Christ Himself is with His flock, and thus the entry to the paradise can be made accessible by commanding the guard to sheathe his sword (296).

One puzzling aspect of *The ancient night* is that this being a story of healing the soul after a long journey to Christ, not once is the name of Jesus mentioned nor the title of Christ. On the other hand, there is really nothing in the poem that an Orthodox believer would find objectionable about Christ. There is the Bethlehem star and thus presumably the Bethlehem birth. There is the healing power of Christ, His death and resurrection. He is a divine being – "he – the Deity" (2.4.264), "only God can reconcile God" (273), "God mitigates the wrath of God" (289) – and thus the concept of the Trinity is implicitly accepted (granted, the Holy Spirit is never presented, at least not explicitly).

The absence of the name of Jesus and of the title of Christ extends to all of Bobrov's poetry. Only in a translation of Klopstock did he mention Christ (1.369); in a translation of Pope he wrote about the Anointed (375); in his translation of church hymns he spoke about the Savior (372, 373) and the Bridegroom (373), but in his own poetry he only mentioned the Word (272), the Bridegroom (281),

periphrastically, the true sun (311) and the Son of Mary (2.241). This is all the more puzzling considering the fact that Bobrov's father was a priest and the frequent Biblical references from the earliest poetry indicate that Bobrov knew the Orthodox dogma rather well.

Bobrov entered the student life in Moscow at the beginning of the Masonic movement, which could be considered as the spiritual alternative to what the official Orthodox church had to offer. There were at least two streams of the Russian masonry. One that was represented by Elagin, Kheraskov, Maikov, and others, aimed at a generic form of religious belief with a God whose attributes were distilled from the many religions. It was a monotheistic belief even to the point of uniformitarianism. On the other hand, there were Rosicrucians who included Lopukhin, Novikov, Gamaleia, Schwarz, and others, who wanted to revive Christianity and wanted to experience the union with Christ already here, on earth. They found unsatisfactory the dryness of the official church with its numerous rites that stood between them and God and Christ. Bobrov had very strong ties with both streams of masonry. He owed to Kheraskov the awakening in him of his poetic spirit and Kheraskov appears repeatedly in Bobrov's grateful verses. Bobrov also had strong contacts with Novikov, who even commissioned translation-related work from Bobrov. Bobrov was part of the translation seminar that had just been established according to the plan of Johann Schwarz, which quartered its members in a separate house in which Bobrov lived with, among others, with Maksim I. Nevzorov, a future mason. Moreover, Bobrov's poetry includes some masonic symbolism¹⁵. Interestingly, there is no record that Bobrov himself joined any masonic lodge. One reason could be that he found appealing both streams of the Russian masonry and that this appeal is also reflected in *The ancient night*. The culmination of the poem is meeting Christ, meeting Him in person, unmediated by any church or priesthood. This is what the Rosicrucians yearned for. However, treating Christ in a very lofty but somewhat anonymous fashion brings the generic element to the fore; it makes Christ more universal, not limited to Christian denominations alone, more acceptable to non-practicing believers, to people who do not want to be attached to a particular church but who have a spiritual longing that they are uncertain how to fulfill. The Physician of *The ancient night* would be what Bobrov offered them.

In, as it were, a reversal of the Anselm of Canterbury's saying, *The ancient night* can be considered the quest of understanding seeking faith. Bobrov was influenced by the Enlightenment, more by its scientific than its philosophical part¹⁶,

¹⁵ Marina Aptekman, The origins of kabbalistic symbolism in the poetry of Semen Bobrov, *Study Group on Eighteenth-Century Russia. Newsletter* 2003, no. 31, pp. 53–82.

¹⁶ In Bobrov's opinion, Spinoza, Helvetius, Voltaire, and other such skeptics, deists, and Pelagians considered humans to be on equal footing with other animals and thus they left humans without any goal (2.4.342).

appreciated the accomplishments of science and documented them in his poetry. Critics even complained about his pedantry in that respect in the *Chersonida*. Reason was of primary importance on an individual, on a social, and on a cosmic scale: reason, “this universal law / Prescribed by the creator of nature, / This divine branch, / The weapon of the universal will, / Of all solid truths / And a source of virtues, / The mirror of morals / And the principle of civilization / Rules over nations of all times / And over all societies” (2.3.86–87). Reason can build religions just as it builds civilizations, but when it is unchecked, it can go awry as it did as Nesham experienced in his travels through most developed civilizations, and becomes self-centered, cutting itself from its divine source. Reason must be under the supervision of the Creator, who is perfect, supremely wise, omnipotent, just, eternal, good (211), God who is love and joy (229). As such, God does not force anyone to be obedient to Him but waits for any person who wants reconciliation, the reconciliation prepared by God Himself through the person of the divine Physician, Christ. In this way blindness will be removed from human eyes and Edenic happiness restored for all eternity. And God needs only one offering, the contrite soul (1.2.105).

Bobrov very strongly emphasized that Nesham also represented himself (2.4.297–298, 321). Very little is known about Bobrov’s life and it is not known whether and to what extent he himself followed his own advice of offering his contrite soul to God. However, as a result of his theological reflections, he created an intricate epic poem which is the best of his works, difficult to read and confusing at times as it can be.

This was a long travel through which Bobrov returned to the views of his very first poem. In this poem he spoke about the Triune providential God and this is the God whom he rediscovered in Christ the Physician, God who rules over nature and gives loving support to those who come to Him through Christ who offered Himself for the sins of all people and all of them are initially blind. Bobrov offered a Christian solution minus Christian rites, whereby he implicitly sided with the Muslim heretic who did it to the point of the rejection of revelation. Bobrov did not go that far recognizing the limitations of reason and accepting at least Biblical revelation.

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STRESZCZENIE

Bobrov jest ważną postacią literacką końca XVIII i początku XIX wieku w Rosji, choć jego poezja nie zawsze była doceniana w jego czasach. Poezja Bobrowa jest bogata w różne tematy i nastroje; artysta we wczesnej poezji pisał o stworzeniu świata, a w kwestiach osobistych był szczególnie zainteresowany problemem śmierci. Po przeniesieniu się na Krym napisał dzieło *Tauryda* (1798), zatytułowane później *Chersonida* (1804), które jest poetyckim i pełnym podziwu opisem przyrody i obyczajów Krymu, a także zawiera interesujące rozważania teologiczne. Jego ostatnim i najdłuższym dziełem jest poemat epicki *Starożytna noc wszechświata lub wędrujący ślepiec* (1807–1809), który jest alegorią ludzkości poszukującej prawdy, a jednocześnie alegorią poszukiwania prawdy przez każdego człowieka. Bobrov pokazuje, że tę prawdę można znaleźć tylko w Chrystusie.

Słowa kluczowe: Bobrov, prawosławie, masoneria

SUMMARY

Bobrov is an important literary figure of the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century in Russia, although his work was not always appreciated in his times. Bobrov's poetry is rich with different topics and moods; in his early poetry he wrote about the creation of the world, but on personal level he was preoccupied with the problem of death. After he moved to Crimea he wrote a book-long poem *Taurida* (1798) or later *Chersonida* (1804), which is a detailed and admiring description of Crimea's nature and people and also included interesting theological reflections. His last and longest work is the epic poem, *The ancient night of the universe or the wandering blind man* (1807–1809) which is an allegory of humanity searching for truth and, at the same time, a search for truth of each individual person. Bobrov shows that such truth can only be found in Christ.

Key words: Bobrov, Orthodoxy, masonry