

Title: Zhukovskii's Swan Song

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This paper takes as its starting point one of Vasilii Zhukovskii's last poems, "The Swan of Tsarskoe Selo" (1851), which apostrophizes a dying swan who has supposedly witnessed the reigns of Catherine II, Alexander I, and Nicholas I during his century-long life at the royal estate. Misunderstood and friendless, the swan is a moribund monument to the past. The poem, admirably received by Zhukovskii's contemporaries as his own "swan song," abounds in images and poetic conventions that detain its reader in the tradition of the late eighteenth – early nineteenth centuries. By the mid-century, Zhukovskii was clearly past his prime. Critics as early as Belinskii have placed him irrevocably between Karamzin and Pushkin, even though Zhukovskii outlived the latter by almost 15 years. After the poet's death, his admirers rebuked those – and there were many – who considered Zhukovskii superannuated. Taking this very superannuation as its theme, the poem reveals yet another way in which Zhukovskii adheres to the cultural practices of the earlier era. As a historical elegist, he not only revisits the royal places of memory frequented by Derzhavin and Pushkin, but also inscribes the individual biography (the swan's, his own) into a reign-based historical timeline, which betrays his lifelong self-identification as a court poet, a decidedly passé form of creative self-fashioning in the 1850s. Critics have commented on Zhukovskii's Karamzin-era aesthetic and ethical values (Veselovskii) and on his court-centered historiosophy (Vinitskii). But Zhukovskii's "swan song," when read in tandem with the correspondence around it (Chaadaev, Pletnev), is not only indebted to these earlier traditions, but also exposes in the age of Nicholas the persistence of some of the questions that had plagued the Alexandrine Man: issues of patronage and artistic independence, instability of poetic genres and historical periodization.

Bibliography:

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