

Title: Merezhkovskii's Dostoevskian Response to Tolstoyan Death in "Smert'"

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Abstract:

A decade before he wrote the first major study on the two titans of Russian literature – L. Tolstoi i Dostoevskii. Zhizn', tvorchestvo i religiia (first published in Mir iskusstva, 1900-2), Dmitrii Merezhkovskii staged a literary-symbolic debate between both writers' religious and artistic conceptions of death as he understood them. First published in Severnyi vestnik in 1891, "Smert'. Peterburgskaia poema" (Death. A Petersburg poem) is the story of the agonizing death of physiologist Boris Kamenskii. As death nears, his lover Olga abandons her comfortable, but stifling, society life in order to devote herself to the destruction of his nihilist materialism through Christian faith. This very Dostoevskiiian plot (recalling the ideological argument of Crime and Punishment) culminates in the veneer of a Tolstoyan death. Ksenia Kumpan has observed affinities between Boris's death and "The Death of Ivan Ilych" (47-48), but there are also overt textual references to Prince Andrei's death in War and Peace (Ueland 64), as well as Nikolai Levin's death in Anna Karenina. Though acknowledged as pioneering, Merezhkovskii's study is often criticized for relying on blunt, oppositional clichés about Tolstoy ("seer of the flesh") and Dostoevsky ("seer of the spirit"). In a close reading of "Smert'," I will show how Boris's death represents an attempt to reconcile the respective artistic stances discussed in the later study. Moreover, I will argue that this reconciliation takes place on a formalistic level. Merezhkovskii's use of a 12-line stanza structure (recalling Pushkin's 14-line Onegin stanza), is more than poetic imitation, but a larger gesture toward the culturally commonplace view of Pushkin as the symbol of artistic and (in this case) ideological harmony.