

PIERRE R. HART

## Mirza and Mistress in Derzhavin's "Felitsa" Poetry

Encumbered by an accumulation of rhetorical devices, the panegyric ode seemed an unlikely vehicle for poetic innovation. Yet when Gavriil Derzhavin, after more than a decade of literary activity, turned once again to the celebration of that most illustrious of subjects, the Empress Catherine,<sup>1</sup> he was rewarded with the immediate recognition of both his fellow writers and the monarch herself for his impressive success in the genre. Although odes previously written had given evidence of the poet's competency in working with this form, it was with "Felitsa" and "A Mirza's Vision" that he demonstrated his capacity for transcending its limitations.<sup>2</sup> While seeming to accept the conventions of established genres, he subtly subverted them through recombinations which stressed the importance of a more subjective poetic vision.

Of particular significance was Derzhavin's introduction of both thematic and stylistic elements from the "oriental tale," a prose genre which enjoyed considerable popularity throughout much of the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> In terms of narrative stance, this provided the poet with an alternative to the traditionally anonymous role of the panegyrist. Clad in the disguise of the oriental moralist or mirza, he could address his sovereign in direct and uninhibited fashion and simultaneously create an impression of his own worth as a poet. In both odes it was the relationship between mirza and mistress or, more specifically, the poet's conception of his role in the service of the empress which lent much of the freshness to these works. As I hope to demonstrate, the reader's awareness of the poet in his creative function comes to rival that of the ode's declared subject.

Cursory examination of some representative types of the oriental tale provides an indication of the manner in which Derzhavin adapted and expanded

1. According to Ia. Grot, before the publication of "Felitsa" Derzhavin had written some ten odes in which the portrayal of Catherine was a prominent feature. See G. R. Derzhavin, *Sochineniia*, ed. Ia. Grot, 4 vols. in 7 (St. Petersburg, 1864-83), 1:150.

2. Strictly speaking, two additional odes should be considered as belonging to this cycle of poems, for "Thanksgiving to Felitsa" (1783) and "A Portrayal of Felitsa" (1789) were written during the same period and reflect upon some of the same events. Since the purpose of this essay is to determine the impact of the oriental tale on the Felitsa cycle, I have restricted my discussion to the two works in which this influence is most clearly in evidence.

3. For a discussion of some original compositions by Russian authors in this genre see V. N. Kubacheva, "Vostochnaia povest' v russkoi literature XVIII-XIX veka," *XVIII vek* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1962), 5:295-315.

the narrator's role. Among the European models important to the general development of this genre in Russia, Joseph Addison's philosophic tale "The Vision of Mirza" holds particular interest.<sup>4</sup> In this work the mirza speaks of his personal vision through which the moral judgments of a higher being have been revealed to him. Rather than merely describing the exotic landscape, as was the case in the original oriental tale, Addison's narrator employs it as the backdrop for a philosophic discussion. And while it is possible to distinguish the mirza as a separate personality, he serves largely as a vehicle for conveying a didactic message to the reader.

In the satiric variant of this genre the narrator frequently uses the third-person form for his descriptions, and yet, through his wit and the sense of his separation from the society, the reader is able to appreciate his distinctive nature. Under the pretext of portraying a remote Eastern kingdom, the narrator actually delivers an indictment against existing social and political institutions in his native land. Thus the convention of the oriental traveler becomes a transparent device for permitting the socially concerned author to speak with impunity. The number of translated and original works of this nature published during the latter part of the eighteenth century in Russia suggests that this form provided a welcome means for the expression of social criticism.<sup>5</sup>

Derzhavin implicated the mirza in the narration of both "Felitsa" and "A Mirza's Vision," and although his function in the two odes differed significantly, it is appropriate to relate each instance to the tradition of the oriental tale. The notion of the narrator as social commentator is important

4. Ernest J. Simmons, *English Literature and Culture in Russia (1553-1840)* (Cambridge, Mass., 1935), p. 119, notes that Addison's tale enjoyed considerable popularity in translation and had been published twice before Derzhavin began his "Felitsa" cycle. I have been unable to find any direct evidence that Derzhavin knew of these translations, although his general familiarity with English authors of the day would suggest that he did. Aleksei Veselovsky, *Zapadnoe vliianie v novoi russkoi literature* (Moscow, 1916), p. 114, asserts that "in all probability" the translation of Addison's work inspired Derzhavin, but he offers no supporting evidence to prove the point. The question of sources, at least insofar as "Felitsa" is concerned, is complicated by the poet's deliberate use of Catherine's *Tale of Prince Khlor* as a point of departure. The ode's full subtitle clearly implicates Catherine's tale as a source for some of its oriental coloration: "An ode to the august Kirghiz-Kazak Princess Felitsa, written by a Tatar mirza who, having long resided in Moscow, now lives in St. Petersburg, attending to his affairs. Translated from the Arabian, 1782." (The concluding mention of translation from the work of an unidentified Eastern writer introduces another convention of the oriental tale.)

5. As Martha Pike Conant, *The Oriental Tale in England in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1908), pp. 227-32, points out, the satiric form of the oriental tale was more favored in France, whereas in England a more openly philosophic or moralizing variant was common. The importance of the satiric tradition for Russian writers would appear at least partially attributable to the fact that French models predominated in the literature of that day.

to both works, with the urgency of the message being more clearly expressed in "A Mirza's Vision." Like Addison, Derzhavin employed first-person narration, but the narrator emerges in both poems as a well-developed personality rather than simply the means to an end.

Catherine's own allegorical *Tale of Prince Khlor* provided the impetus for "Felitsa," and in reflecting this source Derzhavin introduced a new element into the definition of the mirza. As one of the group of figures who lent a vaguely oriental atmosphere to the empress's work, the mirza fulfilled a negative function by symbolizing human vices. Such qualities are also associated with the mirza in Derzhavin's ode. By virtue of his own designation, the poem's putative author must also be numbered among the guilty.<sup>6</sup> In the introduction a clear distinction is made between the empress as a wise preceptress and the narrator as her attentive, if somewhat weak-willed, student. Appealing to Felitsa for guidance, the poet admits his own insufficiencies: "Segodnia vlastvuiu soboiu / A zavtra prikhotiam ia rab."<sup>7</sup> This open acknowledgment of fault prepares us for what might, at first glance, appear to be a totally personal confession, but with a verbal sleight of hand Derzhavin redirects the thrust of his remarks. In using the first-person narration throughout the description of life at court, he makes it apparent that his actual objective is to provide a collective portrait of the nobility. In effect, he confounds the reader's expectations by exploiting the role of the penitent for satiric purposes, and in this fashion reveals the shortcomings of those around the throne.

The narrator's ambiguous position might be attributed to the persisting influence of the panegyric. While such odes naturally implied the existence of a lesser individual dedicated to the celebration of the ruler, they did not usually detract from their main purpose by introducing the personality of the poet. Through the admission of his own insufficiencies, Derzhavin could indirectly flatter his subject while still calling attention to his own presence and function. Nor is the latter portrait totally negative. Stanzas 5 through 10 stand like a series of miniature paintings dealing with various aspects of the nobles' lives. In his summary statement on their pastimes, the poet implies that the faults they demonstrate are in fact a testament to their membership in the greater human community (stanza 11):

6. Such inclusion is unusual in the oriental tale proper. In Ivan Krylov's *Kaib*, for example, the narrator gives some indication of being an aesthetically sensitive person, but he maintains a clear distinction between himself and the totally untalented writers at the court.

7. Derzhavin, *Sochineniia*, vol. 1. The texts for "Felitsa" and "A Mirza's Vision" are on pages 129-49 and 157-68 respectively. In the case of "Felitsa" the passages cited are indicated in the text by stanza number in parentheses. The lines quoted above are from stanza 2. Since "A Mirza's Vision" has no stanzaic divisions, the passages cited from it are indicated by line number.

Таков, Фелица, я развратен!  
 Но на меня весь свет похож.  
 Кто сколько мудростью ни знатен,  
 Но всякий человек есть ложь.

Despite this ready admission of frailty, the fact that it is thoroughly human in quality causes a distinct modulation in what might otherwise have become a strident satire. A delicate balance appears to exist between the attempt to criticize and the poet's inclination to portray sensual pleasures positively. The "thousands of diverse dishes" which grace the table of the banquet scene, for example, might well have become the means for castigating the nobility's gluttony, yet the attention given to the detail of this feast evokes a visually splendid image. As he recalls the glitter of the silver and gold table setting or the sumptuous array of domestic and imported delicacies, the poet-gastronome provides direct proof of his own weaknesses.

It is only after admitting these faults that the narrator speaks of himself as one of the "good caliphs." Significantly, this more positive judgment of the poet is based upon the redeeming qualities of his art. If his penchant for rhyming is regarded as something less than essential to the welfare of the state, it nonetheless serves to distinguish him from less talented mirzas. Indeed, the positive assessment of the artist provides a thematic link between this ode and "A Mirza's Vision," in which the narrator's portrait conspicuously lacks satiric touches.

In formulating the narrator's role for this latter work, Derzhavin may well have been guided by the pensive atmosphere which prevails in Addison's "Vision" if not by its particulars.<sup>8</sup> Rather than proceeding from a celebration of an illustrious individual, both Addison's and Derzhavin's works, as their common title indicates, center on the mirza's personal experience. In Addison's tale the principal concern is with questions of general philosophic importance. Mirza's vision is in essence a revelation; his initial "profound contemplation on the vanity of human life" provides the impetus for his extraordinary experience under the guidance of the shepherd-genius. Introduction of a supernatural being and the relationship which he enjoys with Mirza is based on the premise that man, burdened by conventional cares, is incapable of fully understanding his situation by himself.

In adapting the genre to verse, Derzhavin followed Addison's example to the extent that the vision scene itself is still prominent. His most important innovation was to expand the narrative frame and to integrate the particulars of the poet's life as presented in the frame with the philosophic content of the

8. In the absence of any evidence to prove that Addison's tale was a direct source, it might be argued that both works reflect, in their contemplative narrative frames, the new sentimentalism which was becoming prominent in the literatures of England and Russia.

vision proper. Although it might be argued that the introductory description of Petersburg does not necessarily lead to an awareness of the narrator's personality, it is fairly intimate in tone (see below) and furthermore it is immediately followed by a passage in which the specifics of a private life are central. The lines devoted to the definition of a "good man" can be considered a point of departure from Addison's model.

The notion of modest ambition which is celebrated in this passage begins as abstract praise of morality and temperance and is thus consistent with the sort of sentiment found in Addison's work, but it quickly becomes apparent that Derzhavin's comments have direct relevance to his own life. As in several other poems, mention of the "tender Plenira" evokes the image of the poet's first wife, and his several "faithful friends" are undoubtedly those men of letters, including V. V. Kapnist and I. I. Khemnitser, who continually encouraged him in his literary pursuits. The most specific reference, which also provides a bridge to the introduction of the poem's second major figure, is to the recognition accorded Derzhavin by Catherine after the publication of "Felitsa." Royal recognition for the production of a few *virshi* seemingly provides the ultimate degree of happiness, as is evidenced by the exclamatory conclusion to this passage: "Blazhen!"

Comparison of the narrator's function in "A Mirza's Vision" and in "Felitsa" indicates a movement from relatively good-natured satire toward a more sober contemplation of social responsibilities. The deliberate confusion of courtier and narrator which softened the impact of the commentary in "Felitsa" is absent from this later ode, and the poet's identification with virtue is made with less ambiguity. Although the capricious whims of the nobility are once again described, the poet remains dissociated from them, and indeed selfish interests are here defined as being inimical to the welfare of both the poet and the state. Intent on the gratification of their desires through the offices of the monarch, the nobility oppose demonstrations of creativity which might detract from the favor they enjoy. Here, then, is a first hint of the artist's acutely felt alienation from official society, which was to become such a prominent theme in the poetry of later generations of Russian writers.

In order to assess the significance of the narrator's emergence as a dominant figure, further consideration must be given to the thematic concerns of the oriental tale proper. One of the most frequently encountered themes was that of the enlightened monarch struggling to establish or maintain just government in the face of opposition by a corrupt nobility.<sup>9</sup> Such situations enable the author simultaneously to praise the ruler and to castigate his subordinates. By virtue of its eulogistic potential, the tale demonstrated its affinity to the

9. See Kubacheva, "Vostochnaia povest'," pp. 304-7.

panegyric, and this may well explain Derzhavin's initial attraction to the genre. "Felitsa" makes the more explicit use of this thematic convention, for in it we find both direct praise of the empress and compliments derived from the contrast between Catherine and the nobility. The latter, more indirect technique is especially common in the first half of the ode. In the third and fourth stanzas the positive judgment of the monarch's activities depends upon the indirect criticism of her courtiers' pastimes. Thus Felitsa frequently goes about on foot, "not imitating" her mirzas. She reads and writes, "not valuing" her own rest, and she "does not especially enjoy masquerades." By emphasizing the simple, unpretentious nature of her activities, Derzhavin departs from the established practice of the panegyric while still attaining its goals.

Convention is more conspicuous in the lengthy concluding eulogy to Catherine, but an occasional turn of phrase lifts the portrayal from the realm of commonplace rhetoric and lends it a more distinctive tone. Amid the usual metaphoric treatments of the monarch as the steady helmsman and an emissary from the heavens, the assessment of the empress as a patron of the arts is particularly noteworthy. As in the case of the narrator, mention of her attitude toward poetry helps to establish a connection with both the characters and the theme of "The Vision of Mirza" (stanza 15):

Поэзия тебе любезна,  
Приятна, сладостна, полезна,  
Как летом вкусный лимонад.

The general impression of Catherine as an intellectually and morally superior being is sustained, albeit in unconventional fashion, by this simile. As a summary statement on her attitude toward creative activity, the casual nature of this formulation also reflects the poet's confidence in his sovereign. Although she may "condescend" to recognize artistic activity, hers is the enlightened tolerance characteristic of the monarch in the oriental tale. Like lemonade, poetry represents a refreshing, if not indispensable, alternative to the usual fare with which the mighty are sustained.

With respect to Derzhavin's portrayal of the nobility, the question of the relationship between the narrator's own penchant for "vice" and his indulgent attitude toward others has already been raised. When, in addition, the persisting influence of the panegyric is taken into account, some explanation for the departure from the oriental tale's satiric practice is provided. Although elements of satire remain in the description of the nobility, there is nothing to suggest that they present a serious obstacle to the administration of enlightened rule. Their diversions seem rather innocuous, and at times even amusing.

In describing the physical setting for their activities, Derzhavin abandoned the last vestiges of camouflage employed in the oriental tale. The original

detailed descriptions of exotic locales had been exploited by eighteenth-century satirists for the purposes of their own fiction, and though a nominally oriental cover remained, features of the writer's own land were immediately recognizable. Even in the moral tale the convention persisted, and thus, although Addison names the site of his vision as "Bagdat," the landscape, complete with grazing oxen and sheep, appears more English in nature. What may well have been of greatest importance to Derzhavin was the practice of employing physical detail in support of the work's general tone. Both "Felitsa" and "A Mirza's Vision" give considerable attention to the particulars of the setting. The introduction to the latter ode is especially noteworthy in this respect, offering what is generally considered to be the first example of an urban landscape in Russian literature. As in Addison's "Vision," the initial nocturnal view of Petersburg evokes a mood of quiet contemplation as a prelude to the vision itself. Although the poet's renowned sense of color and movement is evident, it is modulated and thus strengthens the pensive atmosphere (lines 5–8):

... она [луна]  
 Сквозь окна дом мой осещала  
 И палевым своим лучом  
 Златые стекла рисовала  
 На лаковом полу моем.

In "Felitsa," on the other hand, the unrestrained enthusiasm for striking physical effects is consistent with the generally exuberant tone of that ode.

A similar distinction may be noted in the conception of both Felitsa and the nobility. In "A Mirza's Vision" the manner of their portrayal reflects the more serious concerns characteristic of the work. There is a clear separation between the image of Felitsa as an idealized vision and the actual empress, who is never referred to by name. Although Felitsa's physical attributes are those of Catherine, an important difference derives from their respective attitudes toward the poet. Only the Felitsa of the vision demonstrates an appreciation of the artist's position. Like the supernatural being who appears to Addison's narrator, Felitsa is, in essence, the poet's alter ego, and the instructions she gives Mirza are the projection of his own convictions.<sup>10</sup> To imply philosophic unanimity between monarch and subject was always a hazardous enterprise, especially when, as here, a veiled criticism of existing

10. G. Makogonenko, *Ot Fonvizina do Pushkina* (Moscow, 1969), pp. 377–89, has compared the first prose draft for this poem, written in 1783, with the final version, which was published in 1791. On the basis of this comparison, he concludes that Derzhavin's original intention was to advise Catherine on matters of state through his poetry but that external circumstances forced him to concentrate instead on a defense of the poet's autonomy.

social practices was apparent. By exploiting a convention of the oriental tale and transforming Catherine into a paragon of virtue, Derzhavin was literally able to put words into the empress's mouth without incurring her wrath.

Felitsa's entry has some of the same revelatory function as the vision does in Addison's work; the narrator's vague musings are dispelled and his attention focused on the particular ideas presented by the vision. In Derzhavin's work particularly, there is the suggestion that the narrator has been laboring under certain delusions up to this point. Among the physical effects which signal the entrance of the goddess, the most noteworthy is the shaking of the entire building: "Мое vse zdan'e potriaslos'" (line 54). In addition to the awesome effect suggested by a literal reading of this line, it might also be figuratively construed as an admission of the inadequacies inherent in the poet's previous position.

In her role of the enlightened ruler, Felitsa serves to remind the narrator of the necessity of preserving the artist's integrity. The poet, she maintains, can best function if he is not encouraged to waste his talent on the fatuous praise of rulers. By stressing the susceptibility of the poet to such practices and the negative effect they have on the general welfare, Derzhavin avoids direct implication of the monarch as the instigator of such practices (lines 105–8):

Владыки света люди те же,  
В них страсти, хоть на них венцы;  
Яд лести их вредит не реже  
А где поэты не льстецы?

Yet such an admission of frailty should not be construed as the equivalent of that offered in "Felitsa." Derzhavin's question here is at least partly rhetorical, and in subsequent lines he makes a clear distinction between the true poet and those sycophants crowded about the throne. Although only briefly mentioned, the nobility present an image of unrelieved selfishness to which the poet is firmly opposed.

As a consequence of his vision, the poet is prompted to re-evaluate his attitude toward both the throne and society. Although continued respect is accorded the "gentle tsarevna," a new strain of self-assertiveness is heard which culminates in a statement on the poet's, rather than the monarch's, importance. This shift in stress is illustrated by a comparison of the conclusions of the two odes. "Felitsa" remains close to the convention of both the panegyric and the oriental tale, concluding with a reaffirmation of the monarch's importance. In defining Catherine's claim to immortality, the narrator modestly refrains from any mention of his own contribution, allowing the empress's deeds to speak for themselves: "Da del tvoikh v potomstve zvuki / Kak v nebe zvezdy, vozblestiat" (stanza 26).



Celestial imagery is equally important to the description of the ruler's impact on subsequent generations in "A Mirza's Vision," but the total effect is qualified by the emergence of the poet as the agent responsible for the creation of an enduring poetic image. In the course of the final couplet the emphasis shifts from exclusive concern for the empress's fame to that regarding the poet himself. Syntactically, the last line reveals the altered thematic stress: "Toboi bessmerten budu sam." Concluding with self rather than sovereign, the poet thus confounds the pattern of the panegyric and extends the function of the mirza well beyond that found in the oriental tale.

A summary comparison of these two works devoted to the praise of Catherine reveals a similar confluence of themes, but the relative contribution of individual notions differs. Resolution in favor of the poet-mirza and his art, as expressed in "A Mirza's Vision," reflects Derzhavin's increasing interest in poetry of a more personal nature. While he continued to hold the formal ode in high esteem and was to reassert its conventions in several subsequent works, he was simultaneously seeking a means of expressing sentiments which lay beyond the traditional limits of the genre. As on other occasions during his career, Derzhavin's first impulse was to retain the form while attempting to extend its function. The resulting mixed genre offered no more than a temporary solution, however interesting it might have been. Ultimately, other forms more amenable to the lyric impulse became more frequent in his verse. For the moment, however, the mirza served his purpose, providing one of the first opportunities for the poet's voice to be heard above the roar of conventional rhetoric.