
... the Cheated Eye
Shuts Arrogantly—in the Grave—
Another way—to See—
Emily Dickinson

No fact of Alexander Pushkin’s life or work was so important in constructing modern mythologies of Pushkin as his death. As a preliminary effort toward understanding those modern myths, I propose here to consider three nineteenth-century poems on Pushkin’s death, all written soon thereafter. Mikhail Lermontov’s "Smert’ poeta" ("The Death of the Poet," 1837) defined Pushkin’s death as an act of social violence and created a powerful discourse about Pushkin's death based on moral judgment. His definition itself constituted a symbolic act in Russian political and cultural life: "Smert’ poeta" attained great authority for succeeding generations’ writings about Pushkin’s death and about the political context of his life. Less well-known accounts by Vasilii Zhukovskii and Countess Evdokiia Rostopchina will show more personal and strictly historical responses, foreshadowing the unorthodox responses of some of Pushkin's later readers.

At the time of his death in a duel in 1837, Alexander Pushkin was admired as Russia’s great national poet. Though his fame had declined during the 1830s, crowds who waited for news of the dying poet revealed how much Pushkin was loved and how profound was Russia's loss. The transformation of the death into tributes to his greatness began at once,¹ and Lermontov's "Smert'
poeta" was penned instantly—some have even claimed that it was begun as Pushkin lay dying. Copies were circulated quickly and widely. Lermontov’s poem, written when he was twenty-three years old, brought him immediate fame, as well as the special notoriety reserved for victims of state repression (the poem led to his first exile to the South).2 "Smert' poeta" made Lermontov into Pushkin’s heir apparent.3

2. The tale of Lermontov’s authorship and of his exile has been told many times. See, for example, V. A. Manuilov and L. N. Nazarova, Lermontov v Peterburge (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1984), pp. 112-27, and I. S. Chistova, "Smert’ poeta," in Lermontovskaia entsiklopediia, ed. V. A. Manuilov (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1981), pp. 511-13, where there is also an excellent listing of scholarship about the poem.