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THE RETURN TO MYTH AND THE INEFFABLE: 
THE HEGELIAN SUBTEXT OF TYUTCHEV’S 
POETRY AND THE POETICS OF 
RUSSIAN SYMBOLISM

While much is made of the correspondence between the poetic thought of Fyodor Ivanovich Tyutchev1 and the German romantic poet-philosopher Schelling, less is said of the Hegelian themes which underlie much of Tyutchev’s poetic opus.2 The line for which Tyutchev is perhaps most well known—“a thought, once uttered, is untrue,”3 from his 18364 poem Silentium:

Silentium!

Be silent, hide yourself, and conceal
your feelings and your dreams.
Let them rise and set in the depths of your soul, silently,
like stars in the night;
contemplate them with admiration, and be silent.

How will the heart express itself?
How will another understand you?
Will he understand what it is that you live by?
A thought that is spoken is a falsehood;
by stirring up the springs you will cloud them:
drink of them, and be silent.

Know how to live within yourself:
there is in your soul a whole world
of mysterious and enchanted thoughts;
they will be drowned by the noise without;
daylight will drive them away:
listen to their singing and be silent.

2. Ibid. Dewey, in his discussion of the relationship between Tyutchev and Schelling, makes note of some of “Tyutchev’s reservations concerning Schelling’s... philosophy” (p. 127), before going on to show how Tyutchev’s “verse reflected or refracted... certain elements of the general intellectual atmosphere in Germany with which he felt an affinity” (p.132). Dewey makes it clear that Tyutchev and Hegel would have at very least drawn from mutual sources to develop their respective philosophies (p. 130).

Silentium!
Tyutchev’s poem may be interpreted as a poeticised edition of Hegel’s phenomenology of perception, at the core of which is the notion of the intrinsic disparity between the subject and his self-awareness or self-consciousness. The limitations of language to express directly what is meant (and how the subject can represent himself in language) is captured in Hegel’s analytic of the ‘this’ and ‘meaning’ in his dialectic of ‘sense-certainty’.

It is not surprising that a phenomenological inflection, which was embedded in German Idealist and Romantic philosophy from Hegel onwards, made its way into Tyutchev’s poetic work. Before he was twenty, Tyutchev had left Russia for life abroad, spending most of the next twenty-two years in Munich, where he was connected with the German literary circles. This made Tyutchev into an agent of transmission of German Idealism, which could be transplanted onto Russian soil more easily via an indigenous Russian poet than through translations of German philosophy. Tyutchev’s phenomenological approach to the world he represented in poetry thus played an important role in establishing him as a predecessor of various Russian poets of the twentieth century, particularly those identified with Russian Symbolism.

Two Russian Symbolists who were instrumental in the reception of Tyutchev’s phenomenological poetics are Dmitry Sergeyevich Merezhkovsky and Viacheslav Ivanovich Ivanov. Merezhkovsky’s Symbolist manifesto advocates the use of Tyutchev’s poetry as a model for the first generation of Russian Symbolist poets. Ivanov, who represents the second generation of Russian Symbolists, also traces the birth of Russian Symbolism back to Tyutchev in a manner similar to Merezhkovsky.

In *Silentium!* the lyric voice of the poem urges a Thou - an Other - to preserve his “inner self” by leaving unspoken his feelings and thoughts, as “the magic of veiled thoughts... might / be blinded by the outer light, / drowned in the noise of day, unheard.” Tyutchev’s lyrical “I” of the poem also warns of the detriment that expression can cause to one’s “inner self” or “spirit,” likening the pure experience of this inner self or spirit to undisturbed water: “dimmed is the fountainhead when stirred.” This valorisation of inner experience as the source of an alternative world had direct appeal to the Russian Symbolists. Tyutchev’s experiencing subject of this “inner world” is thus close to the (Freudian) subject of the unconscious or the subject of Hegel’s phenomenology. The declaration that “a thought, once uttered, is untrue,” reflects the underlying philosophy of the poem, namely that an utterance is devoid of essence. That which is ‘essential’ to the subject of Tyutchev’s poem cannot be expressed or represented through language.

The discrepancy between thought and language or the inherent limitations of language to express what is thought is articulated in full in the first chapter.