Chapter 15. The Theological Context of Lomonosov’s “Evening” and “Morning Meditations on God’s Majesty”

While Lomonosov’s “Evening Meditation on God’s Majesty on the Occasion of the Great Northern Lights” (Vechernee razmyshlenie o Bozhiem Velichestve pri sluchae velikogo severnogo siianiia) and “Morning Meditation on God’s Majesty” (Utrennee razmyshleniia o Bozhiem velichestve) have long been rightfully recognized as masterpieces of Russian poetry, the question of their religious content has not only not been studied but not even considered as a valid concern. On the one hand, the theological aspect of Lomonosov’s poetry has mostly been ignored, or even denied. As V. Dorovatovskaiia wrote in 1911, “Lomonosov’s thoughts were not directed at religion and purely religious questions held no interest for him.”¹ On the other hand, it was suggested that even if the issue were to be raised (I again cite Dorovatovskaiia) Lomonosov “remained an isolated case in the ideological regard.”² These poems’ relation to Russian poetic and religious traditions remains little studied³ and their correlation with

¹ V. Dorovatovskaiia, “O zaimstvovaniakh Lomonosova iz Biblii,” in M. V. Lomonosov, 1711–1911: Sbornik statei, ed. V. V. Sipovskii (St. Petersburg, 1911), 38.
² Dorovatovskaiia, “O zaimstvovaniakh,” 65. This neglect of Lomonosov’s religious views was shared, understandably, by the great majority of Soviet critics.
³ L. V. Pumpianskii referred in passing to the poems’ serious theological content, which he defined as “a rationalist, Lutheran and Leibnizian-colored theism” and as “a phenomenon of the European bourgeois type” (“Ocherki po literature pervoi poloviny XVIII veka,” XVIII vek, 1 [M. — L., 1935], 110). The most important works on the religious heritage of Lomonosov’s poetry are: Alexander Levitsky, “The Sacred Ode (Oda Dukhovnaja) in Eighteenth-Century Russian Literary Culture,” Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1977; L. F. Lutsevich, Psaltyr’ v russkoi poezii (St. Petersburg, 2002). On works concerning the issue of Lomonosov and religion, see: Kristianstvo i novaia russkaia literatura XVII–XX vekov: Bibliograficheskii ukazatel’, ed. V. A. Kotel’nikov, comp. A. P. Dmitriev i L. V. Dmitrieva (St. Petersburg, 2002), 103–106.
European Enlightenment trends unexplored. The goal of this article is twofold: first, to define the philosophical and theological trend to which the “Meditations” belong, and secondly, to offer a reading of the poems in light of this tradition, following in the steps of those critics who have seen in them a well considered argument concerning the existence of God and an attempt to harmonize reason and faith.¹

The trend I am speaking of is what was described in the eighteenth century as “physicotheology.” As is evident from the hybrid term, its primary objective was to reconcile faith and science, or more precisely, to demonstrate God’s existence on the basis of evidence from natural science. The concluding lines of the “Morning Meditation” offer a concise statement of this idea:

И на твою взирая тварь,  
Хвалить тебя, бессмертный царь.

(And when beholding all Your works, / To give you praise, immortal King.)⁵

See also the following studies that were unfortunately not accessible to me at the time of writing this article: Walter Schamschula, “Zu den Quellen von Lomonosovs ‘kosmologischer’ Lyrik,” Zeitschrift für Slavische Philologie, 34: 2 (1969): 225–53; Zhiva Benchich, “Barokko i klassitsizm v Razmyslentiaakh o bozhii velichestve Lomonosova,” Russika Romana, 3 (1996): 27–50; as well as Kirill Ospovat, “Nekotorye konteksty ‘Utrennego…’ i ‘Vechernego razmyslenija o bozhii velichestve’” in Study Group on Eighteenth-Century Russia Newsletter, 32 (2004), 39–56, which appeared during the time the original Russian version of this article was at press. Schamschula and Ospovat suggest some sources for Lomonosov’s poems, while Benchich focuses on stylistic issues.

¹ For example, I. Z. Serman, who writes that “Disturbed by the orthodox clergy’s attacks on science, Lomonosov felt that it was necessary to come forth in its defense. But science had to be shown not as inimical to God or religion but as a way to genuine knowledge of God through the best understanding of His created world. Lomonosov devoted two of his most inspired poetic works [the “meditations”] to such an explanation of the place of science in the cognition of God.” (I. Z. Serman, Mikhail Lomonosov: Life and Poetry [Jerusalem: Centre of Slavic and Russian Studies, The University of Jerusalem, 1988], 120). Serman writes: “During all his conscious life, Lomonosov conducted a philosophical straggle on two fronts: both against those who censured science for its effort to comprehend everything in the world, and against those who tried to create a world system without the participation of God in it” (115). See also Lutsevich, Psaltyr’, chap. 5.

⁵ The translations of the “Meditations” are from Harold B. Segel, ed. and trans., The Literature of Eighteenth-Century Russia: An Anthology, vol. 1 (New York: Dutton, 1967), 202–208.
As Thomas Saine has written, “In the first half of the eighteenth century, a flood of physicotheological works, by scientists, divines, and laypeople alike, contrived to see God’s hand and his design for the universe in every creature, every rock, and every blade of grass,” that is, they set out to prove God’s existence by examining the visible world. In Lomonosov’s day there was still no clear division between the natural sciences and “natural” theology, and this was clearly evident in physicotheological works, whose discourse combined secular and religious, classical and Biblical, patristic and contemporary, Orthodox Russian and non-Orthodox Western material. Physicotheological works of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were written in a wide variety of genres, in prose and verse (as well as in combination) and often contained a mixture of generic elements. This was a pan-European, multi-lingual phenomenon, and there was an active exchange of ideas and texts in English, German, French and other languages, including Russian. In eighteenth-century Russia physicotheological ideas were generally accepted by all educated people. They may be found in many scientific and philosophical treatises, in poetry (both religious and secular, especially in so-called nature-philosophical verse) as well as in textbooks, sermons, and theological works. It is thus appropriate to speak

6 Thomas P. Saine, The Problem of Being Modern, or The German Pursuit of Enlightenment from Leibniz to the French Revolution (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 20.

7 One of the most extensive expositions of physicotheological ideas in Russia was V. K. Trediakovskii’s unpublished poem “Feoptiia ili dokazatel’stvo o bogozrenii po veshcham sozdannogo veshchestva” (1750–1754, published by I. Z. Serman only in 1963 in Izbannye proizvedeniia. Biblioteka poeta. Bol’shaia seriia, 2nd ed. [Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1963]). In the foreword (not included in the 1963 publication), Trediakovskii offers a long list of physicotheological works, and also includes opponents of this tradition, making up in all “almost the entire circle of philosophy” (V. K. Trediakovskii, Psalter 1753, ed. Alexander Levitsky. Russische Psalmenübertragungen; Biblia Slavica, Ser. 3 [Ostslavische Bibeln], Bd. 4 [Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1989], 464). “Feoptiia” is an unusual theodicy in verse inspired by Leibniz and Alexander Pope, based on François Fénelon’s Traité de l’existence et des attributs de Dieu (1712, 1718). See Wilhelm Breitschuh, Die Feoptija V. K. Trediakovskij: Ein Physicotheologisches Lehrgedicht im Russland des 18. Jahrhunderts. Slavistische Beiträge, Bd. 134 (Munich: Sagner, 1979). Fénelon’s treatise was one of the most popular physicotheological works in France and was well known in Russia; Kantemir wrote an adaption of this work entitled “Letter on Nature and Man” (1743; published in 1868). Other physicotheological works that appeared in Russia include: “Razmyslenie o velicheste bozhiem, po koliku onoe prilezhnym razsmotreniem i ispytaniem estestva
of physicotheological discourse, that is, a particular set of ideas, images and topoi that combine to form a recognizable unity.

Lomonosov’s “Meditations” are a prime example of this discourse. As the starting point for our analysis we will consider their titles.8 This attention might seem exaggerated were it not for the fact that they offer a precise encapsulation of the central themes and topoi of the physicotheological trend. The general formula of the “Meditations” titles — “meditation on the majesty of God on the occasion of some natural phenomenon” — is very widespread in physicotheological literature. For convenience we may split this up into the following five parts: 1–2) genre and variant of genre (e.g., morning or evening meditation); 3) subject (God); 4) quality

8 V. L. Chekanal, who wrote the commentary on these poems for the main Soviet academic edition of Lomonosov, asserts that “There is no doubt that the words ‘on God’s Majesty’ were included in the official title of both odes primarily out of concern for the censor: the materialistic view of the universe and in particular, about heavenly bodies, provoked significant opposition on the part of church authorities” (M. V. Lomonosov, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, 11 vols. [M.-L.: Akademii nauk SSSR, 1950–83], VIII: 910). On the formulaic nature of physico-theological titles, which he connects with the poetry of Barthold Heinrich Brockes, see Schamschula, “Zu den Quellen,” esp. 242.
(or qualities) of God (e.g., majesty); and 5) the immediate occasion for the work (e.g., the northern lights).9

Before we turn to a closer analysis of these elements, we need to say a few words about the physicotheological tradition and its sources. As noted, physicotheological works made use of materials from various genres and epochs. We may divide this roughly into three main groups—classical works, religious writings, and contemporary Enlightenment material, both by secular and religious authors. In his Rhetoric and the “Additions” to the “Appearance of Venus on the Sun” (1761) Lomonosov supplies rich material concerning the broad intellectual and specific textological sources of the “Meditations.”10 The classical sources here include Cicero, whose treatise The Nature of the Gods had a powerful influence on Christian theology and Enlightenment thought11; and Claudian’s long poem “Against Rufinus (In Rufinum),” a fragment of which served as the immediate model for the “Meditations.”12 Of Christian sources, Lomonosov cites

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9 In the “Morning Meditation” this last element is absent, although it is quite clear that this is a meditation on the nature of the sun.

Here are three examples of popular physicotheological works that were published and translated many times and that appeared before Lomonosov’s poems. The titles all contain comparable elements. 1) John Ray (1627–1705), The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation: In Two Parts: viz. The Heavenly Bodies, Elements, Meteors, Fossils, Vegetables, Animals, (Beasts, Birds, Fishes, and Insects) More Particularly in the Body of the Earth, its Figure, Motion, and Consistency, and in the Admirable Structure of the Bodies of Man, and other Animals, as also in their Generation… (1691) (London, 1692). 2) Bernard Nieuwentyt (1654–1718) Het regt gebruik der werelt eschouwingen: ter overtuiginge van ongodisten en ongelovigen aangetoont… [Translated into English as: The Correct Use of Meditation for Understanding the Omnipotence, Wisdom and Goodness of the Creator in the Marvelous Structure of Animals’ Bodies… in the Formation of the Elements… [and] in the Structure of the Heavens] (Amsterdam, 1715). 3) Friedrich Christian Lesser (1692–1754), Insecto-theologia, oder: Vernunft- und schriftmäßiger Versuch, wie ein Mensch durch aufmerksame Betrachtung derer sonst wenig geachteten Insecten zu lebendiger Erkänntniss und Bewunderung der Allmacht, Weissheit, der Güte und Gerechtigkeit des grossen Gottes gelangen könne (Frankfurt, Leipzig, 1738). [Translated into English as: Insecto-theology, or a Demonstration of the Being and Perfections of God, from a Consideration of the Structure and Economy of Insects].

10 These are discussed, for example, in Lutsevich, Psaltyr’; Iu. V. Stennik, “M. Lomonosov. ‘Vechernee razmyshlenie o Bozhiem Velichestve pri sluchae velikogo severnogo siianiia,’” in Poeticheskii stroi russkoi liriki (L., 1973), 9–20; and in my article “The ‘Obviousness’ of the Truth in Eighteenth-Century Russian Thought,” included in this collection.

11 See Levitt, “The ‘Obviousness’ of the Truth,” 297–300.

12 The passage is from Book I section 3; Lomonosov, Polnoe sobranie, IV: 376.
John of Damascus’ *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* and Basil the Great’s sermons, works on whose basis he defended himself against his clerical enemies. The argument that although God is ultimately inconceivable he may be apprehended through the physical world and the senses could be found in the Bible and patristic literature and served as an axiom of the physicotheological trend.

Turning to the first two elements of the title, “Evening” (or “Morning”) and “Meditation,” the label “meditation” is of primary importance for these poems as it defines their genre and type of philosophical reflection. “Meditation” may refer to both secular philosophical as well as theological thematics. As a philosophical genre, “meditation” suggests the consideration of an already accepted truth, as opposed to, for example, a “treatise” or “proof” whose goal is to logically demonstrate the veracity of a given idea or system. As Iakov Kozel’skii wrote in his *Philosophical Propositions* of 1768, “If we closely examine the parts of some truth, this examination is called meditation (reflexio).” Meditation is a necessary stage in the process of understanding the truth, somewhere between sensual perception and cognition as such. (We may note in passing that in this sense meditation is directly connected with asserting the reliability of vision.)

In the theological context, the function of “meditation” is the same, from the point of view of logic. But as a genre, “meditation” may serve as a synonym for “beseda” (literally, conversation), which in turn may describe a sermon or type of prayer. Lomonosov himself uses the term “meditations” to refer to Basil the Great’s *Sermons* (Besedy) and to John of Damascus’ *Exposition*, asserting for example that “in their books these great luminaries strove to unite (sodruzhit’) the understanding of nature with faith, combining this effort with divinely inspired meditations, according to the degree that astronomy was known in their day.”

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13 See Lutsevich, *Psaltry*, 251–254.
14 Ia. P. Kozel’skii, *Filosofitcheskiiia predlozheniia* (St. Petersburg: [Senate], 1786), 64.
15 On “meditation” as a type of Orthodox prayer, see for example Prep. Isaak Sirin, *Beseda* 10 (“O chine razmyshleniia [Sirian, “herga”] i o razlichnykh vidakh ego.”), *O Bozhestvennykh tainakh i o dukhovnoi zhizni: Novootkrytye teksty*, trans. Ieromonakh Ilarion (Alfeev) (Moscow, 1998).
16 Lomonosov, *Polnoe sobranie*, IV: 374. In the Russian translation, Basil the Great himself often uses words for “meditation” (razmyshlenie, razmyshliat’) to describe his “besedy.” See *Besedy sviatogo ottsa nashego Vasiliiia Velikogo, arhiepiskopa Kesarii i Kappadokiiskia, na shestodnei, sirech’ na shest’ dni tvoreniia, opisannykh sv. Prorokom Moiseem* (Moscow: Universitetskaia tipografia u N. Novikova, 1782).
Why “Evening” and “Morning” meditations? This leads directly to the first of the truths on which the poet meditates, that is, the possibility of proving God’s existence by the inductive method, based on the evidence of the marvelous organization of the natural world. This is the so-called “argument from design” — “know the Creator by the Creation.” In his Rhetoric Lomonosov presents this in the form of a syllogism, a condensed paraphrase of Cicero’s The Nature of the Gods:

If something consists of parts, of which each one depends on another for its existence, [that means that] it was put together by a rational being. The visible world consists of such parts, of which each one depends on another for its existence. It follows that the visible world was created by a rational being.  

But why specifically “Evening” and “Morning” meditations? The issue is that the ontological problem (the problem of the character of being) is connected to the cosmological (how the world came into existence). The alternation of night and day is not only a microcosm of the natural order, the changeless laws of nature, but also of the process of the world’s formation (“creation” in both senses). It is no accident that the main Christian works on natural science (cosmologies) took the form of the “Hexaemeron” (in Slavonic “Shestodnev”) — commentaries to the first chapter of Genesis, that is, the six days of creation, in the form of sermons or “conversations.” Ontology (the essence of the world) becomes known through considering cosmology (the process of creation). Indeed many physicotheological works functioned as cosmologies for the modern era, and many of them specifically centered on the Earth’s creation. As in Basil the Great’s Hexaemeron, in which each “conversation” relates to one day of creation, many physicotheological works employ a similar structural device, alternating days and nights (or evenings).

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17 Lomonosov, Polnoe sobranie, VII: 319.
18 On this tradition, see the commentaries to: Shestodnev Ioanna ekzarkha Bolgarskogo, ed. G. S. Barankov and V. V. Mil’kov. Pamiatniki drevnerusskoi mysli, vyp. 2. (St. Petersburg: Aleteia, 2001). See also Drevnerusskaia kosmografiia, ed. G. S. Baran-kov. Pamiatniki drevnerusskoi mysli (St. Petersburg: Aleteia, 2004), esp. 158–170.
19 See, for example, Trediakovskii’s Feoptiia and Apollos’s Evgeont (see note 5). Edward Young’s famous physicotheological poem The Complaint: or, Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality (1742–1745), which was very popular in Russia, also uses this structural device. This work was “translated” into Russian several times both in prose and in peculiar paraphrases. See P. R. Zaborov, “‘Nochnye razmyslieniiia’ lunga v rannikh russkikh perevodakh,” XVIII vek, 6: Russkaia literatura XVIII veka: Epokha
The movement from night to day or darkness to light is not only a microcosm of Creation but also a metaphor for the spiritual process leading a person from meditation to revelation. This process is at the heart of physicotheological works, where, as in Lomonosov’s “Meditations,” the central action is a change in vision. The archetypal moment of this change of vision occurs when a person raises his eyes to the heavens, sees the glittering stars and planets, and goes into ecstasy over the miraculous structure of the universe. The paradigm or prototype of this moment most likely comes from the passage in *The Nature of the Gods* in which Cicero cites Aristotle’s lost treatise *On Philosophy* (the passage that Cicero quotes is the only part that remains). Cicero writes that the Epicureans “talk such nonsense about the universe that it seems to me that they have never gazed upwards at the remarkable embellishment of the heavens lying before their very eyes.” He continues, quoting Aristotle:

Imagine that there were people who had always dwelt below the earth in decent and well-lit accommodation embellished with statues and pictures, and endowed with all the possessions which those reputed to be wealthy have in abundance. These people had never set foot on the earth, but through rumor and hearsay they had heard of the existence of some divine power wielded by gods. A moment came when the jaws of the earth parted, and they were able to emerge from their hidden abodes, and to set foot in this world of ours. They were confronted by the sudden sight of earth, seas, and sky; they beheld towering clouds, and felt the force of winds; they gazed on the sun, and became aware of its power and beauty, and its ability to create daylight by shedding its beams over the whole sky. Then, when night overshadowed the earth, they saw the entire sky dotted and adorned with stars, and the phases of the moon’s light as it waxed and waned; they beheld the risings and settings of all those heavenly bodies, and their prescribed, unchangeable courses through all eternity. When they observed all this, they would certainly believe that gods existed, and that these great manifestations were the works of gods.20

This moment seems analogous to the liberation of the philosopher in Plato’s parable of the cave from the *Republic*, although the liberation here is not from

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20 Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, trans. P. G. Walsh (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 81 (Book 2, sec. 94–95).
the physical world into the spiritual realm but occurs within the confines of material reality. It is a process of revelation, a coming to understanding, the acquisition of new, correct vision.\textsuperscript{21}

It is precisely here, in the problem of (re)cognition, that one of the central theological issues arises. Meditations on God's existence and on the rational structure of the universe (i.e., ontology) yields to gnoseology and epistemology. What we see is defined by how "our perishable eye" functions. On the one hand, the epistemological problem is connected to discussion of various natural-scientific theories (in the "Meditations" — about the nature of the northern lights and the character of the sun's surface).\textsuperscript{22} On the other, physicotheological works, including the "Meditations," come up against the fact that God is fundamentally unknowable, unproveable, unseeable — beyond the limits of human comprehension. This, one might say, is the basic problem or paradox of monotheism, with which Orthodox theologians have always struggled, from Dionysius the Areopagite to the Hesychasts to the modern followers of Imiaslavie. Physicotheological works resolve the problem in a traditional way, arguing that God may be known if not directly then through His divine manifestations, His signs, qualities, energies, etc. (precisely how, to what degree, and how the process is to be conceived, are all subject to serious debate).

The titles "Evening Meditation on God's Majesty on the Occasion of the Great Northern Lights" and "Morning Meditation on God's Majesty" themselves imply that one may come to knowledge of God through His secondary features in the physical world, first of all, through his majesty or greatness (velichestvo). Lomonosov himself writes about this both in his paraphrase of Cicero's \textit{The Nature of the Gods} in the \textit{Rhetoric} and in the "Additions" to "The Appearance of Venus." Here is the relevant passage from the latter:

\begin{quote}
The Creator gave the human race two books. In one He showed His greatness, in the other His will. The first is the visible world, which He created so that a person, looking upon the immensity, beauty and harmonious construction of the edifice, would recognize divine omnipotence, to the extent of the understanding given him. The second book is Holy Writ. In it is shown the
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\textsuperscript{21} See Levitt, "The 'Obviousness' of the Truth," 299.
\textsuperscript{22} As Lomonosov noted in his "Iz'iasneniia" to the "Slovo o iavlenniakh, ot elektricheskoi sily proiskhodiahshchikh," "My ode on the northern lights... expresses my long-held opinion that the northern lights might be produced from the movement of ether (efir)." Lomonosov, \textit{Polnoe sobranie}, III: 123.
Creator’s concern for our salvation. Of these divinely-inspired prophetic and apostolic books the interpreters and elucidators are the great teachers of the church.  

Lomonosov also expressed this idea in his paraphrase of Basil the Great’s *Hexaemeron* in words which could serve as a physicotheological slogan and short formulation of the idea of the “Meditations” themselves:

While the indescribable wisdom of God’s deeds is clear (iavstvuet) if only from meditations on the whole of creation (o vsekh tvariakh), to which the study of the physical [world] leads, astronomy more than anything else gives a sense of His majesty and power (velichestva i mogushchestva) . . .

Majesty is the most outstanding feature of physical reality, combining as it does both power and wisdom. According to physicotheologists, these three traits, together with a fourth — goodness — are the principle attributes of God-the-Creator, and therefore appear in the titles of their works in various combinations (see note 7). Majesty is the mark of God in His role as Creator, cosmic Architect and Artist.

To what extent God’s signs are obvious in the material world is a question resolved differently by various physicotheological writers. For many, this is not a problem, because the truth is very simply obvious. However, often the degree of obviousness depends on the nature of the one who looks. In Lomonosov’s formulation, a person recognizes “divine omnipotence to the degree of understanding given him” (po mere sebe darovannogo poniatia). For Orthodox theologians, this capacity depends on the moral purity of one’s soul; for others, and more secular-minded Enlightenment physicotheologists, it depends rather on one’s amount of education (reason). Where for the former the ability to see truly characterizes the saint, for the latter this privilege is given to the geniuses of natural science.

23 Lomonosov, *Polnoe sobranie*, IV: 375. Cf. the image of the “book of the world” (the “kniga vechnykh prav,” i.e., nature) in the “Evening Meditation.”
24 Lomonosov, *Polnoe sobranie*, IV: 372.
25 See this idea in the “Razmyshlenie o velichestve bozhiem, po koliku onoe prilezhnym razmotreniem i ispytaniem estestva otkryvaetsia,” Ezhemesiachnye sochineniia k pol’ze i uveseleniu sluashchie, November, 1756, 409.
26 Levitt, “The ‘Obviousness’ of the Truth.”
27 This latter opinion was held by the author of the anonymous German translation “Razmyshlenie o velichestve bozhiem” cited above in notes 7 and 25. It is possible that this was the reason the publication was criticized by church authorities. See *Polnoe
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One of the basic features of Lomonosov’s “Meditations” is the depth and seriousness of the epistemological problem they pose concerning the limitations of our “mortal sensations” (brennykh chuvstv). In the “Evening Meditation” this is expressed by the dialogical form of the poem and in the rhetorical power of the repeated questions:

Но где ж, натура, твой закон? …
Не солнце ли ставит там свой трон? …
Скажите, что нас так мятет? …
Что зыбет ясный ночью луч?
Что тонкий пламень в твердь разит?
Как молния без грозных туч
Стремится от земли в зенит?
Как может быть, чтоб мерзлый пар
Среди зимы рождал пожар?

(But where, O Nature, is your law? … / Does not the sun set there its throne? … / What is it so disturbs us, tell? … / At night what vibrates lucid rays? / What subtle flame cuts firmament? / And without stormy thunderclouds / Wherefrom does lightning rush to earth? / How can it be that frozen steam / In midst of winter brings forth fire?)

The poem ends with four more questions, as the poet’s doubts seem to remain:

Сомнений полон ваш ответ
О том, что окрест ближних мест.
Скажите ж, коль пространен свет?
И что малейших дале звезд?
Несведен тварей вам конец?
Скажите ж, коль велик творец?

(Your answer is replete with doubts / About the places nearest man. / Pray tell us, how vast is the world [or: light]? / What lies beyond the smallest stars? / Is creatures’ end unknown to you? / Pray tell how great is God Himself?)

To some extent, the last question is also an answer, insofar as it is rhetorical, and insofar as defining the majesty of God is equal to defining His nature

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sobranie postanovlenii i rasporeiazhenii po vedomstvu Pravoslavnogo ispovedaniia Rossiiskoi imperii (St. Petersburg, 1912), vol. 4, № 1532, 20 Dec. 1756, 272–273. However, this work’s markedly rationalist perspective was not typical of most physicotheological works that appeared in Russia.

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in general. Here is the focus of the meditation as “the consideration of an already accepted truth”; God exists, but how can one determine how great He is, and what are the limits to our understanding?

As critics have recognized, the tone of the “Morning Meditation” is far more affirmative that the “Evening” and we may consider the second meditation as offering a direct answer to the questions of the first

Чудясь ясным толь лучам,  
Представь, каков зиждитель сам!…  
Велик зиждитель наш господь!

(And marveling at such radiant beams / Just think how God Himself must be!… / Our Lord creator is great!)

But the truth is not so obvious even in the “Morning Meditation.” The picture of the sun’s surface that makes up the scientific center of the poem’s interest, describing Lomonosov’s theory in verse (just as in the “Evening Meditation” his theory of the northern lights is proposed), is nevertheless presented not simply as a spontaneous act of sensation but also as an act of imagination:

Когда бы смертным толь высоко  
Возможно было возлететь,  
Чтоб к солнцу бренно наше око  
Могло, приближившись, воззреть,… (Italics added — M. L.)

(If mortals only had the power / So high above the earth to fly, / So that our perishable eye / Could see the sun, once close to it…)

As Plato and Aristotle and later theologians and philosophers asserted, the act of sight, for all its seeming immediacy (the obviousness of what is seen)

28 From the time of their publication in Lomonosov’s Sochineniia of 1751, the “Meditations” were published together and under the rubric of “spiritual odes.” In eighteenth-century publications the “Morning Meditation” preceded the “Evening,” but in many later editions the order was reversed. On the basis of metrical analysis, V. M. Zhir-munsikki concluded that the “Evening Meditation” was written first (“Ody Lomonosova ‘Vechernee’ i ‘Utrennee razmyshlenie o Bozhiem velichestve’: K voprosu o datirovke,” XVIII vek, 10: Russkaia literatura vosemnadtsatogo veka i ee mezhdunarodnye sviazi [Leningrad: Nauka, 1975], 27–30).

29 See note 22. A. A. Morozov suggests that the notion of “frozen steam” refers to the theory of Christian Wolff. See M. V. Lomonosov, Izbrannye proizvedeniiia. Biblioteka poeta. Bol’shaia seriiia. 3rd ed. (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1986), 510.
nevertheless requires processing, involving memory, thought (meditation), and imagination. Of course the nature of human understanding was also a central issue in Enlightenment thought and also posed the question of the complex interaction of the physical and spiritual.\(^{30}\)

The solution of the epistemological problem comes in the final stanzas of the “Morning Meditation” which may be taken as the denouement to both poems taken together.\(^{31}\) First the difference between inner and outer vision is noted and the weakness of sensual sight before God’s divine insight:

\[
\text{Светило дневное блистает} \\
\text{Лишь только на поверхность тел;} \\
\text{Но взор твой в бездну проницает,} \\
\text{Не зная никаких предел.}
\]

(The light of day casts forth its brightness / But lightens only surfaces. / Your gaze instead much deeper reaches / Not knowing any boundaries.)

Here the secondary role of the sun as simply a pretext for meditation seems particularly clear. The poet’s potential crisis of vision is resolved in the final stanza which brings the poem closest to a prayer:

\[
\text{Творец! покрытому мне тьмою} \\
\text{Простри премудрости лучи…}
\]

(To me, Creator, steeped in darkness / Extend the rays of [Your] wisdom!)

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\(^{30}\) See for example our discussion of this issue in “Was Sumarokov a Lockean Sensualist? On Locke’s Reception in Eighteenth-Century Russia,” chap. 8 in this volume.

\(^{31}\) In this regard it seems significant that in the Rhetoric, right after the section that includes the “Evening Meditation” (presented as an example of logical expansion [rasprostranenie], § 270), there follows the “conditional syllogism” in which the arguments proving God’s existence from The Nature of the Gods are presented. It is clear to all readers of these poems, starting with the titles, that they are closely connected, and one may suggest that they make up a cycle. L. V. Pumpianskii asserted that together with the “Oda, vybrannaia iz Iova, glavy 38, 39, 40 i 41” and several stanzas from the “Oda na pribytie…Elizavety Petrovny iz Moskvy v Sanktpeterburg 1742 goda…” they form a certain unity (Pumpianskii, 108). Notably, the “Job” theme often came up in physicotheological literature that includes many “paraphrases of particular chapters of Job” both in verse and prose. Its connection to the “Meditations” is subject for further investigation. As in Lomonosov’s paraphrase, the central problem is the justification of divine justice. In physicotheological writing this issue was linked to Leibniz’ book that coined the term “theodicy” (Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l’homme, et l’origine du mal, 1710).
“The rays of wisdom” is the culminating image of the entire poem (or cycle), combining metaphorical, spiritual light and real, physical light.\(^{32}\) For Descartes and the Enlighteners, as for traditional theologians, reason is helpless and vision defective without divine sanction; for Descartes the “light of nature” comes from God, the final guarantor and embodiment of truth.

As Lomonosov himself explained in the passage cited earlier, the proofs of the “majesty and power . . . of God’s works” are everywhere visible in the physical world. But astronomy “more than anything” can supply these proofs, because it demonstrates “the order of heavenly luminaries’ movements. We imagine the creator the more distinctly the more precisely our observations accord with our predictions; and the more we achieve new discoveries, the louder we glorify Him.”\(^{33}\) The structure of the heavens was the most obvious example of the divine order for Aristotle, and as is well known became a highly contentious issue for Enlightenment thinkers. The physicotheological movement was precisely an attempt to reconcile the latest achievements of natural science with Holy Writ, and the ancient dispute with the Epicureans over whether or not the universe was purposeful or accidental that had long ago seemed to have been resolved in favor of Aristotle now once again became relevant. The debate over “the plurality of worlds” that commentators have seen raised in the “Evening Meditation” (“Tam raznykh mnozhestvo svetov; / Neschetny solntsa tam goriat” [There are a great number of various worlds; Countless suns there glitter]) and that they attribute to the disagreements over Fontenelle’s *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* of 1686 might with equal justification be related to the dispute of Cicero and the church fathers against the Epicurean position.\(^{34}\)

The final segment of the title identifies the immediate pretext for the meditation. We have already noted the significance of the theme of “day and night” on the cosmological and metaphorical level and described the ancient argument, repeated by Lomonosov and the physicotheologists, that observations of the heavens provide the most “distinct” and obvious notion (or proof) of God’s existence. Thus focusing on the northern lights and the sun not only reflected the poet’s particular scientific interests but

\(^{32}\) The following final lines of the poem also emphasize the parallel between divine and human. Man is characterized in terms of creation, and is himself a creator, i.e., a microcosm or image of God (cf. “Vsegda tvoriti nauchii,” “Tvoreti!,” “tvoiu tvar”).

\(^{33}\) Lomonosov, *Polnoe sobranie*, IV: 372.

\(^{34}\) On the parallel with Basil the Great, see Lutsevich, *Psalter’,* 252–53; on the connection to Fontenelle, see Stennik, “M. Lomonosov,” 16–18. See also the discussion of this parallel in Saine, *The Problem of Being Modern*, chap. 1.
represented a typical subject for physicotheological consideration. Indeed the “astronomical” theme was a popular inspiration for physicotheological works (e.g., William Derham's *Astro-Theology: or a Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God: From a Survey of the Heavens...* [second edition, London, 1715]) and there were also various physicotheological works concerning meteorological phenomena, including “bronto-theology” (the theology of thunder and lightning) and “helio-theologia” (about the sun), into which category we may perhaps include the “Morning Meditation.”

Thus the titles of Lomonosov’s poems offer a microcosm of the physicotheological position and clearly indicate their discursive background. Defining this background seems crucial for understanding these works of art, although of course it does not “explain” them. Rather, it presents the basis on which their intellectual and artistic specifics may be better understood.

35 Other quasi-scientific physicotheological treatises included studies of “Testaceo-theologia” (the theology of snails and mollusks); “Hydro-theologia” (the theology of water); “Insecto-theologia” (the theology of insects); “Litho-theologia” (geological theology); “Phyto-theologia” (botanical theology); and so on.