Among Sumarokov’s twenty-six works for the stage his single drama, “The Hermit” (Pustynnik, 1759), occupies a somewhat enigmatic place, raising questions about both the author’s conception of the genre and the play’s status as a work of Russian Classicism. As is well known, the notion of genre played a leading role in Classicist poetics, and with Sumarokov in particular. While he often used the word “drama” (Russian, drama) in the general sense (as synonym for “play” or “dramatic work” and in such phrases as “drama and music”), nowhere in his works is there a definition of drama as a special genre. In the “Epistle on Poetry,” following Boileau, he includes under “drama” comedy and tragedy — the only theatrical genres recognized by Classicism. Furthermore, none of the scholars who have considered Sumarokov’s dramaturgy (G. A. Gukovskii, P. N. Berkov, V. N. Vsevolodskii-Gerngross, H.-B. Harder, I. Z. Serman, G. N. Moiseeva, Iu. V. Stennik) have paid attention to the “drama” for the same reason: it did not belong to the standard genres of Classicism and even to some extent conflicted with them.\(^1\) The French scholar Jean Patouillet, who noted this seeming anomaly in passing, expressed surprise that Sumarokov, a violent “foe of the drama” himself had tried his hand at “a genre which he struggled

\(^1\) G. A. Gukovskii, “O sumarokovskoi tragedii,” Poetika, 1 (Leningrad, 1926), 67–80; P. N. Berkov, Aleksandr Petrovich Sumarokov, 1717–1777. Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1949.; V. N. Vsevolodskii-Gerngross, Russkii teatr ot istokov do serediny XVIII veka (Moscow: Akademiia nauk, 1957); Hans Bernd Harder, Studien zur Geschichte der russischen klassizistischen Tragödie, 1747–1769 (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1962); G. N. Moiseeva, Dreverusskaia literatura v khudozhestvennom soznaniem i istoricheskoi mysli Rossii v XVIII veke (Leningrad: Nauka, 1980); Iu. V. Stennik, Zhanr tragedii v russkoi literature: epokha klassitsizma (Leningrad: Nauka, 1981).
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against.”

A solution to the riddle of “The Hermit”’s genre and its unexpected defense of its hero’s ascetic withdrawal from life require a new consideration of Sumarokovian Classicism.

“The Hermit” does not correspond to usual notions of Sumarokov’s dramaturgy either in its form or content. How did it come to be written?

By the middle of the eighteenth century when Sumarokov founded the new national theater, Classicist theater in the West was already experiencing a period of crisis and decadence. In England as a result of Puritan attacks on the theater a new “bourgeois drama” arose; its early prototype, George Lillo’s “The London Merchant, or the History of George Barnwell” (1743), achieved popularity across Europe. In France a new mixed dramatic genre appeared, called at times “serious” or “tearful” tragedy, and at times “tearful comedy” or simply “drama” (le drame). Forerunners and founders of this trend are considered Nivelle de La Chaussée, Philippe Néricault Destouches and Denis Diderot. As early as 1741 the French critic and translator Pierre Defontaine suggested the term “drama” for this new phenomenon but it took a long time to catch on and did not figure in the repertoire of plays at the Comédie Française until 1769. By this time there was a large theoretical literature on the subject, in particular well-known treatises by Diderot and Beaumarchais. One hundred years after Defontaine’s suggestion Belinskii defined “drama” as “a special type of dramatic poetry that occupies a middle place between tragedy and comedy.” This definition basically coincided with that of eighteenth-century French critics, but for those raised on the classical hierarchy of genres the new phenomenon was far more problematic than for Romantic critics. The terminological lack of clarity continued for a long time. It was hard to decide whether the new plays were closer to comedy or tragedy (there was no other choice) and furthermore they were disparate in form (some in prose and some in verse) and in content (there were “bourgeois,” “domestic,” and “serious” dramas). In the register of plays

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2 Jean Patouillet, “Une episode de l’histoire de la Russie: La Lettre de Voltaire à Sumarokov (26 Février 1769),” *Revue de littérature comparée*, 7 (1927), 448–49.

3 On the French definition, see: Eleanor F. Jourdain, *Dramatic Theory and Practice in France 1690–1808* (New York: B. Blom, 1968); Félix A. Gaiffe, *Le drame en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: A Colin, 1971); Barrett H. Clark, *European Theories of the Drama…An Anthology of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1965).

4 Gaiffe, *Le drame*, 93, 167; Patouillet, “Une episode,” 444–48.

5 V. G. Belinskii, “Razdelenie poezii na rody i vidy” (1841), *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 5 (Moscow: Akademiia nauk, 1954), 62.
of the early Russian theater published by V. I. Rezanov that P. N. Berkov dated to the first half of the 1760’s “The Hermit” is listed with Sumarokov’s “small” (i.e. one-act) comedies. Kheraskov’s first theatrical attempt “The Venetian Nun” (Venetsianskaia monakhina) of 1758 may be considered the first Russian “bourgeois” or “tearful” drama, although the author himself labeled it a tragedy. In contrast to “The Hermit,” in this play (which was never staged) monastic vows frustrate the union of the lover — protagonists, which was a fairly common theatrical plot complication. By the mid 1760’s many of the new dramas were translated into Russian and in 1770, the year in which Beaumarchais’ “tearful drama” Eugénie which Sumarokov attacked was staged in Russia, the anonymous one-act drama (dramma) “Good Deeds Win Hearts” (Blagodeianiia priobretaiut serdtsa), possibly a translation from French, also appeared. In the mid 1770’s Kheraskov wrote two plays subtitled “tearful dramas.” As Berkov has demonstrated, the new trend developed mostly as a rejection of Sumarokov’s comedic practice. In France these domestic and bourgeois dramas posed provocative social issues and served a new, middle class audience, but in Russia the question of the new form was connected to the creation of a national repertory and the challenge of adapting plays “to Russian mores” (sklonenie na russkie nravy). However, this debate only arose after the creation and staging of “The Hermit.”

In regard to its content, there is no clear connection between “The Hermit” and contemporary French dramaturgy. True, there did exist the tradition of “Christian tragedy” (Corneille’s “Polyeucte” of 1640, Racine’s “Esther” and “Athalie” and of 1689 and 1691, plays that were well known to Sumarokov), but their plots, concerning the martyrdom of early Christian

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6 V. I. Rezanov, “Parizhskie rukopisyne teksty A. P. Sumarokova,” Izvestiia Otdeleniia russkogo iazyka i slovesnosti, 2 (St. Petersburg, 1907), 135–69; P. N. Berkov, Istoriia russkoi komedii XVIII veka (Leningrad: Nauka, 1977), 50–2. Apparently in terms of the repertoire, “The Hermit” filled the same role as one-act comedies that were presented along with tragedies, and meant to provide relief to audiences after the presentation of the longer, more serious works.

7 Michael Green, “Italian Scandal as Russian Tragedy: Kheraskov’s Venetsiansnaia Monakhina,” Russia and the World of the Eighteenth Century: Proceedings of the Third International Conference, ed. Roger P. Bartlett, Anthony Glenn Cross, and Karen Rasmussen (Columbus, Ohio: Slavica Publishers, 1988), 388–99.

8 See Svodnyi catalog russkoi knigi grazhdanskoi pechati XVIII veka: 1725–1800, vol. 1 (Moscow: Gos. biblioteki SSSR imeni V. I. Lenina, 1962), 106 (no. 591). Of course, many translations remained in manuscript; see Berkov, Istoriia, 84–5.

9 P. N. Berkov, “Iz istorii russkoi teatral’noi terminologii XVII–XVIII vekov,” Trudy Otdeleniia drevnerusskoi literatury, 11 (Moscow, Leningrad, 1965), 299.
Sumarokov highly valued Voltaire’s Christian tragedy “Alzire” (1736), referring to it as “Voltaire’s crown” in the “Epistle on Poetry.” While critics have disagreed about whether he wrote genuinely Christian tragedies or masked attacks on religion, it is significant that in his article “Opinion About French Tragedies in a Dream” Sumarokov not only defended Voltaire as a Christian writer but insisted that true writers are always religious. Be that as it may, Voltaire was a fundamental foe of monasticism, and his well-known argument with Pascal, begun in the twenty-fifth of the Lettres anglaises known as “Anti-Pascal” (1734), continued throughout his creative life. However, the complex of theological issues that formed the general background for French Classicism on the whole had little direct relevance for Russia.

The most probable source of the new genre for Sumarokov was indigenous “school drama.” Transplanted from Poland and Ukraine in the second half of the seventeenth century by Simeon Polotskii and others, by the time that the new secular theatre was established it was already on the wane. For its debut in St. Petersburg in 1752 Fedor Volkov’s Yaroslavl troupe that was to become the nucleus of Sumarokov’s theater presented both Sumarokov’s first tragedy “Khorev” and Dimitri Rostovskii’s school drama “On a Repentent Sinner” (O kaiushchemsia greshnike). Three other plays by Rostovskii were also labeled “dramas” (“Uspenskaia,” “Rozhdestvenskaia” and “Dmitrievskaia”; all also carried the subtitle “comedy”) as was Isaakii Khmarnoi’s “Drama of Ezikiel, King of Israel” (Drama o Ezekii, tsare Izrail’skom) of 1728. The importance of school drama for the new secular theater has long been suggested, and E. A. Kasatkina strongly asserted its importance for Sumarokov, although direct borrowings are difficult to demonstrate. The closest direct prototype for “The Hermit” is the drama

10 Nevertheless, Iu. V. Stennik suggests that N. Khrushchev’s translation of “Polyeucte” of the late 1750’s that was produced in the court theater had an influence on Sumarokov’s play. See A. P. Sumarokov, Dramaticheskie sochineniia, ed. Iu. V. Stennik (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1990), 29–30, 475.

11 A. P. Sumarokov, Izbrannye proizvedeniia, 2nd ed. P. N. Berkov, ed. Biblioteka poeta, Bol’shaia seriia (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1957), 121; see also: Michael Green, “Kheraskov and the Christian Tragedy,” California Slavic Studies, 9 (1976), 1–25.

12 A. P. Sumarokov, Polnoe sobranie vsekh sochinenii, ed. N. I. Novikov. 2nd ed. Vol. 5 (Moscow, 1787), 351–55 (hereafter PSVS).

13 Mina Waterman, Voltaire, Pascal and Human Destiny (New York: Octagon Books, 1971); M. Sina, L’anti-Pascal di Voltaire. (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1970).

14 E. A. Kasatkina, “Sumarokovskia tragediiia 40-kh i nachala 50-kh godov XVIII veka,” Uchenye zapiski Tomskogo ped. universiteta, 13 (1955), 213–61.
“Aleksei, Man of God” (Aleksei, Bozhii chelovek) whose plot similarity to Sumarokov’s play was suggested by V. N. Vsevolodskii-Gerngross. The Life of Aleksei, Man of God, was one of the most popular and widespread saints lives in Russia, and as V. P. Adrianova-Peretts demonstrated, its story was echoed in many other works, both high church genres (including sermons) and in folk genres (spiritual verse, songs). The play “Aleksei, Man of God” is dated to 1672 or 1673, and is one of the oldest school dramas. In it are combined elements of medieval mystery play and those of newer, Baroque dramaturgy. There are almost forty characters in the play, including angels, allegorical figures, and a variety of “low” types — beggars, peasants, servants. The supernatural plays a major role; angels converse with men, a voice from heaven summons Aleksei, and at the play’s end the spirit of the beatified Aleksei gives a speech. All this is far from Sumarokov’s dramaturgy, of course. The similarity with Sumarokov’s play is in the central subject matter concerning the retreat from worldly goods. This theme, as in “The Hermit,” is developed in a series of discussions and complaints concerning the protagonist’s voluntary ascetic withdrawal. In particular, the laments by Aleksei’s betrothed that she has been “shamed” and “abandoned” by him, and that he has broken his promise to her, generally recall those of Parfeniia in the last act of “The Hermit.”

The key problem for Aleksei is that of marriage. Like Sumarokov’s protagonist Evmenii, he wants “to serve God,” although otherwise there is little similarity. The young Aleksei, single son of a Roman senator, runs away from his wedding and returns home later, incognito, to live the impoverished life of a servant in his father’s house; his family only learns of his identity after his death. Evmenii stubbornly defends his retreat from worldly affairs, while Aleksei of the drama (as opposed to the hero of the saint’s life) constantly wavers under the influence of various characters (angels, the goddess Juno, his parents, etc.). In Sofronova’s words, “Aleksei constantly serves as field of action for higher forces,” as opposed to Evmenii who is the independent arbiter of his own fate. Aleksei is thus kin to such other “pathetic heroes” of seventeenth-century literature as the dobryi

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15 Vsevolodskii-Gerngross, Russkii teatr, 195.
16 V. P. Adrianova-Peretts, Zhitie Alekseia cheloveka Bozhiia v drevnei russkoi literature i narodnoi slovesnosti (Petrograd: Ia. Bashmakov, 1917).
17 “Aleksei, Bozhii chelovek,” Russkie dramaticheskie proizvedeniia 1672–1725 godov, ed. N. S. Tikhonravov. Vol. 2 (St. Petersburg: D. E. Kozhanchikov, 1874), 55–6.
18 L. A. Sofronova, Poetika slavianskogo teatra: XVII — pervuyu polovinu XVIII v.: Pol’sha, Ukraina, Rossiiia (Moscow: Nauka, 1981), 175.
molodets from the “Povest’ o Gore-Zochastii” and Savva from the “Povest’ o Savve Grudtsyne.” Notably, both of these figures end their wanderings in a monastery, although as William Harkins noted, this monastic retreat can hardly be considered a positive resolution. In seventeenth-century literature, the motif of taking refuge in a monastery often had negative connotations (as a place of political imprisonment, escape from something evil, or as a place of worldly rather than spiritual profit). All of this again emphasizes the distance separating “The Hermit” and school drama, but it seems entirely probable that this association was what Sumarokov had in mind in using the generic label “drama.” As P. N. Berkov noted, “the new Russian culture and theater of the eighteenth century did not reject the terminology that had arisen in the seventeenth, but filled it with new content.”

Before considering this new content, we should note “The Hermit”’s unusual form. Many formal aspects of the play suggest that it broadens the poetics of Sumarokovean tragedy. The main difference is that “The Hermit” is in one act. The play’s meter may be considered variable iambic, although more than 86% of the lines (348 of 408) are alexandrines (iambic hexameter) with caesura after the third foot — the standard metrical form for Russian tragedy introduced by Sumarokov. If we add to this the three-foot iambic lines that may be perceived as half-lines or as a continuation of the alexandrine rhythm, the figure rises to almost 95%. The other lines of variable length (one, two, four and five foot lines) taken together comprise less than 5.5% of all lines (.25, 2.7, .75 and 1.4% respectively). This variability of line length is far less than, for example, in Sumarokov’s fables. Sumarokov also uses mostly standard paired rhymes, with a small number of ring and one alternating rhyme. In the entire fourth scene (Evmenii’s monologue) the tragic norm is preserved.

As in seven of Sumarokov’s tragedies, the action takes place in ancient Russia, “in the wilderness near Kiev,” and as in them “the world of objects” is largely absent. The single prop, as in most of the tragedies, is a dagger (kinzhal), which plays the same role in the denouement of the play as in the tragedies. The dagger itself, of course, is the symbol of tragic theater. The number of players is seven, the average number for Sumarokov’s tragedies,
and as in them, the protagonists are close to the throne, although here unlike the tragedies kings and queens play no part. All have traditional ancient Russian names, but even though they are not made up (as may be the case in the tragedies), none has an historical prototype. The high station of the characters that is requisite for tragedy (in sharp contrast to bourgeois and domestic drama) is also crucial in “The Hermit,” in which the elevation, seriousness and purity of the passions depicted are equally important.

“The Hermit” is structured according to the system of Sumarokov’s tragedies as described by G. A. Gukovskii and Iu. V. Stennik, and even to a greater degree than the tragedies themselves. For example, the drama observes the three unities even more strictly than the tragedies insofar as the play consists of one continuous segment of time and action. All of the elements defined as Sumarokov’s system — the striving for clarity, simplicity, unity, and the corresponding economy of dramatic means — here are subject to even greater simplification. As in the tragedies, the drama “is made up in significant measure by disclosing the content of the basic situation as it relates to [each] single pair of heroes separately.” This is even more accurate a description of “The Hermit” than the tragedies, insofar as its basic structure is a series of dialogues between Evmenii, who wants to reject the “vanity of life,” and the other characters who try to talk him out of it. Gukovskii spoke astutely of the “device of repetition-gradation of the very same situation.” The one-act drama that replaces the five-act tragedy has a mirror structure, hinging on the fourth act:

Act 1 — Evmenii’s monologue
Act 2 — Evmenii and Afinogen, Izidor
Act 3 — Evmenii and Visarion
Act 4 — Evmenii’s monologue
Act 5 — Evmenii and Visarion
Act 6 — Evmenii and Dometiian, Minodora
Act 7 — Everyone plus Parfeniia; Evmenii’s concluding monologue.

This scheme easily divides into a classical five-part structure and may be considered a microcosm of Sumarokov’s tragic structure.

23 Gukovskii, “O sumarokovskoi tragedii,” 70; Stennik, Zhann tragedii and “O khudozhestvennoi structure tragedii A. P. Sumarokova,” XVIII vek, 5 (Moscow, Leningrad, 1962), 273–94.
24 Gukovskii, “O sumarokovskoi tragedii,” 69.
25 Gukovskii, “O sumarokovskoi tragedii,” 75.
All of these features that link Sumarokov’s drama with his tragedies suggest that he understood “drama” as a broadening (or narrowing) of tragic practice. It is clear that the notion of drama as a mixed genre — what he later sharply denounced — was not part of his conception.

To turn to the plot of the play, the question of “withdrawing from life” is posed at the very start of the play in Evmenii’s first monologue. He reasons:

Забавы здешние утоплены в слезах,
И светлостию тьма мечтуется в глазах:
Век краток здесь, а смерть ужасна;
Прелестна жизнь; однако и несчастна.
Для нас, не ради бед земля сотворена;
Но нашим промыслом бедам покорена.
Повергли идолов в стране мы сей прехвально;
Однако и поднесешь еще живем печально.

Нам чистый дан закон,
Но мы не делаем, что предписует он.
Грехами поражены,
Мы в тину прежнюю глубоко погружены. (PSVS, 4, 283–284)26

Worldly amusements are soaked in tears
And darkness seems like light to the eyes.
Our span is short and death horrible;
Life has charms but is also wretched.
The earth was created for us, not for misfortunes,
And misfortunes are overcome by our action.
Most laudably we have toppled the idols in this land;
However, to this day we still live in sadness.

A perfect law was given us,
But we do not do what it prescribes.
Struck by sins,
We are deeply mired in former slime.

The posing of the problem clearly describes the limits of Sumarokov’s rationalism. On the one hand, Evmenii is a typical enlightener, asserting humanism, logic, and belief that the world may be improved. On the other, the ancient religious perception of the sinfulness and vanity of life predominates. Both the lexicon (utopleny v slezakh, prelestna zhizn’, tina prezhniaia) and tropes (the oxymoron “svetlost’iu t’ma,” the aphoristic juxtapositions “prelestna” — “neschastna,” “prekhval’no” — “pechal’no”)

26 The text has been republished in Sumarokov, Dramaticheskie sochineniia, 434–50.
underscore this Biblical (and common Baroque) theme, whose presence in Sumarokov’s works A. A. Morozov argued contradicted the basic postulates of classicism. The theme of vanitas vanitatum reoccurs in Sumarokov’s works, and should not be ascribed merely to literary fashion or Masonic caprice.

In Sumarokov’s philosophical writings the problem of the world’s vanity revolves around the issue of theodicy — that sin often goes unpunished on earth and evil keeps increasing. He believed that education (uchenie) is “medicine for our spoiled hearts” but also admitted “that this medicine is little used for the common happiness and sometimes even turns into poison” (PSVS, 6, 231; cf. PSVS, 6, 295–97). This rather pessimistic position lead Sumarokov to the conclusion that history and human activity in general may be justified ethically only by reference to life after death. This is what he writes in his history of the first strel’tsy uprising: “Who from these tyrannical actions that almost transcend human nature [in their evil], who from this alone does not see that there is life after our death; when there is no compensating punishment for these evildoers on earth, and when ferocious thunder and terrible lightning did not fall on the heads of these creatures unworthy of their Creator!” (PSVS, 6, 199–200). This is a typical example of Sumarokov’s philosophical reasoning, juxtaposing earthly reality with the divine ideal. God, justice, and the afterlife are necessary and inseparable notions for Sumarokov. To contradict Pushkin’s Salieri, if there is no justice on earth, in must be sought above.

Sumarokov consistently asserts the harmony of reason and religion, science and revelation. Like many enlighteners of his day he had a distaste for metaphysics (as he understood it). “Almost all Cartesian philosophy,” he wrote, “is a naked novel (roman). All metaphysicians without exception were delirious”; only “the wisdom of the Deity is inexhaustible” (PSVS, 9, 290). Sumarokov thus substituted traditional religious idealistic metaphysics for the modern rationalist type. Elsewhere he asks: “What

27 A. A. Morozov, “Sud’by russkogo klassitsizma,” Russkaia literatura, 1 (1974), 19–20, 25–7.

28 See for example the poems: “Na suetu cheloveka (Sutien budest, ty chelovek)” (1759); “Oda na suetu mira (Sredi igry, sredi zabavy)” (1763), in Sumarokov, Izbrannye proizvedeniia, 83 and 89–90; and “Iz Siraha. Glava V. (Begi o smertnyi, suety),” PSVS, 1, 252–53. The “Oda na suetu mira” was originally published as “Oda k M. M. Kheraskovu,” and the theme is central to Kheraskov’s religious poetry; it deserves serious independent study from the theological point of view as an important anti-rationalist strain in Russian Classicism.
then will be after our demise? To the good, good; to the evil, evil. Might someone think that by this I am asserting [the existence of] heaven and hell? No, heaven and hell do not belong to natural philosophy (estestvennoe mudrovanie); but I am writing not about revelation, but practice natural metaphysics (metafizichesstvuui estestvenno), while that is a matter for religious [thinkers]…” (PSVS, 6, 268). “Ia metafizichestvuui estestvenno” (I metaphysicize naturally) — this in lapidary form expresses the basis of Sumarokov’s theology and ethics.

The philosophical question posed in the monologue cited above also evidently has a historical aspect, as the parallel between Peter the Great and Grand Prince Vladimir was a topos of the tradition. For all of the praise of the conversion to Christianity (“Most laudably we have toppled the idols in this land…A perfect law was given us”), analogous to the Petrine reforms, Sumarokov’s protagonist, like the author, was not so much pessimistic as fatalistic concerning their ultimate success. As with the tragedies, having the action of the plays take place in ancient Rus’ may have even bolstered their topicality, both because of the Petrine parallel and as offering images of modern Russian identity as grounded in a legendary past. “The Hermit” may also have an autobiographical subtext, insofar as it was staged in the first year of Sumarokov’s fledgling Russian theater, and as we know from Sumarokov’s correspondence he threatened to quit his post as its director due to the many difficulties involved with it (in 1761 he was fired from his duties, as the authorities took advantage of one of his requests to be released).

This is a secondary issue. What is most important in our view is that the problematic of “The Hermit” suggests that the philosophical premises of Sumarokov’s classicist dramaturgy are less based on French (or German) rationalism, as is often stated, but on the tradition of Russian Enlightenment religious thought. This tradition has been ignored or denigrated not only by nineteenth and twentieth-century positivists, who in general did not acknowledge the religious component of culture, but also by nineteenth-century defenders of the Orthodox tradition who rejected the Enlightenment traditions of the eighteenth-century church. Understanding this aspect of eighteenth-century culture and its profound influence on the new Russian literature is a very important challenge that scholars have yet to fully recognize.

The Enlightenment religious tradition, whose outstanding early representative was Feofan Prokopovich, had a fundamental influence on Sumarokov’s works and world-view. Like many of his cohort, Sumarokov idolized Peter the Great (see, for example, PSVS, 9, 302–303), but at the same time he insisted that the roots of the Petrine transformation extended back to
the previous century, in particular to the early Enlightenment Latinizing tradition of which Prokopovich was the culmination. Sumarokov wrote, for example, that Petr Mogila (Petro Mohyla), founder of the Kiev Mogilianskaia Academy (1632) “was first to open the path to learning for the Russian people” (PSVS, 6, 320), and often noted the progressive enlightening role of church figures in modern Russian history. In his article “On Russian Religious Oratory” (written after 1770) Sumarokov demonstrated his wide familiarity not only with Prokopovich’s sermons (he refers to him as “the Russian Cicero”) but also with the works of his followers, the leading preachers and church figures of the second half of the eighteenth century. This familiarity, personal and literary, is evidenced by many of Sumarokov’s poetic and prose works as well as by his correspondence.

Sumarokov himself wrote in many “religious” genres. Alexander Levitsky has rightly noted the important place of the “spiritual ode” in eighteenth-century Russian literature, including Sumarokov’s oeuvre, although the role of the Orthodox tradition in Russian Classicism remains largely terra incognita.29 It is precisely here that “The Hermit” seems to offer a point of convergence between secular and religious traditions, and also highlights the religious metaphysics that underlies Sumarokov’s philosophical and literary position.

In contrast to the tragedies, “The Hermit” does not seem to pursue direct publicistic goals. As in the tragedies, the drama forefronts the conflict of reason and passion. Its peculiarity, however, is that the hero’s withdrawal from public life in the play is characterized as rational while passion is equated to the duty of serving the fatherland. In this sense the usual evaluation of thematic categories as seen in the tragedies is reversed. The philosophical justification of such withdrawal occupies a central place in the play. Its political consequences do not turn out to be decisive, as one might have expected. It is suggestive that the arguments against Evmenii’s withdrawal are sufficiently convincing that an American historian recently came to the erroneous conclusion that in “The Hermit” Sumarokov rejected the protagonist’s position, suggesting that the playwright meant the play as an object lesson to Russian aristocrats who neglect their social responsibilities. But as Evmenii explains:

29 Alexander Levitsky, “The Sacred Ode In Eighteenth-Century Russian Literary Culture,” Diss., University of Michigan, 1977; L. F. Lutsevich, “Svoeobrazie zhanra prelozheniia psalmov A. P. Sumarokov,” Problemy izucheniiia russkoi literatury XVIII veka, vyp. 4 (Leningrad, 1980), 10–19.
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Я свету отдал долг, и оставляю свет;
Бегу мирских сует. (PSVS, 4, 287)
(I have done my duty to the world, and I abandon it;
I run from worldly vanities.)

He further says to his father:

Для вас я в свете жил,
И обществу служил:
А ныне к вечности открыв себе дорогу,
Служу я Богу. (PSVS, 4, 296)
(For you I lived in the world
And served society.
But now, having discovered the path to eternity for myself,
I serve God.)

The main obstacle to this service is not the thirst for wealth and power (his father offers him “the first place . . . in the entire people”), but the passionate love for his wife. As in the tragedies, the social and amorous themes run in parallel or merge. Evmenii’s argument that he has already paid his social debt does not encounter any substantial challenge and the problem of choosing either love for his wife or love for God takes center stage.

The arguments pro and con withdrawal from public life focus on the issue how the Creator relates to His creation. The protagonist’s brother Visarion and father Dometiian put forward a series of propositions that one may call deist: in their view, Evmenii demands from himself something that is beyond human nature, and therefore unreasonable. The demands of nature, argues Dometiian, represent those of God. In withdrawing from life Evmenii “counters nature” and the universally accepted norm of civilization:

Внимая неба глас, внемли ты глас природы;
Сам хочет Бог того и всей земли народы.
Я знаю то и сам, что наше естество
Во основание имеет Божество.
Но что и сам Создатель,
В сердца посеял нам святую добродетель;
Котора к должности безвременной зовет;
Противу строгости на небо вопиет . . . (PSVS, 4, 294–95)
(Heeding the voice of heaven you are heeding the voice of nature; God himself wants this, as well as all the earth’s peoples. I also know myself that our nature At its base has the Divinity. But also that the Creator Himself Sowed in our hearts holy virtue That calls us to unchanging duty, That cries out to heaven against extremes . . . )

Virtue, love for parents and spouse — all these have been “sown” into people by God as a legitimate part of His being. The desire to withdraw from life is characterized as brutishness (zverstvo) and tyranny against the family. Furthermore, the fact that people are mortal and God is merciful also speaks against Evmenii’s “extreme” stance. Evmenii’s wife Parfeniia voices the ultimate expression of this argument when she insists that the denial of matrimony and marriage vows represents “a most immeasurable falsehood” (nepravda prebezmerna) that God will not tolerate; she even threatens her husband with lightning bolts from heaven. (This, by the way, is how Kheraskov’s “Christian tragedy” “Iulian the Apostate” ends, but Sumarokov did not approve of such supernatural resolutions.30) Evmenii holds to a different “divine law,” the law of higher reason, and when Parfeniia, after an episode threatening herself with the dagger, finally gives in to her husband, she declares: “The voice of the All-High has sown its law in me as well” (Glas Vyshniago i mne ustav uzhe vseliaet).

The main point is not that Sumarokov rejects the “deist,” “natural” argument as such, and certainly not that he is denying the logic of this world. While Sumarokov always recognized logical truth, he just as strongly rejected a naïve faith in the all-conquering power of human reason. “With healthy reasoning we may approach the center of understanding,” he wrote, but “mortals can never touch” that point (PSVS, 4, 317). Divine law is the prerequisite and highest “pure source” for earthly human reason. God acts, and the drama is resolved, not by supernatural means (as in Kheraskov’s play) but through people themselves. The theological issues in “The Hermit” go beyond any raised in Sumarokov’s tragedies, in which the action mostly remains within the earthly sphere of inevitable passions. The play may be taken as a demonstration of the metaphysical basis of Sumarokov’s tragic world-view, as a glimpse of that ideal “center of understanding.”

30 See Green, “Kheraskov and the Christian Tragedy,” 21.
that “mortals can never touch” but which is conditioned by “common sense.” In the same passage in which Sumarokov speaks of the potential harmfulness of learning, he continues: “However, be that as it may, our conscience, that spark of the Divine that has been given to us, demands that in all we strive for we keep virtue in sight; and that we remember in particular that there is a God in the world and that the life given to us by God will return to its pure source; thus it must be, that it is pure. Let us follow our duty; it consists in virtue. And if there is a God, then there will be retribution; and God surely exists” (PSVS, 6, 231–32). In his prose works Sumarokov often makes similar types of argument “proving” God’s existence, because for him God represents the center of understanding, the source of reason, the basis for virtue and justice as well as the single possible perfection. That some sort of divine perfection is possible on earth is the theme of “The Hermit.”

In our view, one must contextualize this drama on the background of that Enlightenment theological tradition spoken of earlier. In conclusion I will mention several points of intersection of “The Hermit” with this tradition. I will limit my observations to the comparison of several of Sumarokov’s ideas with those of Metropolitan Platon (Levshin) (1737–1812). One of the leading clergymen of his age, Platon was a well known orator who in the first half of the 1760’s occupied the place of court preacher, a reformer of religious education and author of the first systematic theological system in Russia. Sumarokov was personally acquainted with him (it was he who suggested that Sumarokov create a transposition of the entire psalter) and greatly valued him as a speaker. Platon took his vows in 1758, so could hardly have had any influence on “The Hermit,” but many of his theological ideas were common to those developed in Sumarokov’s drama.

31 On Platon, see: I. M. Snegirev, Zhizn’ moskovskogo Mitropolita Platona (Moscow, 1856); S. K. Smirnov, Istoriiia Moskovskoi Slaviano-greko-latinskoi akademii (Moscow: V. Got’e, 1855); A. A. Beliaev, Mitropolit Platon kak stroitel’ natsional’noi dukhovnoi shkoly (Sergiev posad, 1913); K. A. Papmehl, Metropolitan Platon of Moscow (Petr Levshin 1737–1812): The Enlightened Prelate, Scholar and Educator (Newtonville, Mass.: Oriental Research Partners, 1983); K. A. Papmehl, “Platon,” in Dictionary of Literary Biography, vol. 150: Early Modern Russian Writers, Late Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, ed. Marcus C. Levitt (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 285–290. See also Platon’s autobiographical writings in Moskvitianin, ch. 1, otd. III (1849), 27–40; ch. 4, otd. III, 1–24; Chteniia v imp. Obschestve istorii i drevnosti rossiiskikh pri Mosk. Universitete, 4 (1881), 55–84.

32 M. N. Longinov, “Poslednie gody zhizni Aleksandra Petrovicha Sumarokova,” Russkii arkhiv, 10 (1871), col. 1694.
The first possible correlation concerns the “Enlightenment” view of monasticism and “withdrawal from life.” Platon explained to Catherine II that he had taken vows “out of special love for enlightenment.” According to Platon, the primary reason for becoming a monk was “the state of not having a wife” (bezzhennoe prebyvanie) — hardly a traditional reason in Russia — but (according to G. Florovskii) “even more it was love of seclusion, not only for prayer as much as for scholarly pursuits and friendship” (in which Florovskii sees “features of an unusual Rousseauism”). Evmenii also seeks peace and seclusion, and one may find in other of Sumarokov’s works an analogous defense of “Rousseauian” isolation and a retreat from the clamor of city life (see, for example, his “Letter on the Beauty of Nature,” 1759). An examination of attitudes toward monasticism in mid-eighteenth century Russia would probably shed new light on the issues “The Hermit” raises.

Another, even more important area of coincidence is Sumarokov’s drama and Platon’s Enlightenment version of Orthodoxy theology. Platon, like other high clergymen of his cohort, was in Joseph II’s words “plus philosophe que prêtre.” Grand Prince Pavel Petrovich (the future Paul I) for whom Platon served as tutor in 1763–65 explained the essence of Platon’s theology in this way: “You assert it as a rule to always demonstrate the conformity (soglasovanie) of the rules and facts (bytii) contained in Holy Writ with natural reason, and to affirm them by means of the conclusions of healthy human reasoning.” The “natural” philosophical arguments that Sumarokov puts forward to prove God’s existence are strikingly similar to those Platon puts forward in the first part of his widely known Catechesis. This section is dedicated to “Natural Knowledge of God” (Bogopoznanie

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33 Georgii Florovskii, Puti russkogo bogosloviia (Paris: YMCA Press, 1937), 110. On the other hand, the roots of such a view may also go back to the seventeenth century; see, for example, A. M. Panchenko, Russkaia stikhotvornaia kul’tura XVII veka (Leningrad: Nauka, 1973), 150–61.

34 Thomas Newlin suggests that the given theme in “The Hermit” as analyzed in this article may be related to the emancipation of the nobility of 1762; see his The Voice in the Garden: Andrei Bolotov and the Anxieties of Russian Pastoral, 1738–1833 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2001), 81.

35 On the one hand, during Catherine’s reign the Orthodox Church’s property was nationalized and the number of monasteries was cut by almost seventy percent. On the other hand, Platon and his cohort strove to preserve and support traditional monastic (and ascetic) traditions.

36 Florovskii, Puti russkogo bogosloviia, 109.

37 Platon (P. E. Levshin), Raznye sochineniia. [2nd ed.] vol. 7 (Moscow, 1780), 274. The first edition was in 1764.
Platon was strongly influenced by his reading of Paul’s epistles and the works of St. Augustine in a Lutheran spirit, with emphasis on the struggle between mind and will. This approach was alien to the older Russian religious tradition but became widespread among eighteenth century Russian church enlighteners. Its basic similarity to Classicist emphasis on the conflict of reason and passion is obvious. It is precisely such a coincidence of “neo-Protestant” ideas and Sumarokovian Classicism may be seen in Evmenii’s monologue in the fourth scene when he asks God to

Наполни разум мой любовию святою,
Чтоб только пленен был я сею красотою:
Желанием мое ты сердце согласи,
И мысли к одному направи небеси . . . (PSVS, 4, 291)

(Fill my reason with holy love
So that I be captivated by that beauty.
Bring my heart into agreement with my desire
And direct my thoughts to heaven alone . . .

Evmenii, like Sts. Paul and Augustine, understands that he can only escape the bondage of earthly attachments with God’s help. Reason alone, however much applied, is incomplete, insufficient, and without the help of higher forces a person cannot overcome the passions.38 This is the cause of the failure of many characters in Sumarokov’s tragedies, and arguably, is at the center of the author’s notion of the tragic. The correction of society or of man is ultimately possible only by means of inexplicable workings of God. This does not mean, however, that Sumarokov’s final conclusion is to reject this world. On the contrary, the “extreme” action taken by the hero of “The Hermit” demonstrates the rational and moral structure of the world and reaffirms the notion of enlightenment that is central to Russian Classicism.

38 Cf. Romans 7: 21–5; Galatians 6: 17; St. Augustine, Confessions, Bk. 8, chap. 5.