

Title: The “Matter” of Poetry: Pyotr Slovtsov’s Scientific Lyric  
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Abstract:

Despite the central place occupied by Mikhail Lomonosov in the history of 18th-century Russian poetry and the overall dominance of the didactic function in 18th-century Russian letters, the Russian Enlightenment did not produce a robust corpus of scientific lyric. The texts that we do have, including by Lomonosov himself and by Pyotr Slovtsov (1767-1843, the subject of this paper), probe poetry’s particular capabilities in conveying information, while also, as per the more familiar scholarly interpretation, signaling their participation in the state-sanctioned enlightenment project by popularizing recently acquired scientific knowledge. Thus, in a footnote to his 1796 poem “Matter” [Materiia], Slovtsov explains: “The author of this piece only wanted to test whether physical truths can be offered in verse,” thereby turning the poetic text itself into a laboratory. Focusing on several poems by Pyotr Slovtsov (esp. “Matter”), this paper examines the inflections of scientific discourse—the rhetoric of reference, conjecture, experiment, doubt, and debate—in late 18th-century Russian verse, taking into special consideration its relation to core features of the odic poetics (lyric enthusiasm, apostrophic structuring of a hierarchical world order, and expressions of religious belief).