

The background is a painting of a man in a dark, swirling, ethereal space. The man is the central figure, depicted from the waist up, looking upwards. A bright beam of light emanates from his forehead, extending towards the top of the frame. The background is a complex, swirling pattern of colors, including deep blues, greens, and oranges, suggesting a cosmic or microscopic universe. The overall mood is mysterious and contemplative.

**Petar II Petrovich
Nyegosh**

**THE RAY OF
THE
MICROCOSM**

**Translated by Branislav G.
Romchevich**

The title of the original: *Luča mikrokozma*, od Petra II Petrovića Njegoša.

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Translated by Branislav G. Romchevich.

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Contents

Translator's Foreword: The Author and the Work	4
<i>The Ray of the Microcosm</i>	8
Translator's Endnotes	107

TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD: THE AUTHOR AND THE WORKS

Petar II Petrovich Nyegosh (most often, simply *Nyegosh*) was, from 1830 to 1851, Vladika (Metropolitan) of Montenegro, which title carried supreme spiritual as well as secular, political authority and power. Born as Radivoje Rade Petrovich in 1813 in Nyegushi, the seat of the dynastic family to which he belonged, he grew up to be dark and handsome, over two meters tall, robust and strong looking; he died in his thirty eighth year, of tuberculosis. A priest and a statesman, he is also considered by many to be the greatest poet and sage among the Southern Slavs.

Educated at several Montenegrin monasteries, Nyegosh ascended the throne at seventeen, following the death of his uncle, Petar I Petrovich Nyegosh, and assumed the name under which he is known. He was a ruler bent on uniting Montenegrin tribes and centralizing and modernizing Montenegro. His introduction of universal taxation, personal guard and similar reforms caused several revolts during his lifetime. He did not shrink from sending serious offenders before the firing squad, but also knew how and when to show clemency.

Nyegosh's foreign policy was based on maintaining a friendly relationship with the Habsburg Austria, seeking Russia's protection, and also included incessant struggle against the Ottoman Empire's

provocations and border violations. His unfulfilled dream was the unification of all Serb lands.

In addition to his religious education, Nyegosh was acquainted with the world of literature by Sima Milutinovich Sarayliya, a Bosnian Serb poet and adventurer, who had come to Montenegro in 1827 and become the secretary to the vladika, the young Rade's uncle, and later to Nyegosh himself. Also, he had access to a not so negligible library of his uncle. During his travels in Italy and Austria, particularly during his stay in Vienna, Nyegosh had an opportunity to meet the leading Serbian literati – Karadzich, Radichevich, and others.

Nyegosh began writing poetry at seventeen and in the remaining twenty years created several poetry collections, essays and, most importantly, an extensive epic poem, *The Ray of the Microcosm*, and two epic style dramas, *The Mountain Wreath* and *The False Tsar Stephen the Short*.

Inevitably, Nyegosh drew heavily on Serb epic poetry and folklore, as well as on the biblical themes from his religious education. His metaphors and imagery are unsurpassable, and his meter, the decasyllable without cesura, is unique in all Serbian literature. His style is colloquial, laconic, economical and often cryptic. Although sometimes difficult to divine, it is, nevertheless, like a scalpel that cuts the shortest way through human thought.

The Ray of the Microcosm is the first one in the triad of Nyegosh's major works, the other two being the dramas *The Mountain Wreath* and *The False Tsar Stephen the Little*. Written during the Easter Lent of 1845 and published in Belgrade in the month of October of the same year, under the supervision of Sima Milutinovich Sarayliya, Nyegosh's erstwhile mentor, „The Ray“ is usually called a romantic, cosmic-religious poem, its principal theme being the destiny of Man, including his origins, relationship with God and future expectations. The poem, virtually an epic, comprises a dedication (to Sarayliya) as a prologue and six cantos, totaling 2210 decasyllabic lines arranged in ten-line stanzas. The „ray“ in the title is human soul, or, possibly, human thought, whereas the „microcosm“ is Man himself. The story is presented through an imaginary flight of the ray into the depths of space in its angelic, incorporeal form, and its meeting with its guardian angel, with whose help it comes to know its destiny, including its past and fall from grace.

It is obvious that, to cover his main theme, Nyegosh consulted many sources accessible to him, from the ancient philosophers and church fathers to the modern ones. He had undoubtedly read Milton's *The Paradise Lost*, either as a French or a Russian translation, and was, in some measure, influenced by it. One could even say, jokingly, that „The Ray“ is a short version of „The Paradise“ with a twist, the twist stemming from the fact that Milton

faithfully toed the church line and literally stuck to the Biblical narrative, whereas „The Ray“ is eminently heretical in its principal outlook – that of maintaining that human soul pre–existed in incorporeal, angelic form, that as such it joined in a rebellion against God and was punished by being given its present form of flesh and blood, and set up on the newly created Earth, a prison where Man must expiate his offenses against God and earn his return to grace and his angelic form. However, this is not a place to try to explain how a Montenegrin vladika (bishop) acquired such an outlook and why he proposed it in a poem. This should definitely be left to scholarly disputes, and there is no shortage of them. Much more important to the reader is how Nyegosh masters his material as a piece of art, and there is no avoiding saying: masterfully, and, in many, many places, majestically. His visions and imagery are powerful, often unusual but captivating, his language is majestic throughout. At least this is how the poem comes out in the original. The translator has done his best to make it mirrored in this translation, which is the first translation of *The Ray* into English.

Branislav G. Romchevich

THE RAY OF THE MICROCOSM

Dedicated to

S. Milutinovich¹, Esq.

(At Tsetinye on 1st May 1845)

Yes, you teacher dear to me at all times,
a Serb singer illumined by heaven,
an absurd task is human destiny,
human life is a terrible vision!

5 Man exiled through the gate of miracles,
he himself constitutes a miracle;

Man cast upon a large turbulent bank
by the secret hand of the daring chance,
miserable, with no supervisor,

10 influenced by the secret providence,

he recalls his original glory,
he dreams of a most fortunate blessing;
but all his dreams and his remembrances
conceal themselves very much from his glance,

running hurriedly in shadowy lines 15
into the large annals of eternity;
only, by the somber passage of theirs,
leaving a trace of sadness in his soul,
so that he vainly strains at his chains
to see through the darkness behind himself. 20

Man cast below the cloudy firmament –
are both conceptions received by him here?
Is his dual cradle to be found here?
Has the Maker set out the Earth for him
as some kind of mystical punishment, 25
or a reward rough and temporary,
or a source of spiritual blessing?
Ah, this one is the highest mystery
and the most dreadful spiritual storm –
and the keys to this are found in the grave. 30

Very often and many times have I –
occupied with the most profound thinking
in the nature's most flowery bosom,
and feeding on the nourishing juices
from her naked and most beautiful breast – 35
pluckily asked the generous mother

wherefore has the Maker created her:
for the sake of his numerous children?
Or he's made the children for her pleasure?
40 Or both for the sake of the other one?

However, my temporary wet nurse,
decorated with flowery weather,
provided with a crown of sunny rays,
but entwining all her flowery hairs,
45 and pouring pearly dew all over them
while fair-haired stars are dancing together –
so as to come the nobler in the morn
in front of the eyes of her own ruler –
to all my passionate inquiries
50 always replies with the laughter of hers.

And very often and many times has
the blue firmament of the holy sky,
planted all over with diamond seeds,
been implored by me, with my soul on fire,
55 to reveal to me the holy secret:
whether the Maker's decorated it,
and also opened its colossal book,
so that the creature may praise the Maker and the bliss

or so that Man may read from its page of
his own exaggerated worthlessness? 60

Worldly sages have been scrupulously
asked by me pertaining the fate of Man,
all about his duty in front of God;
however, their different arguments
are swayed by awful inconsistency: 65
all thoughts of theirs collected together
are to me exactly nothing other
than some thirsty wandering through darkness,
than some kind of unspeakable language,
than a glance extinguished by darkness. 70

Man is lulled to a very heavy sleep,
in which he beholds terrible phantasms,
and he can decide with difficulty
that his being does not belong in them.
From time to time, he begins to think that 75
he has freed himself of that awful sleep;
ah, how disappointed all his hopes turn:
he has now immersed himself completely
in a sleep realm yet harder and darker
and in a scene of more horrid visions! 80

Quickness and cunning are given to him
just to make him a worthy member
in the incongruous fair of the world;
and the foundation of his will is laid
85 right on the wings of inconsistency;
of terrible passions is his desire
an inciter and a sightless leader;
malice, envy – a hellish heritage;
this makes Man lower than an animal,
90 yet his mind equals him to immortals!

In the interim and stormy abode,
happiness is really unknown to Man –
true happiness, ever pursued by him;
he knows not its measurements nor limits:
95 the higher he climbs toward the peak of glory,
the higher foe to happiness he is.
The Earth of ours, mother to millions,
can't crown with happiness a single son:
as soon as he becomes its autocrat,
100 he toasts then with a cup of Hercules.²

TRANSLATOR'S ENDNOTES

¹ Sima Milutinovich Sarayliya, a Bosnian Serb poet and adventurer, who came to Montenegro in 1827 and became the secretary to the vladika, the young Rade's (Nyegosh's) uncle, and later to Nyegosh himself; entrusted by Nyegosh to supervise the publishing of the first edition of „The Ray of the Microcosm“ in Belgrade in 1845.

² In antiquity, „the cup of Hercules“ was „a Hercules among cups“, that is a cup of unusually large capacity (Nyegosh says, somewhere, „six bottles“); allegedly the draining of such a cup cost Alexander the Great his life, so that the meaning of the lines 99–100 is that autocrats overreach themselves soon after attaining their highest goal.