



Józef Peszka (1767–1831), "View of the Missionary Monastery from Uþupis", Vilnius, 1808, Lithuanian Art Museum, LDM T-1559

MYKOLAS KLEOPAS OGINSKIS. "PRECEPTS TO A SON"

You are leaving your parents' home, my child, and from this first step a new career begins for you: this is the moment when you can say: I am starting my life.

Think about this word, life: it is not only about the trouble of living, something common to all living beings, but it is also about knowing how to live. For that it is necessary to reflect about the ways and purpose of life.

Do not let this word "reflect" scare you, my dear child, there is no specific age for reflection; and the science of life is like all others, that one can learn, provided that one gets accustomed to retreat into oneself by self-study and to obediently follow the advice, given to you by the people appointed to guide you on the first footpaths of life.

I will not be one of those guides anymore, but this letter will speak to you for me and will give you my advice, my orders and maybe my last wishes if Providence does not grant me the joy of seeing you once again.

So here is what I advise and instruct you:

1. First of all, get the truth firmly set in your mind that man is not here by accident, he is not born without purpose, he owes everything to his Creator, God, and therefore religion is his primary obligation, without which a man is nothing, just a number without value. Be a Christian first of all, because this is the religion that God himself gave to people; be him first by faith, and afterwards strive to become him by conviction: what I am saying here is a lot above your comprehension now, but a day will come when you will be able to understand it and convince yourself that this commandment alone contains everything that is necessary to become happy on earth.

2. Never forget for one moment all that you owe

to your first benefactress, your Mother. She is the one who brought you to life, who loves you with a tenderness that you did not have time to deserve yet, but which you can merit and justify by striving every day to become worthy of her. With a good and firm will, the means to achieve it only depend on you: it is to accustom yourself not to undertake anything, say anything, do anything, without first asking yourself: would my mother approve it or not? After this question, if your conscience tells you that your mother approves it, act boldly, your instinct will not mislead you. If your inner feeling tells you otherwise, refrain and you will save yourself from mistake and remorse. In this respect, you have to think continuously of what she has prescribed and commanded to you, what she has requested you to do. Think about this word, my child, request: would you be able to resist a request of a mother so good, so tender, so loving as yours! Her wishes concerning your conduct are as follows:

3. Be early riser, get up at the time indicated to you. Immediately after you are awakened, get out of your bed, in order not to let sleep and laziness overcome you. The first indispensable action is to give thanks to your Creator, to pray him to preserve your admirable mother, to ask for his blessings to your parents and yourself by staying on paths of virtue. After this first act, a sacred obligation, follows washing, which has to be short but strictly observed, since cleanliness, so important for the health of the body, also influences, by some mysterious association, the purity of the soul.

4. Concerning your meals you have to avoid excesses, especially to refrain from drinking wine, that is so harmful to your health, as you know: very little

wine is all that you can afford. Even beer does not really suit you, the refreshing drinks are best for you. You must know that excessive thirst is always a result of either an overheating or a bad habit, or a stomach in poor condition. You have to understand that health depends on a good stomach, therefore you have to avoid both overheating and the excesses in eating and drinking, namely what contributes to ruining your health by damaging your stomach.

5. With cleanliness, healthy and sober diet and exercise proportionate to your forces you will fulfil everything that is necessary for your health. There are two fields of gymnastics you have special abilities for: they are horse riding and swimming. I wish you to practise them, but only with all the caution that these two sports require. For the first one I entirely rely on the person who will direct you and who will only entrust you to a rider on whose caution he will be able to count. As to swimming, I have to warn you that you have keep in mind that there is an enormous difference between swimming in the sea and swimming in a river or lake. You have gotten it from me, both of us swim like fish, I have seen you jumping into the water with boldness that always gave me great joy. But in past summers we used to jump from a boat into the sea where the water was one hundred feet deep and we never touched the bottom. Whereas, in most rivers, there is little water, frequent currents, and in lakes bottom is covered by weeds and is often miry, what is most dangerous for divers. Remember what I am telling you here, do never bathe in a river or a lake without thinking at the difference I drew here between these bathings and those at the sea.

6. You have to end a day the same way as you have begun it, that is by prayer, by remembering your good mother, the care she has given you, the friendship that she offers you; and by consulting yourself whether you have merited this care and goodness during the day. I do not need to repeat that meriting means fulfilling her wishes, conforming to her will. If you have done that, God and your conscience will bring you a peaceful and sweet sleep. But if, by misfortune, you have failed that, you have to ask God for forgiveness, and let a sincere repentance with determination to correct your-

self restore the calm to your conscience, without which there can be no pure joy in life.

7. To serve you, I send Santi, the servant who has already been with you for three years. You have to treat him with gentleness, kindness and even gratitude, because he leaves his wife and children in order to follow you. But there is a great difference between kindness and familiarity: the first comes from generous heart, the latter comes from vulgar and common mind. Born in a condition to be served and not to serve, you owe this advantage to coincidence, and therefore you do not have any reason to be proud of it. However having this advantage on your side, you have to endeavour to deserve it by elevation and nobleness of sentiments, which, by giving you real value, will justify what is a mere play of fortune.

8. In order to strengthen you in your habit to examine yourself, there is nothing better than to keep a diary of everything you do and especially of everything you think. This habit has a double advantage: first, to get used to retreat into yourself, to consult yourself, to talk to yourself; second, to develop your style. By effort of writing, one becomes a writer, and what is well understood either in a lesson or by own observation is even better learnt by writing it down, and it gets engraved forever in your memory. I am very glad to see that your sisters have taken this habit; it will do good for them.

9. Now, for what concerns your studies, and this section will, at the same time, be used to make my intentions known to the person in charge of directing them. I wish you to have a diplomatic career, because I believe it is what suits you the best. Therefore your studies have to be mainly directed towards this objective. To start with – a good course of classical languages. You already have some knowledge of Greek, and you could know it even better if you had wished. Thus you have to practise it with perseverance and courage, since I am convinced that not only studying both classical languages can be done at the same time, but also that Greek, preceding Latin, makes a lot easier learning of the latter. For some time now, romanticism is for writing what cholera morbus is for people; but this evil will pass as any other, while what is good and beautiful will remain

such forever, because the good and the beautiful as well as truth do not ever change. What I say here is still above your understanding, but, for the time being, you can accept it as an article of faith: there are no good and solid studies if they are not based on studying classical languages.

10. I will not go into details of different kinds of historical and philosophical knowledge you have to get ready to acquire in order to deserve to be employed with honour: the order of the subjects taught as well as the choice of their methods are at the entire discretion of the enlightened person in charge of directing them. I shall only add my wish, that you study modern languages, so necessary for your chosen career. At the time in your life, when memory is so fresh, acquisition of languages is very easy. As to the resulting great benefit, you will be able to assess it only gradually as you advance in your life.

11. *A questo fine, non dimenticar o Caro mio la dolce favella toscana, la lingua di quel bel paese dove il si suona.*¹ For this, it is not enough to speak with Santi, that would only be the language from the streets of Florence. You have to study this language well, it requires good understanding in order to love it; to achieve this, you have to read good Italian writers and also to write in this language. To correspond with your sisters in Italian is what I command you in this regard.

12. Once preparatory studies will have made you ready to follow public lessons, that is, when the person directing your studies will consider it right for you to enter university courses, you will seek to deserve the kindness of your fellow students with an equal, accommodating and polite behaviour with everybody. Among students there are sometimes those agitated, atrabillious characters, who find pleasure in seeking quarrels with their fellows: they are a scourge that you have to avoid with utmost care, and the most certain means to succeed is, as I have said earlier, to be equally polite with everyone and never interfere in the affairs which do not concern you. The real courage for you consists in being firm and constant in the

fulfilment of your duties. Frequently, the fear to look like a coward lends a tone of arrogance to somebody who is one indeed, and that is nothing else but the courage of cowards, which, after that of duellists and informers, is the most despicable in society.

13. Complete obedience and trust in a person who will undertake the burden of looking after your conduct and pursuits. The best way to deserve his benevolence is to strictly fulfil your duties. Do not forget that he replaces us for you. It simply means that you have to respect and obey him as your father.

14. I can say that, for the time of your voyage, your uncle and aunt Dolgorouky have kindly agreed to take upon themselves to act as father and mother to you, until they will be able to entrust you into the hands that Providence destines to replace them. To prescribe you the conduct that you have to keep in respect of your generous relatives is really unnecessary. I have a too good opinion of you, my dear friend, not to be certain that you will make every effort to earn their benevolence and that you will not deviate for one moment from their will.

Goodbye, my dear child, let Heaven bless you, as I bless you from the bottom of my heart. Write us at least twice a month; let the trust and truth always guide your pen. With what joy we shall learn about your successes! Because on them will depend the happy day when we shall be able to embrace you. If you love us as I believe you do, this thought will support you in your work, by never letting you forget that if, after three years, you will progress sufficiently to pass an exam, it will be the only way for you to get a job in one of the diplomatic missions in Italy, so that we can reunite and never be separated again.

Translated from French to English by Kestutis Urbaitis. Michai Kleofas Ogiński's letter "Precepts for my son" is kept in Lithuanian State Historical Archives (f. 1177, ap. 1, b. 87).

¹ To this end, my dear, do not forget the soft idiom of Tuscany, the language of this beautiful country where it can be heard.