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The literary and intellectual context

During the first half of the eighteenth century, prose fiction was not a recognized literary concern in Russia. The only kind of prose that was regulated by the ruling Neoclassicist movement was nonfictional, nonnarrative prose, such as the oration. The existing prose fiction, widely circulated in manuscript form, was, by and large, a carry-over from the seventeenth century: popular literature, tales of the 'Frol Skobeev' type, the so-called Petrine tales, as well as translated Western chivalric adventure tales and romances, usually referred to as prose of the 'Bova Korolevich' calibre. Such prose fiction was regarded by the literati as inferior mass literature, which met neither of the Horatian criteria for literature proper. It was, however, extremely popular among the masses (and, one has reason to believe, not only among the masses) and proved influential for the further development of Russian prose fiction.[1]

Throughout the latter part of the century, this kind of prose fiction was, on the one hand, collected and published in unchanged form, and, on the other, edited, adapted, embellished, and combined with other kinds of prose and published in this changed form. The fact of publication in itself, with the widening reading public it entailed, served as an impetus for the recognition of the 'legitimacy' of such prose fiction. Book printing also gave a decisive boost to the Russian translators of Western prose fiction.[2] Translation of Western novels had started on a small scale already in the 1730s in manuscript form. From the 1750s on, these translations were printed, and were, furthermore, carried out by professional translators (I. P. Elagin, I. Shishkin, and S. A. Poroshin among the most prominent ones). A group of translators united around the first private journal, *Idle Time Usefully Spent (Prazdnoe vremia v polzu upotreblennoe,* 1759–60), the title being indicative of their stand with regard to prose fiction.[3] Their systematic translation and printing of prose fiction was instrumental in furthering its literary status. The range of prose fiction translated during the second half

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of the eighteenth century was astounding: Hellenistic and Roman novels, Medieval courtly romances, Eastern tales in the vein of *Arabian Nights*, works by Calprenède, Mme de LaFayette, and Prévost appeared next to Lesage's picaresque novels, works by Fénelon, Ramsay, and Terrason, as well as the novels of Richardson, Fielding, Rousseau, and Goethe. Thus prose fiction of the most varied types, from geographically and chronologically different points of origin, vied with the native and translated popular literature. Original Russian novels and tales, heavily influenced by both the old popular prose fiction and the new Western translations, began to appear in the 1760s from the pens of such writers as Fedor Emin, Chulkov, Popov, and Levshin – to name just the most prominent.

The translators, particularly Elagin, Poroshin, and Emin, were also fervent advocates of the merits of their 'new' prose, understood by them mainly according to their prime model, Prévost. The prefaces to their works constituted the main forum for publicizing their views. Their contention was that prose fiction should be regarded as serious literature on a par with poetry; it, too, served the recognized functions of art, namely to edify and entertain. Furthermore, they claimed, edification and moral teaching are best served when presented in an entertaining rather than purely didactic manner, which was, in their view precisely the advantage of the 'new' prose fiction.

The opposing Neoclassicist camp did not reject the novel outright, but only the particular type of novel that was propagandized by Elagin and his camp – particularly prose fiction with affinities to both 'Bova Korolevich' and Prévost. Exceptions were made for certain works by Fénelon, Barclay, Terrason, Swift, Cervantes, and, of ancient prose, for Aesop, Apuleius, Petronius, and some others. Indeed, some of the major Neoclassicist writers themselves translated and even wrote original prose fiction. Trediakovskii, in addition to Tallemant's *précieuse* novel, *Voyage de l'île d'Amour* (which he translated as early as 1730), also translated Barclay's *Argenis* (1751) and Fénelon's *Les Aventures de Télémaque* (1766), the latter, in verse.[4] Kheraskov wrote a series of original Russian historical-philosophical-political novels: *Numa, or Flourishing Rome* (*Numa, ili Protsvetaiushchii Rim*, 1768), *Cadmus and Harmonia* (*Kadm i Garmoniia*, 1786), and *Polydorus, Son of Cadmus and Harmonia* (*Polidor, syn Kadma i Garmonii*, 1794), all

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of which are utopian, characterized by lofty didacticism, 'teachings for rulers', and Enlightenment rhetoric.[5]

Emin's *The Adventures of Themistocles* (*Prikliucheniia Femistokla*, 1763) is indicative of the fact that the Elagin camp (Emin started out as one of the 'new' translators), by no means spurned such edifying lofty prose fiction.[6] Thus both some of the leading Neoclassicists and the proponents of the 'new' prose strove to legitimize prose fiction as viable literature. This striving for legitimacy was implemented both in Neoclassicist novels and in the Emin-type 'new' prose, as well as in the tale adaptations, mainly through the introduction of an authoritative, sophisticated image of author, serving to guide the reader to the correct moral interpretation of the works.[7]

Even though some authors, notably Chulkov, single out this pretentious image of author as a butt for their mockery, their own works also strongly feature an image of author. That this image was qualitatively different (a humorous, silly, frivolous, vulgar double-talking liar, a mocker of literary pretentiousness), does not alter the basic innovatory fact of introducing a prominent image of author in the text. This signal feature of all prose fiction of the era was to be particularly prominent and further refined by Sentimentalist authors who finally managed to gain for prose fiction the status as legitimate literature it has since had. Both the serious and the mocking varieties are developed in Sentimentalist prose and can be seen as precursors to the two major strains of Russian nineteenth-century literature: the 'serious' images of author such as those in Tolstoi's major novels, and the chatty, mocking ones such as abound in Gogol′'s masterpieces. One of Karamzin's achievements was to create images of author that were fully acceptable to the age of sense and sensibility, by trimming the rough edges of both the pretentious preacher image and the vulgar Chulkovian mocker.

The prominence of image of author has been noted by scholars. For example, Serman, in his survey of eighteenth-century prose, comes to the following conclusion:

> On the whole, the most important innovation for Russian narrative prose from the mid 1770s on, was the appearance of an author–narrator who directly addresses a reader with direct speech. This direct authorial speech is heard in all new literary genres – in 'diaries', 'notes', 'journeys'. *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* joins the general movement of Senti-

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mentalist prose precisely by the fact that its unity is created by a lyrical image of author–narrator.[8]

The question as to what such an image of author consists in will be one of the main topics of my investigation. One of the best studies of the problem of author in Sentimentalist poetry is Gukovskii's 1938 monograph *Studies in the History of Russian Literature and Social Thought of the XVIII century*, the second part of which is devoted to what he calls the Murav'ev–Karamzin branch of the Sentimentalist movement.[9] He bases his literary argument on the socio-historical conditions of the era (revolutions in the West, peasant uprisings at home). This social reality shook the very foundations of the preceding Rationalistic world view, the faith in absolute values, given *a priori*. Everything external to man came to seem unstable and unpredictable, and the only firm point in the universe was man himself. R. F. Brissenden in his excellent discussion of West European Sentimentalism makes similar points and argues convincingly that Sentimentalism can be regarded as a specific branch of Enlightenment philosophy. He points out that the individual human experience was seen as the source of all knowledge and values. The point of departure for philosophical thinking was shifted, accordingly, from a metaphysical to an epistemological theory. A theory of what a person knows and how he comes to know it replaced, or was considered primary to, a theory about the ultimate nature of the world.[10] This shift from 'world' to 'perceiver of the world' also lies at the basis of what Gukovskii labels Sentimentalist solipsism, the guiding principle of the new literary movement:

> Doubt about the truth of what to the fathers seemed the sole truth – that is the point of departure for the attitudes and world view of the Murav'ev–Karamzin school [. . .] The scepticism and relativism led inevitably to a solipsistic understanding of the world. In the final analysis, the writer and thinker places himself at the center of the world. The universe is shaped for him not according to the laws of a logical scheme, but according to the laws of his personal perception precisely as an individual person.[11]

A new subjective attitude toward art accompanied the new subjective philosophy. Art was both conceived and perceived in terms of personal experience and emotion, and the solipsistic principle became basic to Sentimentalist prose. By the same token, the poet's mission as an official intellectual leader and teacher was

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regarded with scepticism in favor of a subjective aesthetic experience. As Gukovskii aphoristically puts it, 'they [the Sentimentalists] see in a work of art only the individual, in this lies their weakness, but they *see* the individual and in this lies their strength'.[12]

Brissenden provides an interesting analysis of the complexities which arose in defining the nature of personal experience, the details of which need not concern us here. As a general tendency, two poles emerged, one emphasizing Feeling (Sensibility) the other emphasizing Reason (Sense). The former was in general afforded more attention and, in some cases, primacy. That emphasis was a natural consequence of the fact that the latter had reigned supreme in the preceding Rationalist philosophy. A balance of the two aspects of experience was held to be ideal, and, as Brissenden points out, definitions of the two extremes frequently came to overlap, particularly towards the end of the century when terms such as 'reasonable feelings' gradually came to indicate a common, supra-individual principle which was seen to inform both. The relative prominence of Feeling and Reason, and the awareness of individual experience was, however, less important than the crucial stress on the sanctity of individual experience and, consequently, on individual judgments of the physical and moral universe.

The logical consequence of the solipsistic principle would be a completely relativistic or subjective ethics (or lack of ethics) and, indeed, as is pointed out by Brissenden, 'it is a short, and some would argue, logical step from something like the humane scepticism of David Hume's ethical position to the bleak and anarchic moral nihilism espoused and advocated by the Marquis de Sade'.[13] The philosophers of the era were aware of the problem, and their debates came to focus increasingly on questions of whether the moral sentiments of the individual had any intrinsic authority, such that they have universal validity, and whether the moral sentiments of man in general at their core agreed or disagreed with the traditional precepts of Christian morality.

That Karamzin was deeply concerned with the consequences of solipsism and even, as it were, took the principle to its de Sadean limits, is attested by some of his last prose works, notably 'My Confession' ('Moia ispoved''). As Brissenden points out, however, the belief in the solipsistic principle was held along with a belief in a second principle: that of sympathy. The sympathetic principle

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states that a human being is inherently benevolent, or at least capable of acting benevolently, given the opportunity. According to this principle, human beings are by nature able to sympathize with each other, to identify in some way with the experiences of their fellow humans. Such innate sympathy was held to be basic to the formation of moral attitudes, and to be the factor which enabled humans to communicate in the first place. Sympathy was also viewed as the basis of social cohesion. For many thinkers (Brissenden names Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, Adam Smith), this was so fundamental a belief that it entered into the very definition of a human being, and its opposite was something inconceivable. Statements such as the following by Hume were characteristic: 'A creature, absolutely malicious and spiteful, were there any such in nature, must be worse than indifferent to the images of vice and virtue. All his sentiments must be inverted, and directly opposite to those which prevail in human society.'[14] That Karamzin relied on the sympathetic principle as well, is abundantly clear from his stress on man as active perceiver with the sympathetic ability to co-create, a concept I hope to show is crucial to Karamzin's Sentimentalism. The principle is repeatedly voiced by Karamzin both in his articles and in his fiction. Gukovskii quotes Karamzin's axiom, 'a bad person cannot be a good author', and one could cite a similar Karamzinian definition of the reader: 'Bad people do not even read novels.'[15] In a work published in 1797, 'Dialogue on Happiness' ('Razgovor o shchastii'), the following words echoing Hume's statement are uttered by Filalet, who plays the role of a more authoritative teacher to the sceptical Melodor: 'A total villain or a person who loves evil because it is evil and hates good because it is good, is, if not a bad poetic fantasy, at least a freak outside Nature, a being, inexplicable by natural laws.'[16]

This is not to say that Karamzin, or the other Sentimentalist thinkers, were oblivious to the existence of evil. Indeed, the belief in the sympathetic principle was often accompanied by a pessimistic belief that a person, although good, somehow creates the conditions which prevent him from fulfilling his good impulses. As Brissenden expresses it:

> An awareness of the problem was usually not enough to destroy the optimistic belief that if only the right circumstances prevailed man could live up to his expectations. At the same time, however, the contemplation of the evil and inimical conditions – 'the world' – in which the benevolent

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impulse was forced to operate was accepted as a legitimate source for melancholy. The Sentimental tribute of a tear exacted by the spectacle of virtue in distress was an acknowledgement at once of man's inherent goodness and of the impossibility of his ever being able to demonstrate his goodness effectively.[17]

This kind of belief lies behind most of Karamzin's narrators, and is particularly forcefully expressed in 'Bornholm Island' ('Ostrov Borngol'm'), where, as we shall see, the stress is on sympathy between author and reader by way of describing its absence in the 'world'. For the most part, the existence of pure evil as such was not acknowledged by Karamzin, who preferred to refer vice to human weakness, imperfection, error, or an inability of the human mind to fathom the larger divine design which, by definition, is good. This leads us to the source of human sympathy, which by most Sentimentalists was seen as God (or Nature), who had implanted a spark of his absolute goodness in man. This idea is expressed by Karamzin (or his narrators and personages) from many different angles: as conscience, as a recurring Wielandian curtain image, and as faith in a larger divine design ('Bornholm Island'), and is most eloquently stated in 'A Promenade', which contains a passage curiously reminiscent of Yorick's famous apostrophe to the great SENSORIUM:

Dear sensibility! source inexhausted of all that's precious in our joys, or costly in our sorrows! thou chainest thy martyr down upon his bed of straw – and 'tis thou who lifts him up to HEAVEN – eternal fountain of our feelings! – 'tis here I trace thee – and this is thy divinity which stirs within me – not, that in some sad and sickening moments '*my soul shrinks back upon herself, and startles at destruction*' – mere pomp of words! – but that I feel some generous joys and generous cares beyond myself – all comes from thee, great SENSORIUM of the world! which vibrates, if a hair of our heads but falls upon the ground, in the remotest desert of thy creation.[18]

The same source of goodness is also the source of aesthetic perception and creation in Karamzin's aesthetics. The third Sentimentalist principle, what I will call the pleasure principle, is seen as the result of a recognition in one's self of this 'divine spark', that is, the recognition of one's own goodness. Pleasure may be prompted both by goodness in the 'world' and by various evils (provided one's own conscience is clear). Since man is naturally inclined towards his own pleasure and towards avoiding pain, it follows that he is also

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naturally inclined towards goodness and beauty. This idea was expressed with particular force in Karamzin's 'On the Sciences, Arts, and Enlightenment' ('Nechto o naukakh, iskusstvakh i prosveshchenii'):

> Whosoever, through the myriads of glimmering spheres, spinning in the blue celestial space, can spiritually ascend to the throne of the invisible divinity; whosoever hears his voice in thunder and in Zephyrs, in the stir of seas and – in his own heart; whosoever sees the world in an atom and in the world – an atom of boundless creation; whosoever in each flowerlet, in each motion and deed of nature feels the breath of the highest bliss and in scarlet celestial lightning kisses the hem of Savaoth's raiment: that person can not be a villain.[19]

The 'divine spark' also serves as our conscience, and alerts us to the presence of evil in ourselves. Such ideas were expressed by most of the major philosophers of the era, among others by Albrecht von Haller, both as a physiologist (his treatise on sensibility and irritability in animals) and as a poet (his meditation 'Über den Ursprung des Übels', written in 1734 and translated into Russian by Karamzin in 1786). The pleasure principle is also fundamental to Karamzin's aesthetics, since moral goodness is equated with beauty.

It is true that Karamzin, particularly in his *Aglaia* period and in some of his later works, paid more attention to existing evils – as did most Sentimentalists after the French Revolution.[20] That does not mean, however, that Karamzin during that period of his life (or indeed ever) subscribed to a belief that human nature is innately evil. It would seem, on the contrary, that his attention to evil (or human weakness, in Karamzin's system) stemmed from a firm belief in the inherent goodness in the human being, and in a possibility of awakening an awareness of the pleasure in goodness and pain in evil through art, education, philanthropy, enlightened monarchy, etc.[21]

As the solipsistic, sympathetic, and pleasure principles became prominent, the very nature of literature and its function in society was changing. Initially an organ of official (artistic and other) ideology practised in exclusive official and literary circles, it became a personal enterprise of private salons and intimate gatherings of a few friends aiming to move the audience's (and the poet's own) sensitivities. Tears and pleasant thoughts, rather than loud applause, became the desired effect of art. Trifling forms, practised

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in intimate society and previously not regarded as literature, gradually became sanctioned as literature.

It is one of the paradoxes of the era that, while all the personal aspects of literature came to be acknowledged as desirable, the actual practice of literature was simultaneously developing in an increasingly impersonal direction. Owing to a number of factors, such as a rapidly increasing literacy, bookprinting, translation, the emergence and ever wider circulation of literary journals, the author no longer could take a personal contact with his readers for granted. Earlier in the century authors knew their readers, either personally or by virtue of the fact that they were part of the same cultural elite. Manuscripts were circulated among friends and acquaintances or read aloud in select groups, official or strictly private, and there was always the assurance of a known audience. Publication (even after that became an option) was simply irrelevant and often deemed undesirable (Murav'ev's reluctance to publish, being a case in point). Economic gain did not enter the picture, since few authors lived solely by their literary work – they were supported by patrons, were independently wealthy, or were employed in positions ('real' or token) which gave them ample time to write.[22]

Thus, during the Neoclassicist era, while the distance between actual authors and actual readers was close, and there was a personal relationship between them, literature itself was conceptualized supra-personally. As has been demonstrated most convincingly by Gukovskii, the hierarchical system of genres (as opposed to the author's individuality) and the imitation and perfection of models (as opposed to individual innovations) were the artistic criteria *par excellence*. The very names of authors were thought of generically and ranked accordingly (The Russian Racine, The Russian Pindar). Poems, entire collections of poems, and entire novels, appeared anonymously. Works migrated freely, the same work could reappear in different journals and could be freely 'improved' and edited with or without the original author's approval. The work's origin and publication data were irrelevant. Genre also determined the composition of collections (the Novikov edition of Sumarokov's works is a good example), and even titles were often strictly generic. Thus the personality or identity of author and reader were not, *per se*, *literary facts*.[23] Towards the second half of the eighteenth century, and particularly from the

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1780s on, this situation gradually began to change. Writing came to be regarded as a respectable profession, not only translating and publishing, but also creative writing as such. The author's name appeared more frequently on the title page, and the titles themselves often included a reference to the author's 'I' (Karamzin's *My Trifles* [*Moi bezdelki*], and 'My Confession' ['Moia ispoved''], Dmitriev's *My Trifles Too* [*I moi bezdelki*], I. Bakhtin's *I Too Am an Author* [*I ia avtor*], are symptomatic). Works came to be read according to author (rather than genre).

Karamzin was one of the first authors in Russia to live exclusively by that profession (until 1803 when he became court historian and devoted himself exclusively to his *History of the Russian State*). Lotman points out that while most of Karamzin's friends divided their lives between art and government service, Karamzin demonstratively declined any government appointments in order to devote himself to writing.[24] Not only did he participate as an editor and contributor–translator in the *Children's Reading for Heart and Mind* (*Detskoe chtenie dlia serdtsa i razuma*, one of Novikov's publishing ventures), but he single-handedly published two major journals, *Moscow Journal* (*Moskovskii zhurnal*, 1791–2), and *Messenger of Europe*, (*Vestnik Evropy*, 1802–3) as well as various literary almanacs and 'pantheons'. Karamzin also established close connections with a French journal *Le Spectateur du Nord*, published in Hamburg. His own works appeared in it in translation, and he also contributed articles about Russian literature, thereby introducing Russian literature to the European audience.[25] As editor of the journals he always signed his work (either by full name or real initials, from advertising to title page to footnotes). Although the individual works in the journals were frequently unsigned, or signed by curious pseudonyms, real or made-up initials, or strange orthographical signs, some were clearly identified. It is revealing that Karamzin, in the final issue of *Messenger of Europe,* felt compelled (by popular demand) to identify previously unidentified works, acknowledging most of them as his own.[26] Even so, many of them, particularly the works in *Moscow Journal*, remain unattributed to this day. Krylov and Klushin stressed identification of their own works even more radically (not to say polemically), and always signed them in their journal, *St. Petersburg Mercury*.[27]

Lotman, in *Sotvorenie Karamzina,* repeatedly makes a very

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