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978-1-107-69485-9 - Documents of Catherine the Great: The Correspondence with
Voltaire and the Instruction of 1767 in the English Text of 1768

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The Correspondence with
Voltaire and the *Instruction* of 1767
in the English text of 1768

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To
A. P. GOUDY

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INTRODUCTION

(i)

“Vive l’adorable Catherine!” cried Voltaire.

“Vous êtes devenue ma passion dominante.... Je me mets à vos pieds, je les baise beaucoup plus respectueusement que ceux du pape.... Je me mets à vos pieds avec adoration de latrerie.”

“Je prends hardiment ce titre de votre favorite”, replied the Empress, “Je baiserais de bon cœur cette main qui a écrit tant de belles choses.... Je ne cesserai de vous souhaiter l’âge de Mathusalem.”

Thus wrote two creators of the eighteenth century in the years in which that century reached and passed its height. Both were adventurers with those cosmopolitan careers in which the age abounded. The dictator of French learning had been safer in Berlin than in Paris, and now posed as a Swiss. The German princess, ever studiously Russian, had long dreaded the Petersburg Bastille, and now lay in peril of deposition. In externals, indeed, no two correspondents could be more unlike. Voltaire, when the interchange began, verged on seventy, while Catherine had not half his years. Like Thiers, he was “all brain”, while in face and frame he formed the prototype of the frail Leo XIII, ablest and most gentle of modern popes. Catherine, but a few years earlier, had charmed young Poniatowski into forgetting that Siberia existed. With her black hair and long eyelashes, her skin of dazzling whiteness, her lips made for kisses, her perfect hands and arms, her pleasant voice and active bearing, he adored a mistress at once captivating and noble, who turned with perfect ease from the gayest trifling to the most serious calculations. In gaiety indeed she resembled Voltaire, and like him she remained gay long after youth had flown. Her immense vitality produced what he owed to his more subtle insight and long-practised pose.

Their gaiety informs a correspondence which illuminates the

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years 1763–77, years which form the very pith and marrow of the century. For Europe, freed from the internecine strife which began in 1740, had now turned hopefully to the advancement of civilisation, and, ere Voltaire died, achieved astonishing success. Cook and others only less eminent explored the earth, while the scientists computed its density and explained its structure. Within a decade, hydrogen, nitrogen and oxygen were discovered. Coke, Watt, Arkwright, Hargreaves, Wedgwood—such names were pledges that what the scientist might discover would be applied to the benefit of man. Inoculation and steam power were introduced. Meanwhile the science of government shared in the advance. A young Italian expounded the relations between crime and punishment: a Portuguese statesman condemned slavery. Autocrats in other lands showed themselves eager for new light, but while they turned towards Montesquieu, Rousseau produced a mirage or a new illumination. Religious intolerance at least was condemned by all progressive men. While Wesley was becoming a national institution, the Jesuit hold was broken, and the French philosophers gained the ear of educated Europe. “Si l’opinion est la reine du monde”, wrote Voltaire to D’Alembert, “les philosophes gouvernent cette reine.”

The movement of the human mind in these years shook economic theory no less than physical, political and religious. While Adam Smith was working out his system, Necker and Turgot stood opposed. In this electric atmosphere, moreover, art flourished. For the age, with its classical dignity, proportion and restraint, it could be claimed that in it every article that the French peasant saw around him was a thing of beauty. While Johnson talked with Boswell, and Goldsmith, Sterne, Sheridan and Smollett charmed mankind, Lessing and Goethe were discovering new avenues to the emotions. Conscious of its progressive civilisation, Europe was at this time justly proud.

(ii)

In 1762 Voltaire had been for a generation the unquestioned patriarch of literary Europe. “For a poet”, said Rameau’s nephew, “there is Voltaire.” “And who else?” “Voltaire.”

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“And for a third?” “Voltaire.” “And a fourth?” “Voltaire.” A century after his death, John Morley could still describe him as the very eye of modern illumination, the most trenchant writer in the world. This rank was the reward of his prose, and not least of his 14,000 letters.

Frederick the Great, the foremost contemporary monarch, and the most vindictive, forgave him everything rather than be shut out from his correspondence. This, which no mortal has surpassed and of which Frederick saw but a tiny fraction, made Voltaire “the newsvendor of Europe” and a really considerable power. In Russia, where the educated and fashionable aped the French, his name had become generic for a man of letters. Russians placed their sons *dans les Voltaire*, as Swiss families, brought up on Crusoe, became Robinson on desert islands. Until 1762, however, when “almost with a saucer of cherry brandy at her lips” the daughter of the great Peter died, Voltaire could claim no pupil on the Russian throne. Through five campaigns, indeed, Elizabeth’s troops on the east of Prussia, like those of Louis XV on the west, had been striving to crush that champion of Philosophy, the “wicked man, who turned holy things into ridicule and never went to church”.

The summer of 1762, however, witnessed the sudden rise of a new planet as radiant as Voltaire himself. Startled in the spring by the news that Peter III, Elizabeth’s successor, had changed sides, thus saving Prussia, Europe learned in the summer that he had been assassinated and that his widow had seized the crown. Voltaire, trembling for “philosophy”¹ in its struggle with priest-ridden monarchy, saw Frederick restored to power and a philosopher-empress installed in Russia. For Catherine, although perhaps “the most political woman in history”, was also his devoted pupil. Their mutual magnetism triumphed over distance. Next year a contact was established which only death could break.

The actual intermediary seems to have been Pictet, Catherine’s

¹ The inverted commas, or a precautionary P, warn the reader that there is no question of metaphysics (which D’Alembert indeed associated with medicine and theology as the greatest absurdities produced by man) but rather of an enthusiasm for a “fertilising medley of new notions” poured out by literary men interested in natural science.

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gigantic secretary from Geneva. Voltaire, dreading some government onslaught which would renew his acquaintance with the Bastille, had bought four estates near the Swiss frontier, thus becoming a citizen of Berne and of Geneva as well as of France. Secure at Ferney within this “sort of quadrilateral”, he could write of himself as an old Swiss loving freedom, while orthodox French became “les Welches”, the un-French W hall-marking them as barbarians. Both to him and to his correspondents the curiosity of the French post office was well known, and his letters were not seldom phrased to instruct or defy or hoodwink the ministers of Louis XV.

Voltaire was already deeply interested in Russia. Ivan Shuvalov, a Russian Maecenas, had commissioned him to write a history of Peter the Great, and the consummate courtier sent one graceful compliment after another from Geneva to Petersburg. Now it was congratulation on taking Colberg from the Prussians, now condolence on the death of Elizabeth, now defence of her father’s reforms against the doctrinaire strictures of Rousseau. His admiration for Russia was no less sincere than the investigation which evoked it. The laws of history, he declared, allowed no palliative or disguise of Peter’s condemnation of his son to death. But the five great non-Greek churches of Petersburg, monuments of the spirit of toleration, formed an example to other nations. Poltava, where the Swedish king was overthrown and Peter’s new creation made secure, gave the opportunity for a great spread of civilisation and was therefore to Voltaire the only battle which has promoted the happiness of the human race. To him Elizabeth was not the crapulous illiterate but the clement empress who sentenced no man to death. The rumour ran that her successor had been poisoned or strangled by his wife, and Voltaire believed that she herself would soon be overthrown. But he was prepared to welcome her as the fourth woman to defend the great Peter’s work and above all as the upholder of toleration.

Within a month of Peter’s murder, indeed, Pictet was vindicating his mistress and the Russian nation in a letter to Voltaire. The Tsar, wrote Catherine’s secretary, had sunk into open and incessant debauchery, and his people had naturally replaced him

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by “the worthiest and greatest empress whom the world had ever known”. His letter crossed one to Shuvalov, in which Voltaire made light of the assassination. Like the Jesuits of old, he declared, Providence makes use of every means, and a drunkard’s death from colic at least teaches us to be sober. Another, dated Ferney, 25 September 1762, extols Catherine for her offer to print the menaced *Encyclopaedia* in Russia. Before the year ended, Pictet reported his mistress, “qui les sait presque toutes par cœur”, as clamouring for Voltaire’s works, and the Russian court for permission to act his latest plays. Thus was the way prepared for empress and patriarch to correspond direct.

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It is much to be deplored that during its first three years the correspondence between Catherine and Voltaire survives only in fragments. With the aid of drafts which may never have been copied and sent, or, if sent, may have failed to arrive, it is possible, however, to outline their relations. The foundation of their intercourse was their need of one another for the achievement of their purposes in life. Catherine, it is true, was sincerely grateful to the “philosopher” whose works had formed her mind and style, and, when she was on the verge of suicide, had relieved the spiritual starvation and social torment of her existence. As an amateur of intellectual exchanges, she relished in Voltaire’s letters that which she derived also from other “philosophers”, notably from Diderot and Grimm, by word of mouth. But with their common master, her senior by five and thirty years, she could never chatter as artlessly as sometimes with the disciples. To her Voltaire must be the arbiter of her credit and of Russia’s in the eyes of the enlightened world. Whether or no the topic was political, her letters to Voltaire were always in some degree documents of state.

Voltaire, on the other hand, found in Catherine an ally of rising value as her hold on the Russian sceptre grew more firm. All his most cherished projects she might attain or at least advance. While Jesuit influence appeared to be supreme in

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France, Voltaireans ruled or seemed likely to rule in Prussia, Russia, Denmark, Sweden, the Empire, and perhaps elsewhere. This handful of enlightened despots might defy the priests and spread over non-Latin Europe the liberty which won Voltaire's enthusiastic admiration among the English, Dutch and Swiss. Compared with this great hope, Catherine's power to subsidise the "philosophers" and their protégés was in Voltaire's eyes a small though real merit. While some English statesmen looked vaguely to the new northern star to preserve Europe from Bourbon domination, Voltaire formed the precise and not unfounded belief that the empress was ready to free her own oppressed subjects and those of the Turks and Poles. The historian of the great Peter was eager for fresh Poltavas.

Such were the realities which underlay the embroidered surface of their correspondence. Waliszewski, the Polish *advocatus diaboli*, sneeringly reminds us that in Voltaire's letters to D'Alembert Catherine becomes simply *la belle Cateau*, or *Cateau* without the *belle*, and that the two philosophers agree that such converts give "philosophy" but little cause to boast. Catherine, moreover, for all her incense, kept her nephews away from the patriarch and himself from Petersburg. "For God's sake", she implored Grimm in March 1778, "advise the octogenarian to remain in Paris. What should he do here? He would die, here or by the wayside, of cold, weariness and bad roads.... Tell him that *Cateau* is only good to see from a distance. That *Cateau* tickled me not a little." An unprejudiced reader may think that neither of these letters convicts the writers of hypocrisy in their mutual compliments. In their age, indeed, epistolary courtesy had become somewhat mechanical, as when, for example, a young noble ascribed the success of his courtship to the renown of his parents' virtues. Nothing in the Catherine-Voltaire letters was more dangerous to truth than Frederick's excuse for not inviting "the divine Emily" with Voltaire lest her radiance, added to Voltaire's, should be too blinding for his merely mortal vision. A compliment in a letter meant neither more nor less than a bow on meeting in the street.

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Whether sincere or not, the letters of Voltaire to Catherine were unquestionably written by Voltaire. Is the converse true? According to the article on Catherine in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “the letters to Voltaire attributed to her are not hers, and were probably composed for her by Andrei Shuvalov”. The writer gives neither his name, nor his authority, nor his reasons, but he declares that all other accounts of Catherine have been superseded by Waliszewski’s. He appears, that is to say, to rely upon a Polish scholar not only to treat dispassionately the career of the partitioner of Poland but also to pronounce upon the genuineness of correspondence in a foreign language. Waliszewski’s translator, it is interesting to note, remarks that his *Roman d’une impératrice* (22^e édition, ouvrage couronné par l’académie française, prix Théroutanne) “is not written in Parisian French: it has the colloquialisms of a foreigner, wishing to be more native than the natives”. On a question of French style, Waliszewski’s verdict could not compare in weight with that of M. Rambaud, who pronounces Catherine’s memoirs (those intimate confessions which were unquestionably her own) to be written “en très bon français”.

But has Waliszewski proved that Catherine’s letters to Voltaire were written for her? The passage upon which the encyclopaedist may rely occurs in book III, chapter ii of the *Roman*. It is conspicuously unconvincing. The author first quotes the verdict of M. Quérard, who is certain that not one of the letters to Voltaire was written by an empress to whom “la langue française était peu familière”. M. Quérard places them among his *Supercheries littéraires dévoilées*, because he finds them, as compared with Catherine’s instructions to the brother of Louis XVI, so far superior in style and sense as to establish a difference of authorship. He makes no account of two vital considerations—that the letters were written in Catherine’s prime, the instructions, in her old age; and that in 1763 her usual vehicle was French, for which she gradually substituted Russian as she grew older. Blind to the weakness of M. Quérard’s reasoning, Waliszewski half adopts his conclusion, which he

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then proceeds to demolish without realising that he is doing so. Catherine, he declares, certainly wrote her own letters to Grimm. These letters contain a passage from which he quotes at length. It was written near Moscow on 10 May 1775. Catherine loved dogs, and it was her order to have “Sutherland” stuffed that, according to Ségur, the weeping Chief of Police attempted to carry out on a naturalised court banker of that name. At this time “Anderson” was with his mistress, who thus depicts the scene and much of her own character as well.

“Mais le moyen d’écrire ? ne voilà-t-il pas Tom Anderson qui demande à être couvert ; il s’est placé vis-à-vis de moi sur un fauteuil ; j’ai le bras gauche et lui la patte droite appuyés sur une croisée ouverte, qu’on pourrait prendre pour une porte d’église, si elle n’était au troisième étage. De cette croisée sir Anderson considère, primo, la rivière de Moscou, qui serpente et fait à la portée de la vue une vingtaine de coudes ; il est inquiet, il aboie. C’est un vaisseau qui remonte la rivière ; non, non, c’est outre le vaisseau une vingtaine de chevaux, qui passent la rivière à la nage pour aller paître sur les prés verts et couverts de fleurs qui forment l’autre côté du rivage et qui s’étendent jusqu’à une hauteur couverte de terres fraîchement labourées et qui appartiennent aux trois villages qui sont là devant mes yeux. A gauche est un petit couvent bâti en briques, entouré d’un petit bois, et puis des coudes de la rivière et des maisons de campagne, qui s’étendent jusqu’à la capitale, qu’on voit dans le lointain ; la droite offre à la contemplation de M. Tom des hauteurs couvertes de bois épais, entre lequel on voit des clochers, des églises de pierre et de la neige aussi dans les creux des hauteurs. M. Anderson est fatigué de considérer une aussi belle vue apparemment, car le voilà qui s’emmaillotte dans sa couverture et qui va dormir. Si ma description appesantit vos paupières, vous pourrez, monsieur, en faire autant. Si vous êtes curieux, pour vous désennuyer, de connaître la race des Anderson dans son état présent, la voici. A la tête se trouve le chef de la race sir Tom Anderson, son épouse duchesse Anderson, leurs enfants, la jeune duchesse Anderson, monsieur Anderson. Tom Thomson, celui-ci s’est établi à Moscou sous la tutelle du prince Volkonski, gouverneur-général de la ville ; il y a encore, outre ceux-ci, dont

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la réputation est faite, quatre ou cinq jeunes gens, qui promettent infiniment et qu'on élève dans les meilleures maisons des villes de Moscou et de Pétersbourg, comme par exemple dans celle du prince Orlof, de messieurs Narychkine, chez le prince Tufiakine. Sir Tom Anderson a épousé en secondes noces mademoiselle Mimi, qui depuis ce temps-là a pris le nom de Mimi Anderson, mais jusqu'ici il n'y a pas de lignée. Outre ces légitimes mariages,—puisqu'il faut dire les défauts comme les vertus des gens dans leur histoire,—M. Tom a eu plusieurs attachements illégitimes: la grande duchesse a plusieurs jolies chiennes, qui lui ont mis martel en tête, mais jusqu'ici aucun de ses bâtards n'a paru, et il y a apparence qu'il n'y en a pas; quoi qu'on en dise, ce sont des calomnies."

The writer who could scribble thus in her unstudied written chat could assuredly produce anything which appears in the letters to Voltaire. Some two years later, in August 1777, her spirit and her French were equal to mocking Grimm and her son's German consort.

"Savez-vous la nouvelle du jour? Tandis que vous vous amusez à critiquer mes adresses de lettres, qui finissent par *Dieu sait où*, Euler nous prédit la fin du monde pour le mois de juillet de l'année qui vient; il fait venir tout exprès pour cela deux comètes, qui feront je ne sais quoi à Saturne, qui à son tour viendra nous détruire; or, la grande-duchesse m'a dit de n'en rien croire, parce que les prophéties de l'Evangile et de l'Apocalypse ne sont point encore remplies, et nommément l'Ante-christ n'est point venu, ni toutes les croyances réunies. Moi, à tout cela je réponds comme le barbier de Séville: je dis à l'un: Dieu vous bénisse, et à l'autre: va te coucher, et je vais mon train, qu'en pensez-vous?"

Next year Voltaire died, and Catherine bewailed the fatal May which had robbed her also of Chatham. In letter after letter to Grimm she gave imperial commands for all to be done that could pay homage to the memory of her master *la divinité de la gaîté* and much more. Now it was a hundred complete editions of his works to form citizens, *des génies*, heroes and authors. Now, on December 11, *fête de St André, avec une gelée de 16 à 17 degrés*, again with a dog playing round her, she instructs Grimm to pay

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for Voltaire's library. Her own letters she gives to Grimm, but they are not to be copied or in any way made public. She continues in a passage of supreme interest to readers of this book:

“Je crains l'impression comme le feu; je n'écris pas assez bien pour cela, quoi qu'en disent Mad. Denis et ses amis. Faites cela, commentez mes lettres si vous croyez qu'il en vaille la peine, cela peut faire l'ouvrage le plus bouffon qu'il y eût jamais. Or, écoutez donc, s'il y a de la force, de la profondeur, de la grâce dans mes lettres ou expressions, sachez que je dois tout cela à Voltaire, car pendant fort longtemps nous lisions, relisions et étudions tout ce qui sortait de sa plume, et j'ose dire que par là j'ai acquis un tact si fin que je ne me suis jamais trompée sur ce qui était de lui ou n'en était pas: la griffe du lion a une empoignure à elle que nul humain n'imita jusqu'ici, mais dont l'épître à Ninon du comte Schuvalov [sic] approche.”

This is the Andrei Shuvalov who, in the judgment of the British encyclopaedist, probably wrote Catherine's letters for her. Nephew of Voltaire's Maecenas, he was one of Catherine's titular chamberlains and her “little one”. When the correspondence began he was a lad of nineteen. Voltaire, who knew him well, ranked his French verse with the French prose of his own constant correspondents, Frederick the Great and Catherine herself. If he were a supreme artist he might perhaps have made the letters of his mistress to Voltaire what they plainly are—playful, witty, caressing, irreverent, politic, the natural expression of Catherine's personality. But to say that he may have had the ability and the opportunity to do so is very far from proving or even suggesting that he did. The most accommodating chamberlain could hardly be a pocket dictionary available at Petersburg, Tsarskoeselo, Moscow, Casan—wherever and whenever Catherine desired to write to Voltaire or to add to a letter already written. When the correspondence was at its brightest, Andrei and his bride were actually guests of Voltaire. The copious letters in French written by Catherine to Grimm and others, moreover, appear no less conspicuous for grace and charm. Even M. Quérard would hardly suggest that Andrei Shuvalov made a third in company when she wrote to Grimm or that he drafted the dog-scene for her to copy. Did he compose

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her tribute to his own literary powers? And was Voltaire's keen palate deceived when he spoke of Frederick, Catherine and Shuvalov as three separate writers?

The question is one of far more than merely literary importance. Regarding Catherine's whole career the truth lies in extremes. Either she was a consummate hypocrite, as many have declared, or, as she claims, and as some concede, above all else sincere. The paragraph to Grimm last quoted, if fraudulent, would lower her place in history.

We may pertinently ask whether any ambitious female Philosopher would have risked so humbling an exposure? Hardly Catherine, who wrote many drafts to Voltaire which exist in the Russian archives before transcribing the letters themselves. If Shuvalov or another had made the draft it could easily have been preserved as a copy. But, apart from the labour, it would have been a refinement of hypocrisy for the empress to write out the document that was to be kept as well as that which was to be sent. In many cases, too, the document that Catherine sent, differs from that which Catherine wrote and kept.

Such a fraud, moreover, would have robbed the empress of one of her dearest pleasures—composition. As she confessed to Grimm, the sight of a new pen made her fingers itch to write. Tales, plays, journalism, as well as letters and memoirs, flowed from an author who could only think with a pen in her hand and who could not dictate. In spite of some natural tremors, for a professional scribe to forego the tremulous delight of an interchange with the patriarch of letters was a sacrifice that only some weighty personal or political necessity could impose, and what such necessity could there be? Only, it would seem, that her command of French was inadequate to such a correspondence.

That Catherine never mastered French, that through a half-century for public utterances or for the composition of her private memoirs she could and did always find and conceal a Shuvalov, this may be left for a Frenchman to assert and for a credulous encyclopaedist to repeat. But it is not difficult to prove that she was a first-rate linguist, that she had studied French abundantly, and that she spoke it with perfect ease. French was the customary

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language of the court circle in which she was brought up and the indispensable stock-in-trade of all ambitious North German princesses. Her mother left a noteworthy correspondence in that language. Among Catherine's French instructors were Mlle Cardel and others among the many Huguenots who had fled to Prussia. An ardent reader, she turned naturally to that literature which was as yet hardly challenged by German or by Russian.

"She had begun", wrote John Morley, "with the books in which most of the salt of old France was to be found, with Rabelais, Scarron, Montaigne; she cherished Molière and Corneille; and of the writers of the eighteenth century, apart from Voltaire, the author of *Gil Blas* was her favourite."

If it was her Russian that critics in the 'sixties praised, it was because they took her French for granted. In 1765, when a new British minister made his inaugural speech at Court, Catherine replied extempore in French, the language of her private intercourse, 1755-7, with Hanbury Williams, with his secretary Poniatowski and with Lord Buckingham, ambassador from 1762 to 1765. Just twenty years later, when a new French minister, dazzled by what he saw, forgot his inaugural address, Catherine adjusted hers to meet his improvisation.

Her letters in French, says Grot, who edited those addressed to Grimm between 1774 and 1796, "reveal in the author an uncommon practical knowledge of a foreign tongue, its spirit and idioms".

"Contemporaries", writes the learned German Dr Brückner, "with one accord praised the refinement of social intercourse at the Russian court. This proved the significance of going to school to the Philosophers of France...Of these scholars Catherine equalled the best in mind and wit."

Grimm, thoroughly Parisianised, found that no one surpassed her in readiness and preciseness of expression. Her swift sallies, the verve and grace of her conversation with foreign men of letters left an ineffaceable impression on his mind, and all was done in French. Thus, on the vital question, did Catherine write these letters or merely pretend to have written them? both the nature of the case and the weight of evidence enforce the verdict

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of M. Masson, who knew her well and wrote impartially after she was dead:

“If the Code of Laws drawn up by Catherine bespeak a mind capable of enlarged views and a sound policy, her letters announce the wit, graces and talents of a woman of still greater merit. . . . She never had a man about her capable of writing her letters to Voltaire in French. Odart and Aubri, her secretaries at the time, did not write so well as herself. She was unquestionably the author.”

(v)

The first of the long series which has been preserved appears to date from mid-October 1763. It was written at a time when Catherine's throne, though never solid, was becoming less insecure, when she was resolving to disappoint the British, whom she admired, and connect herself with the Prussians, whom she distrusted, when the question of the Polish succession threatened to become acute, and when she was opening wide the gates of Russia to colonists from other lands. Her letter answered that of September 1763 to Pictet, in which Voltaire plays over almost every Leitmotiv of his share of the coming correspondence.

“Mon cher géant, vraiment votre lettre est d'un vrai philosophe: vous êtes un Anacharsis, et d'Alembert n'a pas voulu l'être. Je ne sais pourquoi le philosophe de Paris n'a pas osé aller chez la Minerve de Russie: il a craint peut-être le sort d'Ixion.

“Pour votre Jean-Jacques, ci-devant citoyen de Genève, je crois que la tête lui a tourné quand il a prophétisé contre les établissements de Pierre le Grand. J'ai peut-être mieux rencontré quand j'ai dit que si jamais l'empire des Turcs était détruit, ce serait par la Russie; et sans l'aventure du Pruth, je tiendrais ma prophétie plus sûre que toutes celles d'Isaïe.

“Votre auguste Catherine seconde est assurément Catherine unique; la première ne fut qu'heureuse. J'ai pris la liberté de lui envoyer quelques exemplaires du second tome de *Pierre le Grand*, par M. de Balk. Je me flatte qu'elle y trouvera des vérités. J'ai eu de très-bons mémoires; je n'ai songé qu'au vrai: je sais heureusement combien elle l'aime.

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“Ce qu’elle a daigné dicter à son géant me paraît d’un esprit bien supérieur. O qu’elle a raison, quand elle fait sentir cette fastidieuse prolixité d’écrits pour et contre les jésuites, et quand elle parle de ces quatre-vingts pages d’extraits sur des choses qu’on doit dire en dix lignes! que j’ai de vanité de penser comme elle! Mais on ne doit jamais rendre public ce qu’on admire, à moins d’une permission expresse; sans quoi il faudrait, je pense, imprimer toutes ses lettres.

“Savez-vous bien que madame la princesse sa mère m’honorait de beaucoup de bonté, et que je pleure sa perte? Si je n’avais que soixante ans, je viendrais me consoler en contemplant sa divine fille.

“Mon cher géant, mettez à ses pieds, je vous prie, ce petit papier pomponné. Si vous êtes bigle, vous verrez que je deviens aveugle et sourd. Elle daigne donc protéger la petite-fille de Corneille? Eh bien! n’est-il pas vrai que toutes les grandes choses nous viennent du Nord? Ai-je tort?

“Madame votre mère vous mandera les nouvelles de Genève. Pour moi, je suis si pénétré du billet que j’ai lu de votre auguste impératrice, que j’en oublie jusqu’à votre grande république. J’ai baisé ce billet: n’allez pas le lui dire au moins; cela n’est pas respectueux.”

(vi)

Between the brilliant initial exchange of the autumn of 1763 and Letter II from the early summer of 1765, the relative positions of Catherine and Voltaire had greatly changed. Voltaire, now over seventy, lived on at Ferney, playing at squiredom, but working as hard in his way as Catherine in hers. The frequent bouts of illness, the honourable preoccupation with the victims of injustice, the thousand demands upon the time of the best-known figure of the day—none of these could sterilise the tireless author. Her letter is an acknowledgment of the first edition of his *Philosophie de l’histoire*. Almost one letter for every day that passed has been enshrined in his published correspondence.

But while in these twenty months Voltaire had steadily enlarged his fame, Catherine had vaulted to the head of Europe.

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Despite rumours and some hushed-up tumults, despite, too, the fundamental illegality of her title, Russia now seemed more firmly hers. In Panin she possessed an honest and able statesman. Her great Prussian neighbour had pledged himself to her alliance, and that pledge at least, for his own safety's sake, he meant to keep. In 1764 he had helped her to force on Poland a king "who had but one title to reign—that he had been her lover". Already statesmen saw that the twenty million Poles must either become her vassals or cede provinces to her empire. In Denmark, and even in Sweden, she had supplanted Louis XV. Britain was hotly courting her alliance. What power, save the Turk, would venture to attack her? proudly asked Panin, and Turkish attack must open the fairest prospect for Russian conquests. At the same time Catherine was showing an untiring zeal to improve the lot of her subjects. One provincial governor received from her in a single month nearly twenty lessons in the duties of his office, each of several hours' duration. "Mettez le Russe dans le bon chemin, il est capable de tout", wrote the outgoing British ambassador in 1765, while the incoming Frenchman noted that she had already raised the revenue by fifteen million livres.

(vii)

The correspondence had been carried on no further than to July 1765 before it touched on what had then become Catherine's chief ambition. This was no less than to remodel the laws of Russia in accordance with the new principles proclaimed in France. To this great design she devoted a fifth part of the fifteen hours which made up her working day. The results appeared in 1767 when her so-called *Instruction* saw the light.

This *Instruction* or *Nakaz* has become inseparably linked with Catherine's name. It embodies that liberal policy which in 1767 won her the title of "the Great" in Russia, and for a time made her the cynosure of Europe. Voltaire pronounced it the finest monument of the century. In Kluchevsky's phrase, it was her "political confession", comprising, as she herself declared, all that she had to say. First promulgated in Russian, within four

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years it appeared in twenty-three versions, including one or more in almost every European language. In 1771 two thousand copies were prevented by a timid government from entering France. Catherine's son forbade it to be read in Russia. Its influence is by no means to be measured by the facts that it did not create a lasting Russian parliament nor achieve a Russian code. But a parliament and a code were what the contemporary world expected, and without them interest in the *Instruction* fell away. The very text became rare. The version here reprinted, bearing, in an age of literary pseudonyms, an untraced Russian name, remains until to-day the only one in English. Ten years ago, a French writer declared that since 1769 the *Instruction* had not been reproduced. Its rarity, however, has not prevented a host of historians from criticising it in general terms. Catherine, according to many of them, was a plagiarist and a hypocrite. With the sole design of self-advertisement she passed off the work of others as her own.

Those who indict Catherine for plagiarism see in the *Instruction* an ill-compounded hash of Montesquieu with a spice of Beccaria. "Every sentence", says the writer in the *Cambridge Historical Series*, "is directly inspired by Beccaria's *Dei delitti e delle pene*, or by Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des Lois*." According to Chechulin's analysis, not less than four-fifths of the whole was derived from the works of others. Fifteen of the first twenty chapters are based on Montesquieu, and in these only 62 sections out of 340 come from another source.

Catherine herself made not the smallest attempt to minimise her indebtedness to her teachers. Beccaria received a cordial invitation to make his home in Russia. She termed Montesquieu's book her breviary, and uttered the hope that if the author observed her work from the next world he would forgive the pillage for the sake of the twenty million Russians whose condition it would improve. To Frederick the Great she mocked at herself as a crow in peacock's feathers, claiming as her own no more than the arrangement and here and there a word or line. Pokrovsky, however, finds her not only a plagiarist but a stupid plagiarist, who summarised Montesquieu without the wit to understand him. To hoodwink the French censors,

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Montesquieu had created an imaginary France which was really England, translating English liberties into terms of antiquated French institutions which he could safely praise. His sophisticated countrymen perfectly comprehended the device, and gleefully read between the lines. Catherine, on the other hand, copied maxims which in Panin's phrase would "renverser les murailles", such maxims as those which made the Senate the custodian of the laws and thus the guardian of the people against the sovereign's caprice and greed. Her ineptitude was most clearly displayed on the question of capital punishment. First, following Montesquieu, she holds in § 79 that a citizen merits death when he has taken life or offered so to do. But when in §§ 209–212 she quotes Beccaria it is to declare that in normal times to deprive a citizen of life must be unnecessary.

To much of this indictment the reply seems obvious. No sovereign is called upon to be an original jurist. To combine in one person a disposition to invent laws with autocratic power would be most dangerous to a state. What Russia required from Catherine was the ability to perceive that the existing laws were bad and the goodwill and energy to seek out better. Someone, by her command, must determine the principles of a better code, and someone, again by her command, must invent machinery for carrying those principles into effect. That Catherine saw the evil and that she showed apparent goodwill and energy, not even Pokrovsky can deny. By herself drafting the principles and decreeing the form of the legislative assembly she shortened the inevitable delay before achievement. Instead of wasting half her reign on attempting to think out the basis of a code, she turned to what has been acclaimed by enlightened men as the greatest book of the century in which she lived. *L'Esprit des Lois* had cost Montesquieu twenty if not forty years of toil. For two decades past all educated Europe had rejoiced in his wit and wisdom. To sneer at Catherine for passing off his maxims as her own is as senseless as to denounce George V for the composition of the king's speech. Such a plagiarist would be capable of publishing the Ten Commandments as his own hints on how to behave. As Diderot wrote, "Les 19 vingtièmes d'une nation sont condamnés à l'ignorance par leur état et leur imbecillité."

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L'autre vingtième est à présent même très éclairé, et l'est sans effet". Catherine purposed to benefit both sections; the larger, which in Russia comprised far more than nineteen-twentieths, by the substance of her decrees; the smaller, which knew its Montesquieu, also by the programme which so open a homage to his principles implied. She brought Russia nearer to freedom in 1767 than did Alexander I after overthrowing Napoleon, or Alexander II after the defeat of Russian absolutism by the West, or Nicholas II after the unprecedented humiliations of 1905. This she did by proclaiming as her own so many of the principles of Montesquieu as she judged advantageous to Russia. Some of his maxims and illustrations she adapted, and once at least she proclaimed the direct opposite of what he wrote. Where she found the young Italian Beccaria more convincing she turned by preference to him. Bielefeld and Justi were also drawn upon, and the supplements contain undisguised sections from the *Encyclopaedia*. In all her compilation Catherine was nothing that is ordinarily meant by plagiarist, nor a hypocrite in any sense at all.

The obvious path towards a true appreciation of the *Instruction* is indicated by its author in words which she chose long afterwards for her tombstone. "In the year 1744 she went to Russia to marry Peter III... Eighteen years of tediousness and solitude caused her to read many books. When she had ascended the throne of Russia, she wished to do good, and tried to bring happiness, freedom and prosperity to her subjects." As she herself declared, her mind was not creative. But she claimed to have found work easy and took credit for her power of distinguishing the salutary from the pernicious, a ruler's most priceless gift. In drawing up projects based on first principles she faithfully represented her age, and she surpassed most "projectors" in her power to begin to put these in execution. "I am a great beginner", she confessed, and the confession at least proves her sincerity. If we add that, as her whole life shows, she had unlimited ambition, unfailing courage, together with both the will and the power to conciliate, the *Instruction* appears as the natural product of the first years in which she sat firmly upon the throne.

Of this epoch (1765-6) she wrote shortly before her death an

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account which is indispensable to a just judgment of the *Instruction* and of herself. “For two years I read and wrote, and for eighteen months consulted no one, but was guided solely by my own heart and reason... When I thought that I had reached my goal, I began to show parts of my results to divers persons... including Prince Orlov and Count Nikita Panin. The latter said, ‘These are principles to throw down walls’.¹ Prince Orlov rated my work very high and often wished to show it to others, but I never showed more than a sheet or two at once. Finally I composed the manifesto summoning delegates from the whole empire, the better to learn the conditions of every section. These assembled in Moscow in 1767. I summoned several persons of different ways of thinking... to hear the *Instruction*. Every part of it evoked division. I let them erase what they pleased, and they struck out more than half of what I had written... I bade them take [the remainder] as rules upon which an opinion can be based, not as a law.”

These rules, described by our ambassador as not much bigger than the Standing Orders of the House of Lords, were to be read monthly as a guide to the deputies in their law-making. They were neither a code nor a decree establishing a parliament. Foreigners, however, persisted in believing them to be both, and the reputation both of Catherine and of the *Instruction* suffered.

To French diplomatists and statesmen, Catherine was the enemy who made Russia the tool of Britain. For more than ten months they had been discussing the report that she was working at a code of laws which, with the aid of an assembly, was designed to emancipate the slaves. Then, in October 1767, their consul at Moscow decried the whole proceeding. The meetings, he wrote, were reputed to be a comedy staged by despotism masquerading as humanity, and the *Instruction*, for all its casket of gold, “a compilation of the works of Montesquieu and of a book entitled *Du délit et des peines*”.

England at the same time was suffering from a lack of intelligent representation in Russia. Macartney, an able commoner interpolated between two duller peers, had at last been

¹ À renverser des murailles—quoted in French by the empress, who on this occasion wrote in Russian.

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suffered to return home, and his successor had not yet arrived. He had praised Catherine's design, but the task of reporting on the *Instruction* itself devolved on the acid and uninitiated secretary of legation, Shirley. "It is scarce possible", he wrote, "to be more active than she is, better acquainted with the genius of her subjects, or more attentive to improve this great advantage", but as, in his judgment, these intentions did not proceed from principles of the purest nature, her actions, like false pearls, had more *éclat* but less value than the genuine ones.

Thinking thus, he penned the famous lines which have been taken for the verdict of his country. "Knowing the restless dispositions of her subjects, the great object of her policy is to occupy them at home and abroad as much as possible. This motive... sharpened by her vanity, has made her undertake to be the legislator of this empire; but in order to do it with safety she has taken care to have in the commission such people only who will follow her dictates and who will form pompous representation of her generosity, justice and moderation."

Shirley knew the Russians better than he knew the empress. The fulfilment of his prophecy of the fate of her project has given a false lustre to his estimate of herself. "Were even these laws to be brought to a certain degree of perfection", he argued, "the extreme want of respected and disinterested magistrates would still prevent her feeling the good effects." The dilemma which Peter the Great had striven to will away by harsh decrees kept fast hold on Russia. Good laws postulate good officials, but without good laws officials cannot be made good. Catherine avoided Peter's absurdities. She issued no such decree as "Let it be done everywhere as at Riga and Reval", nor did she import foreign laws with foreign prisoners to work them. But she was an optimist in an optimistic age, an age prone to believe all men endowed with like capacity, and at least capable of being transfigured by precepts based on reason. Catherine had sacrificed much of the wisdom of the Philosophers to the prejudices of her Russian critics. Though she stood firm in condemning torture, she had consented to strike out many of her aphorisms in favour of peasant freedom. The deputies were not to be told, as she had wished, that food and clothing must be made the legal right of

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everyone. But such slanders as that the whole proceeding was a comedy staged by despotism were refuted by all her conduct. How could her prestige be advanced by the calculated failure of an enterprise which was conspicuously her own?

That enterprise—the composition, discussion and promulgation of the *Instruction*, the election of the 564 deputies and their provision with *cahiers* designed to formulate the grievances of Russia, the solemn assembling at Moscow (11 August 1767), the seventy-seven plenary sessions and the nineteen special committees, the transplantation to Petersburg (February 1768); the struggle, seventy sessions long, with Law; in mid-December, the call to the colours against the Turks; the evaporation of the project in a war of five campaigns and a terrible rebellion—that enterprise, which for four years absorbed Catherine's attention was neither a calculated nor an unqualified failure. A few months before the tragic interruption, the British ambassador visited the assembly. He beheld with surprise “not a black gown or anything that looked like a lawyer in the House”, and was astonished that a motion to declare all field officers noble was carried only by 242 votes to 213. He regarded the institution as a scaffolding, to be removed when Catherine's “noble edifice”, the novel code, should be complete. Although committees functioned for six years more, posterity can point only to a collection of isolated points in which the *Instruction* and the debates influenced specific statutes. Half a century later, according to Speranski, there were more than 30,000 decrees since the code of Alexis and no fresh code. But the *Instruction* and the assembly did not therefore fail wholly to benefit Russia. A national parliament which had been active for seventeen months could not vanish without a trace. It had taught the empress what her people desired, and in some degree what they were. The deputies, like the later Duma, something of “an anthropological museum”, had individually received an intensive training in public life. Above all, the crown had committed itself to ideas and principles which must stir up the stagnant Russia of tradition. Maxims which, to the rulers of a nation claiming to march at the head of civilisation, appeared subversive of authority and order had been proclaimed from the

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Russian throne. “The government”, declared Catherine, “which shackles natural freedom the least...best accords with the design of men in forming civil societies”, and her subjects enshrined her aphorisms in a golden casket. Once saluted by their empress as fellow-beings born to the benefits of natural law, they might indeed be re-enslaved but hardly without hope. Voltaire might justly utter the *Nunc dimittis* of Simeon.

(viii)

With the outbreak of the Turkish war, foreign policy once again became Catherine’s foremost care. Voltaire, more than any other man, could influence a section of European opinion and thereby promote the success of Russia. This success he ardently desired, as a victory of the freest thought in Europe over the most barbarous repression. The Poles, in his eyes, were the accomplices of the Turks and their rivals in persecution. The Catherine-Voltaire correspondence therefore blossomed with new life. From the first year of the war more letters survive than from the five preceding, and until 1774 a brisker *tempo* is maintained. Then, when the Turks lie prostrate, when Poland has undergone partition, when Pugachev’s rebellion has been crushed, and when Voltaire has passed his eightieth birthday, the exchanges become less frequent. They cease only with Voltaire’s death on the morrow of his apotheosis in Paris. His wit, his grace and his zeal for justice survived his powers of body. The last of the twelve thousand letters which remain were a card to his doctor: “Non in solo pane vivit homo sed in omni verbo quod oritur ex ore Tronchin”, and three lines of congratulation to Lally on his father’s vindication. “Le mourant ressuscite en apprenant cette grande nouvelle...il mourra content.”

(ix)

This book has been compiled to meet an emergency, with little beyond local resources. It has not been possible to venture far into “the vast labyrinth of Voltaire” or to complete some