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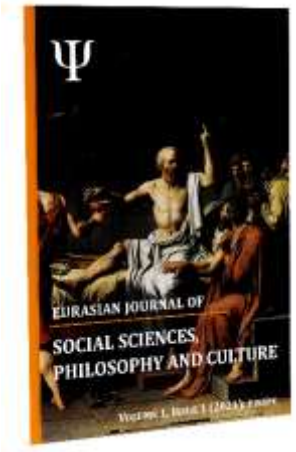

THE HISTORY OF THE RUSSIAN EPISTOLARY NOVEL IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

The article explains the concept of epistolary genre in Russian literature in eighteenth century, the study of the early development of the Russian novel, analysis of the institutional conditions of literature and their impact on literary tendencies.

The history of the Russian novel can be traced back to early medieval times with manuscript translations of Byzantine novels. However, it was only in the eighteenth century that Russian novelistic fiction started to appear in print and that educated Russians thought it no disgrace to confess that they themselves were authors of such texts. The acceptance of something like literature as an estimable cultural expression, and indirectly of the novel as an important literary genre, was only possible within conditions created by the reforms of Peter the Great. One of these conditions was an intense conversance with the secular culture of Western Europe. It follows that eighteenth-century Russian literature stands less in a closed national tradition that developed gradually from medieval times, than that it adopts its ideas and forms from a stockpile of thousands of years of European literature.

The early development of the Russian novel was determined by two significant factors. The first was the reform of Russian society that Peter the Great started around 1700, thereby creating the conditions from which a secular literature could emerge. The second was the state's relaxation of its control of printing presses during the 1760's, which resulted in a growing number of private persons publishing works of their own interest. These two factors in particular make all the difference between the development of the novel in Russia and Western Europe, where a secular culture had existed since the Middle Ages and the state had never

exercised complete control over book production. The emergence of secular literature one of the main characteristics of Russian culture before Peter's reforms was the dominance of the Orthodox Church. In Russia, the church had absolute control over all printing presses and never published works it considered immaterial to the salvation of the soul, in particular something as secular as literature.

Therefore, works of narrative fiction like facetiae and western European novels of chivalry, made to look like native folk tales by the creative additions of Russian copyists, were not allowed to appear in print and were sold only as shabby hand-written folios, for example at the stalls at Moscow's Bridge of the Redeemer.

Peter the Great restricted the influence of the church, introducing a new and in essence secular mentality to Russian culture. Subscribing to the modern belief that man could improve himself and his environment, he tried to exploit the potential of his people and his country to the fullest.[1] For this purpose he needed the technical and organisational skills developed in Western Europe, so he required that all who entered his service should receive a European-style education. Russian noblemen, for their part, used this obligatory education to distinguish themselves from other social groups by linking the concept of nobility with personal refinement, the appreciation of art and literature and even the ability to produce literary works.

By 1750 literature had become a noble occupation. The secular notion of literature that attached cultural prestige to non-religious texts thus entered Russia as a result of Peter's reforms and the consequent change in status of the Russian civil service class. The absence of social institutions operating independently from the state characterised eighteenth-century Russian society.[2] It was the state now that took over the church's control of education and printing presses.[3] Thus, the new Russian literature evolved in close connection with the state. Authors were servants of the state and clients of the developing imperial court. They often tried to please the head of state or one of his favourites and tended to express the ideas of the emperor or one of the bureaucratic factions. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Russian government became aware of the fact that the exploitation of the country's wealth would improve if more private initiative were allowed.[4] With this aim, the nobility was exempted from obligatory state service, while at the same time room opened up to publicly express ideas not directly dictated by the state. In this way Catherine's government created an atmosphere of tolerance that, although restricted in the modem sense, was free enough for literature to flourish. These changes in the institutional conditions of literature had their impact on literary tendencies. During the first half of the eighteenth century, Russian literature was dominated by a small group of authors closely connected with the court and

[1] Raeff, M.: The W ell-Ordered Police State. Social and Institutional Change through Law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600-1800. N ew Haven/London, 1983. P.204

[2] Raeff, M.: Understanding Imperial Russia. State and Society in the Old Regime. New York, 1984.

[3] Marker, G.: Publishing, Printing, and the Origins o f Intellectual Life in Russia, 1700-1800. Princeton, NJ, 1985.

[4] Raeff, M.: The W ell-Ordered Police State. Social and Institutional Change through Law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600-1800. N ew Haven/London, 1983.

governmental institutions such as the Academy of Science. The most prominent of these authors were Vasilii Trediakovskii, Mikhail Lomonosov and Aleksandr Sumarokov. This limited circle of authors produced works that adhered to the same classicist set of literary rules, so that the period can be defined simply as "The Age o f Classicism". However, this homogeneity was destroyed after 1760 when more people started to produce literature. Those classicist works still being published had to compete with literary works of many diverging tendencies.[5]

The debate about the novel The greater availability of the printing presses caused a "boom of books", in which one literary genre clearly dominated: the novel.[6]6 While visitors of an early eighteenth-century Russian bookstore had only a handful of translated prose works to choose from, such as Fénelon's "Télémaque" or Lesage's "Gil Bias", after 1760 they were confronted with shelves sagging under the weight of novels. However, in the eighteenth century, the novel was still a disputed genre, and its appearance in Russia sparked off a debate about its moral and literary merits, repeating on a small scale the discussions held in France for over a century. The arguments for and against the novel were of an ideological and aesthetic nature.[7] First, the novel was said to offend Christian morality. It was considered immoral because of the depiction of human passions such as love. In 1730, representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church accused Vasilii Trediakovskii of corrupting youth in connection with his translation of abbé Tallemant's "Journey to the Island of Love" (Voyage de I'Isle d 'Amour) (1663), which was in fact the first novel printed in Russian. In his "Rhetoric" (Ritorika) of 1748 Lomonosov held the novel responsible for some people's "persistence in animal passions", a reproach echoed by Aleksandr Sumarokov, who in his "Letter on the Reading of Novels" of 1759 accused novelists of writing "bestial descriptions".[8] 8 In 1766, the enlightened government of Catherine II widely distributed Ivan Betskoi's educational "Brief Instructions", which advised that love novels be withheld from young people on the grounds that they led to moral corruption. A second argument against the novel was that the illusions and false realities created by this genre made it incompatible with Enlightenment ideology.

Lomonosov compared novels with "fairy tales" and Sumarokov praised Cervantes novelistic work because it showed convincingly how readers of novels run the risk of turning into foolish Don Quixotes. In addition, the novel raised desires that could not be realised without destroying the existing social order. For this reason young girls of marriageable age should not read about true love, nor should peasants read about the pleasant lives of nobles." Indulgence in the novel's wish-fulfilling world contradicted the neo-stoic ideals of Russian civil servants. The novel had a potentially subversive quality. The moral arguments against the novel were in many ways intertwined with aesthetic

[5] Marker, G.: Publishing, Printing, and the Origins o f Intellectual Life in Russia, 1700-1800. Princeton, NJ, 1985.
[6] Sevast'ianov, A.N.'Ê Rost obrazovannoi auditorii как faktor razvitiia knizhnogo i zhumal'nogo dela v Rossii (1762-1800). M., 1983.
[7] May, G.: Le Dilemme du Roman au XVIIIe siècle. New Haven/Paris, 1963.
[8]Lomonosov, M. V.\ Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. M.:L., 1950-1959.

ones. It seems that the demand for social discipline was reflected in literary discipline, and it should not be surprising that in the mind of a poet like Sumarokov stoic virtues blended with classicist beauties. In his article of 1759 against the novel, Sumarokov opposes "distasteful romance-like style"[9], meaning an extravagant narration, to a "natural style", which uses purist, and abstract, universal terms. He associated both styles with moral categories, identifying the ugly 'romance-like' or romanesque with immoral, unrestrained behaviour, and the beautiful natural style with a moral, disciplined mode of conduct.[10] It seemed that those who identified with state's best interest and endorsed its authority felt that any tolerance shown to literature, any loosening of literary restrictions in favour of the novel, would similarly lead to a relaxing of discipline in social behaviour.[11] The historians of the westem -European novel indeed associate the genre with a dissolution o f authoritarian social structures, linking its rise to democratic movements, such as the emergence of the bourgeoisie. A similar picture can be painted of the Russian novel. Whereas Russian novelistic prose was initially allowed to exist only as manuscript literature, beyond the reach of authority, it subsequently emerged in print when enlightened government permitted a freer and less controlled social life. Literature, and especially those forms that presupposed reading in private, like the novel, became one of the vehicles of such desires. The novel constituted, as it were, a transitional zone between the individual and society, protected from the imperatives of real life. It was by virtue of this non-coercive nature that the novel could turn "into the inescapable biosphere of our daydreams", as the first historian of the Russian novel, Grigorii Blagosvetlov, wrote.[12] The epistolary novel in particular had the potential to give voice to the emancipatory desires harboured by many members of the eighteenth-century Russian civil service class.

Conclusion. As the obstacles to be transgressed in the Russian epistolary novels are taken from actual conditions of social reality, Russian readers must have read these novels as energised with real social tensions. To a certain degree fiction is analogous to fantasy and dreams, however, in literature there is always a moment of conscious reflection. So literary fiction is not only structured by desire, but also by the opposing forces of reality. So the course of the narrative, the way the narrative is told, is not only determined by desire, but as much by a sense of reality, by a need to conform to social demands. From this perspective it appears that the formal characteristics of the epistolary novel correspond with psychological functions. These characteristics, especially in the way Russian authors applied them, offered specific possibilities to reflect on desire and its relationship with social reality. In short, the epistolary novels under discussion can be seen as an endeavour by some Russian authors to give meaning to the conflicting forces of desire and social

[9] Sumarokov, A.P.: Polnoe sobranie vsekh sochincnii v stikhakh i proze. M., 1781.
[10] Sumarokov, A.P.: Polnoe sobranie vsekh sochincnii v stikhakh i proze. M., 1781.
[11] May, G.: Le Dilemme du Roman au XVШe siècle. New Haven/Paris, 1963.
[12] Blagosvetlov, A.: Istoricheskii ocherk russkago prozaicheskago romana li Syn otechestva. No. 27. Spb., 1856.

reality and to solve this conflict through a fictitious construct. Therefore, despite their apparent simplicity, these early, sometimes long-neglected Russian texts may give an especially clear insight into hearts and minds of eighteenth-century Russians, shedding new light on the complexities of their lives.

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