

Russian Studies: New Synergies

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Abstract: This survey traces a set of interrelated trends that characterise current scholarly approaches to the literary culture of the Russian Enlightenment. These include the impact of New Historicism on discussions of court literature and ritual, the relation between literary producers and consumers, and the different models of authorial careers that arise and lead to diverse models of classicism as well as different lyric practices. The article also draws attention to important new editions and works of reference that are providing tools in the ongoing discussion of how the eighteenth century understood the modernising project of the Enlightenment.

Keywords: Russia, classicism, nationalism, science and literature, authorship

Since the 1980s, eighteenth-century literary studies in Russian has been a relatively small but dynamic set of parallel sub-fields that, it might be thought, have yet to interact sufficiently. Outside the chief Russian research cluster, based at the Institute of Russian Literature and its archive in St Petersburg, the discipline has perennially attracted respectable numbers of individual scholars working across the United States, the UK and western Europe. The primary purpose of this selective survey is to identify separate strands: in literary history, including editions; in literary biography; and in questions about the application of definitions of Enlightenment to Russia, with an emphasis on the history of ideas. A secondary purpose will be to suggest that the field has benefited from a certain amount of synergy and converging discourses that suggest positive research trends for the future.

Critical discourse on eighteenth-century Russian literature has long been dominated by a model of classicism as a rule-bound system. The activity of writing literary history of a very traditional kind has continued with more recent works that are exercises in clarification and amplification. The best recent textbooks of the period valuably clarify attributions and associations with movements, and if they only modestly revise the larger picture of how literature was written and consumed in the eighteenth century, their openness to a much larger corpus of secondary and tertiary texts adds considerable depth to our understanding of the literary processes. If some of these new accounts keep literature at a distance from the world of institutions

and ideas, and rarely tell a narrative, they positively translate huge amounts of detailed research into a comprehensive account of all writers, major and minor, and their modes.¹

Yet several new trends have revised the picture of the Russian eighteenth century as a period that established the correct rules of writing and then abided by them. The first new departure relates to a more sophisticated understanding of genre and the literary system. Older accounts of Russian classicism tended to equate theoretical prescriptions found in rhetorical handbooks and grammars with actual practice and to be synchronic, whereas the more nuanced recent accounts of style are alert to the degree of flux in the literary system, showing how rules of grammar, syntax and style were continuously modified as the Russian literary language developed away from ecclesiastical language. Work on the history of the literary language and stylistics has made its mark on reassessments of Russian classicism, creating a picture of greater dynamism and uncertainty about fundamental aspects of language and the creation of a secular literature.² Scholarship both in Russia and abroad has not shed its tendency to write literary history in terms of genre, but recent work has shown far more interest in the various contexts for poetry in the period. Questions of aesthetics, nationalism and politics are much more part of the critical agenda. In the related area of genre studies, newer research is dismantling the dogmatic Marxism of yesteryear, with its realist teleology. By looking at a much wider inventory of texts, including a substantial body of translated fiction, revisionist studies have drawn on Bakhtin and other genre theorists, revealing a more experimental and playful indigenous tradition of fiction. Travel literature has attracted renewed interest partly because voyages openly raise issues of cultural relativism and value, and also because literary voyages tend to play with sophisticated questions of identity and form. Drawing on a toolkit well stocked with semiotic and cultural theory, Andreas Schönle's fine study of travel writing explores the self-representation of first-person narrators in a genre where writing has to negotiate conventions of genre with documentary functions.³ Future systematic discussions of separate genres – work very much needed for the elegy – would profit from a method that combines the best of New Historicist sophistication and new critical exegesis.⁴ Context increasingly means reader-reception of a historicised kind, and here too the opportunities to talk about the pragmatics of reading in the period offer scope for new work. Soviet scholarship on the history of the book was well advanced in the 1980s. More recent work provides a more statistically precise picture of the patterns of book purchasing and, importantly, correlates subscription patterns to the social class of readers, an important refinement given the stratification of Russian society after the Petrine reforms of the 1720s. Researchers should be encouraged to assess the connections between such data and the reception history of genres such as the novel, which would be one way of defining the meaning of concepts such as taste.⁵

Historical scholarship has been a positive influence in opening up greater understanding of the impact of context on literary culture, especially with respect to imperial policy and the literary culture of court life. Undoubtedly the historian Richard Wortman's seminal work, like Stephen Baehr's innovative study of utopian iconography and rhetoric in court literature, has given impetus to a new generation of literary application to their conclusions about court ritual and the symbolic languages of power.⁶ The trend away from antiquarian description that beset older literary histories and towards a more productive New Historical type of reading, focused on semiotic systems and iconography, is exemplified in Andrei Zorin's exploration of nationalism and literature, which inscribes the literary practice of ode writers into their political circumstance at court far more than formalist readings of the ode have allowed. Zorin argues that to a measurable extent official poetry influenced approaches at court to foreign policy as well as reflecting them.⁷ Similarly, though with more emphasis on the didactic function of literature than its symbolic language, Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter examines the connection between ideas of society and works of theatre written during the reign of Catherine II.⁸ Insofar as political theory was underdeveloped in Russia, it is in the large corpus of plays treating questions of individual behaviour, class values and benevolent despotism that one finds responses to Catherine's rule. Wirtschafter's book complements more speculative work on the Russian idea of monarchy and is particularly good on the way drama registered the gentry's insecurity after 1785. With the founding of a university as well as other institutions of learning, and with the appearance of academies of science and of fine arts, the public spaces of metropolitan Russia bore a meaningful, albeit incomplete, resemblance to European cultures. By making effective use of recent work on notions of a pre-political public sphere in Russia, Wirtschafter sets the growth of a vibrant theatrical life in this larger civic context. Sensibly, she refrains from overplaying a Habermasian approach. While there were relatively few newspapers or outlets for public opinion, and even fewer spaces like the coffee houses that have become a classic locus of the European public sphere, the founding of the Imperial Theatre in 1759 gave playwrights an opportunity to face the public and create works that held up a mirror to Russian institutions and also projected an ideal of what might be achieved under an Enlightened absolute ruler.

Sociological approaches to authorship more than literary biography have examined questions of self-definition, status and economic circumstances. Earlier work tended to cast literary quarrels as purely a matter of doctrinal differences in style, and concomitantly to see any deviations from style as either a polemical response to rival systems or as an attempt at originality (see Anna Lisa Crone's *The Daring of Derzhavin: The Moral and Aesthetic Independence of the Poet in Russia*, from 2001, for an example of that critical model). Over the past fifteen years scholars such as Irina Reyfman and Marcus Levitt have re-situated these debates in the literary field and provided far more rounded accounts of writers' lives that relate their literary work to a growing

psychology of authorship that is also class-based.⁹ Reyfman's study of Vassily Trediakovsky restored to the limelight a writer whose important theoretical writings and highly experimental attitude to the literary language were eclipsed by his failures at court and a difficult style.¹⁰ But her particular emphasis on the dynamics of literary reputation adds a new context that finds its complement in the work of Marcus Levitt on the career of one of Trediakovsky's competitors, Alexander Sumarokov. Levitt's micro-historical researches reconstruct the biography and intellectual profile of this seminal figure, whose career is virtually a parable of the struggle for independence that a writer with professional aspirations faced when stuck in a patronage-based system.¹¹ Whether Sumarokov's provocations of powerful figures make him truly a *philosophe* like Voltaire rather than just something of a gadfly is a supposition that deserves to be further tested (and probably contested).¹²

Fundamental to such discussions is the ongoing work of textual editing, in which the Eighteenth-Century Group based at the Institute of Russian Literature (known as Pushkin House) in St Petersburg has been at the forefront. Drawing on its extensive eighteenth-century manuscript holdings and rare books, this team has vastly extended the scope of material available and changed the literary landscape and our understanding of the canon and writers' individual careers and working patterns. The availability of much of this material online through their website has unquestionably made an enormous difference. The recently completed *Dictionary of Russian Writers of the Eighteenth Century* will prove to be an invaluable reference work in future discussions of the status of the writer and the history of translation and book trade in the period.¹³ Such textual productions also reveal the extent of a writer's professional activities: manifold in the case of Alexander Sumarokov, for example, since he had an active career as the Director of the Imperial Theatre and as a playwright. The forthcoming Pushkin House *Collected Works of Alexander Sumarokov*, who was hailed by contemporaries as Russia's Boileau or Racine, will extend revisionist discussions of intellectual life and the shape of literary careers, while also providing new information on technical questions such as stanza form. Among recent separate editions, the impeccably produced critical edition of Sumarokov's odes, under the direction of Ronald Vroon, will be a boon to all those interested in Russian verse forms of the period and the history of poetic genre.¹⁴

A third area marked by new departures lies in the intersection of literature and history of ideas. Here the definition of Enlightenment is an explicit area of concern. No Russian writer of the period explored a broader set of Enlightenment practices, both literary and philosophical, than Nikolai Karamzin. Typically emphasis had fallen on Karamzin as the key theorist of Russian Sentimentalism, but the first complete translation of Karamzin's imposing *Letters of a Russian Traveller* (1797-1801) may shift the focus on to his work as a theorist of Enlightenment.¹⁵ Similarly, there has been an ongoing reassessment of the writings of Alexander Radishchev. His status as a dissident writer at the end of Catherine's reign and the precise political

content of his writings have been subjected to important revisions that also aim to reveal how extensively his writings borrow from European narrative techniques and Enlightenment discourses. More than had been understood, Radishchev, like Karamzin, is a writer whose theory and practice of literary form stands in critical relation to his Enlightenment critique of his society.¹⁶ Further work on his theories of the soul, matter and ideas of liberty are needed and will also be timely in light of much recent scholarship on the history of French materialism.

The degree to which Russia can be said to have had an Enlightenment remains an interestingly contested area. Work on Freemasonry and the discourse of civic space in Russia have partially corrected the view of a culture managed top-down by a highly enterprising Catherine the Great, and this is clearly one area where further description of the interaction of institutions and individuals will alter the history of mentalities in Russia of the period.¹⁷ At least provisionally, it fortifies the picture of a society in which a small but highly accomplished body of public figures, writers and thinkers tackled questions about their nation's identity and its ruler's commitment to key parts of the Enlightenment programme. Just what definitions of Enlightenment reflect the values and activities of contemporary Russians continues to be a question profitably discussed by historians and literary scholars. Clear evidence for shifts on the social historical side, whether in dress and manners, private life or in the government's commitment to social amelioration, remain counterbalanced by only sparse evidence of home-grown engagement with the philosophical underpinnings of the Enlightenment.

The debate over the legacy of Catherine's reign has initiated new evaluations of all policy aspects of her rule and the tension between her actual and theoretical governance models. New approaches to the question of what Enlightenment (or even 'the Enlightenment') meant demonstrate that this is a moving target, and that one's sense of the progressive and regressive in Russian intellectual life depends very much on whether the focus of accounts is institutions, exceptional individuals, book publication, history of academies and universities or original philosophical statement. New lexicographic work on the term *prosveshchenie* traces its contradictory uses, while other studies of keywords such as 'tranquillity' identify how single terms fused new medical understanding with the ongoing assimilation of ancient philosophy as part of the discovery of the ancients in a form of a belated humanism.¹⁸

Questions of Enlightenment and theology cannot be divorced from their scientific context. By the 1770s resistance to modern science – the Church's objections to Copernican theory had been caricatured in the 1720s – had dwindled, and new work on the physical and life sciences in Russia has positively shifted the balance of discussion away from the history of institutional factions and rivalries on to the scientific content. We can only hope for more such work for the sake of the topic itself and because of its collateral importance.¹⁹

There is no question that the intersection of history of science and literature is a highly promising area that has the potential to transform our understanding of how individual writers used key terms associated with Enlightenment ideas – and the degree of individual variation is considerable – and to define the outlook of the period's most important writers.²⁰ No figure straddles the world of literature and science in Russia more notably than Mikhailo Lomonosov. Recent work on the interface between his poetry and research is modifying our understanding of his religious outlook and, importantly, extending the models of the European man of science to Russia. Where work by Reyfman and Levitt has taken the case of Sumarokov as a testing ground for describing the self-image of the author and his status in relation to Russian social hierarchies, essays by Kirill Ospovat and Andrew Kahn explore how the professional distinction of the scientist at the Academy underpinned Lomonosov's ideas about his independence as an author.²¹ At the same time further research, much needed in the case of Radishchev's philosophical work, is likely to give us a more precise understanding of the connections between natural philosophy and literature and their overlapping discourses. This is vital precisely because philosophy as an independent method of investigation made only slender inroads in Russia: the limited reception of important thinkers from Locke to Hume, Leibniz to Kant, is striking by comparison with the impact of Voltaire and Rousseau on literary representation. Literature subsumed philosophy, and dialogues about ideas are refracted through poems and quasi-fictional treatises. The degree to which science and, specifically, advances in optics informed the lyric poetry of Gavrila Derzhavin, the author of canonical poems about God, Nature and the universe, has finally garnered close analysis that promises to open further connections.²² By extension it would be very good to have studies more on the model, for instance, of G. J. Barker-Benfield's work on sex and sensibility in eighteenth-century Britain that relate literature and the human sciences in describing culturally prescribed patterns of feeling.

In sum, the past decade has seen important consolidation in literary history and innovation across the disciplinary boundaries. The most recent work suggests that the centre of gravity in eighteenth-century Russian studies has shifted towards describing the role that individual writers, and literature itself, played in formulating, representing and enacting ideas and postures of Enlightenment. No synthetic discussion on the scale of Roy Porter's or Jonathan Israel's treatments has yet emerged to offer a unifying thesis about the nature of the Russian Enlightenment based on the full range of literary, social and intellectual history. But the number of fine-mesh studies that focus on different aspects of the discussion is likely to be laying the groundwork for such ambitions by providing a more accurate and granular picture of what Russians thought during and about the Enlightenment. Within this rich, multi-dimensional context the time is now ripe for the bolder synthetic statements, in line with the recent work by Dan Edelstein, that correlate the whole phenomenon of writing in the period with Enlightenment outlooks.²³

NOTES

1. See especially the two books by Joachim Klein: *Puti kul'turnogo importa: trudy po russkoi literature XVIII veka* (Moscow: Iazyki slavianskoi kul'tury, 2005) and *Russische Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2008); and for a comprehensive history of the ode as a genre in the period, see Nadezhda Alekseeva, *Russkaia oda: razvitie odicheskoi formy v XVII-XVIII vekakh* (St Petersburg: Nauka, 2005).

2. See especially V. M. Zhivov, *Language and Culture in Eighteenth-Century Russia* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2009).

3. Andreas Schönle, *Authenticity and Fiction in the Russian Literary Journey, 1790-1840* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). See also Andrew Kahn, 'The Rise of the Russian Novel and the Problem of Romance', in Jenny Mander (ed.), *Remapping the Rise of the European Novel* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2007), p.185-99, and David Gasparetti, *The Rise of the Russian Novel: Carnival, Stylization, and Mockery of the West* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998).

4. For a start on the elegy, and its visual component, see Luba Golburt, 'Derzhavin's Ruins and the Birth of Historical Elegy', *Slavic Review* 65 (2006), p.670-93.

5. For the best example of scholarship in this area see A. Iu. Samarin, *Chitatel' v Rossii vo vtoroj polovine XVIII veka* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo MGUP, 2000).

6. Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in the Russian Monarch* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Stephen Baehr, *The Paradise Myth in Eighteenth-Century Russia: Utopian Patterns in Early Secular Russian Literature and Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

7. Andrei Zorin, *Kormia dvuglavogo orla: literatura i gosudarstvennaia ideologiia v Rossia v poslednei treti XVIII-ogo pervei treti XIX-ogo* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2001). Also relevant are the studies collected in Vera Proskurina, *Mify imperii: literatura i vlast' v epokhu Ekateriny II* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2006). While Zorin treats the ideological content of texts as mirrors of court politics, Proskurina emphasises the ideal or virtual in tracing the neoclassical symbolic discourses in Catherine's iconography.

8. Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, *The Play of Ideas in Russian Enlightenment Theatre* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003).

9. Irina Reyfman, 'Writing, Ranks and the Eighteenth-Century Russian Gentry Experience', in Andrew Kahn (ed.), *Representing Private Lives of the Enlightenment*, SVEC 2010:11 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010), p.149-66.

10. Irina Reyfman, *Vasilii Trediakovskiy: The Fool of the 'New' Russian Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

11. Marcus Levitt, 'Sumarokov and the Literary Process of his Time', *Early Modern Russian Letters: Texts and Contexts* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2009), p. 6-119.

12. See Amanda Ewington, *A Voltaire for Russia: A. P. Sumarokov's Journey from Poet-Critic to Russian Philosopher* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010).

13. Natalia Kochetkova et al. (eds), *Slovar' russkikh pisatelei XVIII veka* (St Petersburg: Nauka, 1988-2010).

14. Alexander Sumarokov, *Ody torzhestvennyia: elegii liubovnyia* (Moscow: OGI, 2009).

15. N. M. Karamzin, *Letters of a Russian Traveller*, trans. with an intro. and commentary by Andrew Kahn, SVEC 2003:4 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2003), p.1-593.

16. See Andrew Kahn, 'Self and Sensibility in Radishchev's *Puteshestvie iz Peterburga v Moskvu*: Dialogism and the Moral Spectator', in Laura Englestein and Stephanie Sandler (eds), *Self and Story* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), and Marcus Levitt 'The Dialectic of Vision in Radishchev's *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow*', in *Early Modern Russian Letters*, p.398-412.

17. See Douglas Smith, *Working the Rough Stone: Freemasonry and Society in Eighteenth-Century Russia* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois Press, 1999); Andrew Kahn, 'Karamzin's *Discourses of Enlightenment*', in Karamzin, *Letters of a Russian Traveller*, ed. Kahn, p.459-582.

18. Simon Dixon, 'Prosveshchenie: Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Russia', in Richard Butterwick, Simon Davies and Gabriel Sánchez Espinosa (eds), *Peripheries of the Enlightenment*, SVEC, 2008:01 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2008), p.229-50; Gary Marker, 'Standing in St Petersburg. Looking West, or Is Backwardness All There Is?', in *Republic of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts*: <http://arcade.stanford.edu/journals/rofl/> [accessed 23 May 2011]; Andrew Kahn, 'Blazhenstvo ne v luchakh porfira: Histoire et Fonction de la

Tranquillité (*spokojstvie*) dans la pensée et la poésie russes du XVIIIe siècle, de Kantemir au sentimentalisme', *Révue des Etudes Slaves* 4 (2003), p.669-88; Valeria Sobol, *Febris Erotica: Lovesickness in the Russian Literary Imagination* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2009).

19. Simon Werret, *Fireworks: Pyrotechnic Arts and Sciences in European History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

20. In this connection, see Andrew Kahn, 'Epicureanism in the Russian Enlightenment: Dmitrii Anichkov and Atomic Theory', in Avi Lifschitz and Neven Leddy (eds), *Epicurus in the Enlightenment*, SVEC 2009:12 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2009), p.119-37.

21. See the articles by Kirill Ospovat, 'Lomonosov i "Pis'mo o pol'ze stekla": poeziia i nauka pri dvore Elizavety Petrovny', *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 87 (2007), p.148-83, and 'Mikhail Lomonosov Writes to his Patron: Professional Ethos, Literary Rhetoric and Social Ambition', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* (forthcoming); and Andrew Kahn, 'Talking Back to Radishchev: Dialogism and Reversal in Pushkin's *Puteshestvie iz Moskvyy v Peterburg*', *Stanford Slavic Studies* 29-30 (2005), p.225-48.

22. Tatyana Smoliarova, *Zrimaia Lirika. Derzhavin* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2011).

23. Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

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