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IMAGE OF RUSSIA IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH LITERATURE

by

MAREK W.A. MOSAKOWSKI

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in French
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
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Abstract

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The image of Russia in eighteenth-century France was very complex. It covers a wide spectrum, starting from the infatuation with the Petrine reforms after 1725 and the creation of dangerous Russian myths by Fontenelle, Voltaire, Diderot and other philosophes, who pleaded the Russian cause with just a minimum, or without any degree of criticism. With the passage of time this apologetic trend was somewhat subverted by unflattering accounts of eye-witnesses. However, in the last decades of the century it was recapitulated by Ségur, when Russia's modernization was no longer disputed and was acknowledged as a fact.

Our disseration is divided into three parts. The first is concerned with Fontenelle's Éloge du Czar Pierre Ier and its role in propagating the Russian myth in France. It also focuses on some less familiar passages of Montesquieu's De l'esprit des lois, dedicated to Russian reforms, and on the correspondence between Catherine II

and Grimm. The second part treats the image of Russia, positive for the most part, presented in French fictional literature. The following authors are discussed: Argens, Locatelli, Boissy, Dorat, La Harpe and Thomas. The third part presents several mémoires de voyage, published by a number of diplomats and writers who travelled to eighteenth-century Muscovy and thus had a chance to experience it directly. Russian testimonials of Saint-Pierre, Rulhière, Autroche and Corberon often contradicted Fontenelle's laudatory Éloge, Dorat's uncritical Pierre-le-Grand and Thomas' La Pétréide. The analysis of this revisionistic trend and creation of a more balanced image of Peter the Great and his followers is a major component of the third part. It shows the difference between the Russia of the philosophes, infatuated with the new developments in the East envisaged from a purely theoretical perspective, and the historical reality. But regardless of many critical voices, which often deplored the Muscovite barbarity and the difficult situation of Russian women, there was an evident evolution in the perception of Russia in France. Various literary accounts demonstrate that as the century drew to its close, Russia was treated more seriously and considered by the French an equal partner, not a distant, Asiatic empire.

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Introduction

The eighteenth century was one of the most cosmopolitan periods in the history of European civilization and never before, with the possible exception of the Middle Ages, when Latin was the universal link, did the cultural life of the Old World achieve such a high degree of unity and homogeneity as during the reign of Louis XV and Louis XVI. France in general, and Paris in particular, became the true center of Europe, from which all major trends and ideas radiated, even to the most distant places of the continent. The French language became the lingua franca of cultivated societies of almost every European country and already during the reign of Louis XIV gradually replaced Latin as the traditional medium of philosophical, diplomatic and artistic communication.

During the age of Enlightenment the seeds of French culture were planted all over Europe and reached as far as Russia. The triumph of French letters, French taste, French arts and the French aristocratic way of life was so far-reaching that throughout the entire eighteenth century France never lost its dominance. However, in spite of her intellectual hegemony and contrary to what we may label nowadays as her cultural imperialism, France was always very open and receptive to the various novelties and currents originating outside her national territory. The traditional fascination of the French with Italy or with the classical South, as well as the curiosity of the French

philosophes about England's political system and civil liberties, as the works of Voltaire or Montesquieu clearly manifest, and last but not least, the steady process of discovery of the Germanic world, which had seen its start during the first half of the eighteenth century and was to culminate in the flourishing of the French Romanticism, all these factors indicate that France never really became an isolated cultural dictator, shaping the intellectual map of Europe according to the tastes of her literary elite or to the political interests of the day, but produced instead a very open and a rather tolerant society.

French cultural expansion, which during the period of the Enlightenment reached the most distant corners of Europe, was a long and very complex process. Just as in Newtonian physics, recently introduced to the French public and popularized in the works of Voltaire and Algarotti, action was always counterbalanced by reaction. The French cultural missionaries, for instance, who penetrated even the most provincial courts of Europe and later, often bored and homesick, decided to return to Paris, brought back with them various stimulating novelties unknown in their native land and incorporated their foreign experiences into the mainstream of the Parisian intellectual scene. When the radiating influence of French civilization finally reached the confines of the Muscovy, such an encounter produced almost instantly bilateral relations and Russia became quickly one of the major targets for the curious minds of

French intellectuals and important literary figures. Dimitri S. von Mohrenschildt, a Russian scholar who worked and published in the United States in the nineteen thirties, recapitulates the existence of this cultural bilateralism in the preface to his Russia in the Intellectual Life of Eighteenth-Century France:

The cultural inheritance which Russia received from France has already been studied extensively, and since the publication in 1910 of Emile Haumant's La culture française en Russie, there is little to be added on this subject. On the other hand, studies of cosmopolitan tendencies in France, especially in the second half of the century, have usually been confined to England and Germany. Russia's influence, however, has not yet received sufficient attention. "Le XVIIIe siècle français", observed Mansuy, "sera presque aussi russe qu'anglais et tout le monde y aura quelque chose à dire sur le grand pays slave." (...) It is largely in an endeavor to substantiate this statement that the present work has been undertaken.¹

This bilateral relationship and intellectual exchange between Russia and France in the eighteenth century has also been observed by another distinguished scholar, a Frenchman, Albert Lortholary. In his comprehensive doctoral dissertation, written just after World War II and published in 1951, entitled Le mirage russe en France au XVIIIe siècle, the author states the following about Russia:

Vers 1700, quelle place tient-elle dans la pensée française? On n'a pour elle qu'ignorance ou mépris. Soixante-dix ans se passent, et on lui demande des leçons. En 1700, elle n'est pour nous que la Moscovie barbare. Trois quarts de siècle après, elle est tenue pour un pays de "lumières", sa souveraine est le type du "despote éclairé". Le siècle, a-t-on dit, est devenu "presque aussi russe, qu'anglais".²

¹ Dimitri S. von Mohrenschildt, Russia in the Intellectual Life of Eighteenth-Century France (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936) 4.

There are at least two major reasons of the gradual discovery of Russia by French intellectuals and writers in the eighteenth century. The first of these, as analyzed by Paul Hazard in La crise de la conscience européenne, is the general shift of interest in France towards the North, thus leaving behind the Mediterranean sister cultures of Italy and Spain, which had occupied the French mind almost exclusively during the entire sixteenth and seventeenth century. This gradual change of taste from the classical South, regarded commonly in France as a Latin bien de famille, was initially directed toward a more democratic England, so presented by Voltaire, and to a certain extent toward the German Empire, or at least to some of its most progressive components, such as the newly created Prussia under Frederick I and Frederick the Great. Around the middle of the century, however, the intellectual curiosity and interests of many French writers shifted to Russia, which at that time was considered as a Northern, rather than an Eastern European country:

"C'est du nord aujourd'hui que nous vient la lumière."
 (...) A l'est aussi, des changements de valeur sont en train de s'opérer. (...) On apprend à Paris, et sans qu'on semble d'abord attacher une grande importance à cette nouvelle, que le 18 janvier 1701, à Königsberg, l'électeur de Brandebourg, Frédéric III, a pris la couronne royale, et s'est fait appeler Frédéric Ier, roi de Prusse. Et chez les Moscovites, que se passe-t-il? Un de ces grands-ducs qu'ils nomment czar en leur langue, de cette masse asiatique veut faire une force civilisée; (...) Les vieilles nations s'étonnent, et

² Albert Lortholary, Le mirage russe en France au XVIIIe siècle (Paris: Boivin, 1951) 2.

admirent la stature colossale que prend Pierre le Grand, Empereur de toutes les Russies.³

When compared with other Northern European states, Russia occupied a privileged position in France and was treated differently than democratic England or Germany. To understand the roots of this difference, one must review the literary history of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It was during that period that the fantastic and utopian genres were developed and perfected. Many books depicting imaginary voyages to relatively unknown or fictitious countries were published. Most of these works gained a wide popularity and some of them, like the Voyages et aventures de Jacques Massé, written in 1710 by an utopian thinker, Tyssot de Patot, or La Terre australe connue, published in 1676 by Gabriel de Foigny, became virtual bestsellers. Typical of the manner in which the authors of the period portrayed these imaginary and far away lands is the following passage from Patot's work:

Il étoit impossible que nous pussions nous souler, mon Camarade et moi, de voir la beauté de ce Pais enchanté, et les richesses dont la Terre étoit couverte. Les vergers étoient ornez de beaux arbres chargez, les uns de fleurs, les autres de plus excellens fruits du monde: les campagnes couvertes de froment, d'orge et d'autres grains: les prairies herbeuses, remplies de chevres et de moutons d'une taille extraordinaire (...) et tout cela d'une propreté, d'un ordre et d'une régularité qui nous enchantoit.⁴

³ Paul Hazard, La crise de la conscience européenne (Paris: Fayard, 1961) 69-70.

⁴ Simon Tyssot de Patot, Voyages et aventures de Jacques Massé (Bordeaux: Chez J. L'Aveugle, 1710) 131-32.

Another quasi utopian book that turned out to be not only a French but a truly European hit was the trilogy of the Marquis d'Argens, entitled respectively: Lettres juives, Lettres cabalistiques and Lettres chinoises, published and reprinted several times in the seventeenth thirties and early forties. In the middle of the eighteenth century these utopian themes, expressing enlightened nostalgia for perfect, or at least better organized societies than that of the French monarchy, gradually subsided but did not disappear completely. By this time they were directed toward more concrete and tangible examples. Strangely enough, it was Russia that became a substitute for the French utopian fantasy of socio-political and philosophical perfection. The very distant South American islands, Australia, and some more or less identifiable Oriental places that had filled the European intellectual imagination of the early Enlightenment, had been gradually replaced by the geographically much closer, yet at the same time by the no more familiar and no less strange Muscovy. Russia thus became the new European frontier, the new battleground for radical institutional, social and cultural reforms. The traditional topos of the exotic bon sauvage was destined to give place to a different, more material image of a man newly fashioned, namely the new Russian citizen, who was at first formed by the genius of Peter the Great and subsequently perfected by the monumental endeavors of Catherine II. In the process of

this general shift of interests Russia assumed the role of European China, as observed by Lortholary:

Lorsqu'ils veulent proposer des remèdes aux abus, les "philosophes" du XVIII^e siècle transportent volontiers leur lecteur dans des pays imaginaires où tout se passe au gré de la raison. Plus efficace que ce recours à l'utopie est le procédé qui consiste à donner en exemple un pays mal connu mais réel: tel est le rôle que joue la Chine dans la littérature "philosophique" du siècle. Nous voudrions montrer que la Russie ne joue pas un rôle différent.⁵

It is precisely the paradoxical combination of the geographical proximity and yet distance, as well as the considerable familiarity intermingled with the profound ignorance of more specific aspects of Russian life, that shifted French interests to the Muscovy. Russia was indeed far away but still close enough to Paris; it was relatively well known but at the same time quite mysterious; it was a perfect example of l'être et le paraître coexisting with each other. Russia thus became a new Utopia, but a very tangible and concrete one. It became an "enlightened dream", not an ephemeral reverie epitomizing an exotic, or non-existent perfection, but one that was eventually destined to assume a political reality. The old Western fantasies of ultimate edenic happiness gradually moved from the distant tropics to the immense expanses of the Muscovy, which during the course of just one generation became the biggest theoretical and practical laboratory of eighteenth-century political thought. A new and dangerous illusion was

⁵ Albert Lortholary, Le mirage russe en France au dix-huitième siècle 6.

born. For a large number of French intellectuals Russia constituted a very tempting image of Enlightenment incarnate. Many of the writers and philosophes of the period were convinced of this. And, of course, as we shall attempt to show, others did not.

To understand better the place which Russian themes occupied in French eighteenth-century literature one needs to venture further back into the past and trace the image of the Muscovy as it evolved in preceding centuries. It should not surprise, however, that the further we go back this image becomes progressively bleaker and more fragmentary. This is due for the most part to the paucity of direct contacts between Russia and France during the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance. Gradually this situation changed in the course of the sixteenth century when Western European countries, particularly Germany, perhaps on account of its geographical proximity, resumed closer ties with the Orthodox East, broken around 1240 as a result of Mongol invasions. After 1500 many foreign travellers, mostly Polish, English and German, began revisiting that far away Empire, already historical but now newly recreated by Ivan III, and sent back their commentaries, which in general were very unfavorable and critical. Typical of this trend is a work of a German diplomat, Sigismund von Herberstein, who for many years was an ambassador to Moscow of the Emperor Maximilian I and then Ferdinand I. His Rerum Moscovitarum Commentarii,

published in Vienna in 1549, became an important source of information for other diplomats, merchants and simple travellers intending to venture into Russia. Thus when Rabelais calls Muscovy the land of the sodomites and heretics he is surely not speaking from his own eye-witness experience but rather alludes to what he might have read in secondary sources concerning Russia, published and circulating in his own times. The gradual awakening of interest in Russian subjects which took place in France before 1700 was also enhanced by a detailed and very humorous work of another German traveller, Olearius, whose Relation du voyage de Moscovie, Tartarie et de Perse, fait à l'occasion d'une ambassade envoyée par le duc d'Holstein, depuis l'an 1633 jusques en l'an 1639, published in 1649, was translated into several European languages and had five editions in France.⁶

One of the very first, if indeed not the first account dedicated to Russia that exists in French literature is a short récit entitled Mémoire de voyage en Russie fait en 1586 par Jehan Sauvage. Let us present a few passages of this work, written in delightful old French, to see what were the impressions of the first French traveller to reach the most northern confines of the Russian terra incognita

⁶ Claude de Grève, Le voyage en Russie. Anthologie des voyageurs français aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1990) 6.

and what suggestions he intended to convey for other potential visitors:

Et premièrement, si vous volés entreprendre le voiage de la Moscovie par le Nordh, sçavoir à Saint-Nicolas en la rivière de Saint-Michel-Archange, fault partir à la fin du moys de may ou à la mi-juin pour le plus tard et faire sa droicte route pour aller quérir le cap du Nordh, qui est un cap qui boute bien hors en tirant vers le pauole artique et demeure par le 71e degré.⁷

It is a pity that Jehan Sauvage was concerned mainly with technical details of his trip and, only to a limited extent, with the exotic character of the Russian arctic fauna. Few are the passages in which the author attempts to describe the Russians directly and to represent their traditional way of life, their customs and social interactions. We find nothing in this mini-work comparable with the infinitely more comprehensive accounts of later travellers and writers. The only specific aspect concerning the customs of the Muscovy that Jehan Sauvage considered worth mentioning in his récit was the difficult life the Russians led in their Nordic climate and their fondness of heavy drinking:

Item, quand nous fumes entrés et que nous eumes païé nostre coustume, les serviteurs du sieur apportèrent à monsieur Colas un grand pot de bois rouge qui tenoit plus de douze pots, qui estoit tout plein de grosse bière noire et forte plus que le vin, et falut boire tout. Et croiés que les sieurs Colas et du Renel estoient plus faschez de tout boire que de l'argent qu'ils venoient de desbourser; car il faloit vuider ceste cruche ou bien faire de l'yvroigne pour en sortir, car telle est leur coustume. (5-6)

⁷ Jehan le Sauvage, Mémoire de voiage en Russie fait en 1586 par Jehan Sauvage ed. Louis Latour (Paris: A. Aubry, 1856) 3.

In another rare passage dealing directly with the population of Northern Russia Jehan Sauvage gives us an amusing picture of the chief of the local government. The major theme here is once again heavy drinking, presented however in a slightly more humorous and dramatic manner:

Item, nous sommes arrivés le 26e jour de juin devant la ville de Saint-Michel-Archange, où nos marchands alèrent à terre pour parler au gouverneur et faire leur raport, comme est la coustume en tout pais, et l'ayant salué, il leur demanda d'où ilz estoient, et quand il sceut que nous estions François, il fut bien resjoy et dit à l'interprète qui les présentoit qu'ils estoient les très-bien venus, et prit une grande coupe d'argent et la feist emplir, et falut la vuider: et puis une autre, et encore la revuider; puy encore la 3e qu'il falut parachever; et, ayant fait ces trois beaux coups, on pense estre quite; mais le pire est le dernier, car faut boire une tasse d'eau-de-vie qui est sy forte qu'on a le ventre et le gosier en feu. Quand on a beu une tasse, encore n'estre pas tout, et, ayant parlé un mot avec vous, faudra encore boire à la santé de vostre roy, car vous ne l'auseriez refuser, et c'est la coustume du pais que de bien boire.(12)

Another early account dealing exclusively with Russia, written at the beginning of the seventeenth century, only a few years after Sauvage's report, is Jacques Margeret's Estat de l'empire de Russie et Grande Duché de Moscovie avec ce qui s'y est passé de plus mémorable et tragique, pendant le regne de quatres empereurs: à sçavoir depuis l'an 1590, jusques en 1606, en septembre. As the long title suggests, this is mainly a historical work concerning the fate of several Russian Czars, particularly Dimitri the Impostor. However, in addition to the linear representation of the sequence of historical events, Margeret attempts to portray Russian society in all its contemporary greatness and misery. His account is much more detailed than the

short récit of Sauvage. Margeret's work shows also that the author understood very well the importance of Russia, a vast Empire that was hitherto erroneously marginalized by the West. He was fully aware of the potential role of Russia as a future major European power, whose formidable force might enable her one day to protect Christianity from the heathen Asiatic Muslims. In his dedicatory letter to Henry IV, King of France, Margeret stresses the necessity of travel and speaks of the many advantages that personal acquaintance with foreign countries may bring to the traveller's native land thus increasing its power significantly. His attitude toward Russia, resulting from perspicacious observation, is that of a refined intellectual and a true expert when compared with a rather simplistic and fragmentary account of Jehan Sauvage. This fundamental difference between the two authors, separated from each other by merely one generation, is proof that in the eyes of the French Russia had quickly become an important object of interest:

Au Roy.

Sire

Si les sujets de Vostre Maiesté qui voyagent en Pays éloignez, faisoient leurs Relations au vray de ce qu'ils y ont veu et marqué de plus notable, leur profit particulier tourneroit à l'utilité publique de vostre Estat: non seulement pour faire voir, rechercher et imiter ce qu'est de bon et industrieux chez autrui, (...) mais aussi cela donneroit coeur à nombre des ieunes gens oisifs et casaniers d'aller chercher et apprendre la vertu dans le pénible, mais utile et honorable exercice des voyages et des armes estrangeres, et leveroit l'erreur à plusieurs qui croient que la Chrestienté n'a bornes que la Hongrie: car ie puis dire avec verité que la Russie de laquelle j'entreprends icy la Description, (...) est l'un des meilleurs boulevards de la Chrestienté, et que cet

Empire et ce Pays-là est plus grand, puissant, populeux et abondant que l'on ne cuide, et mieux muni et deffendu contres les Scithes et autres peuples Mahometans, que plusieurs ne iugent. La puissance absolue du prince en son Estat le rend craint et redout, de ses suiets, et le bon ordre et police du dedans, le garantit des courses ordinaires des Barbares.⁸

Margeret was also one of the first French writers to discuss the complete secrecy in which the Russian governmental machinery had been functioning since time immemorial. This nearly paranoid secrecy surrounding the affairs of the state was often depicted by many other travellers who went to Russia in the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The universally sanctioned reticence and fear such a secrecy aroused became quickly the epitome of the oppressiveness of the Russian ruling establishment. This irrational need for secrecy was considered one of the major causes of Russia's totalitarian character, her political unpredictability, as well as her institutional disorder and the changing fortunes of her despotic rulers, victims of their own obsessions:

(...) il s'y verra (in Margeret's work) des accidents bien remarquables et dont les grands Princes peuvent tirer quelque profit, mesme par l'infortune de mon maistre Demetrius; arrivé avec grandes traverses à son Empire, élevé et bouleversé tout en moins de deux ans, et sa mort mesme suivie de ce mal-heur qu'aucuns le iugent avoir esté ou imposteur ou supposé: il s'y verra pareillement beaucoup de particularitez de cét Estat dignes d'estre sçeues, et toutefois ignorées tant pour l'éloignement du climat, que pour la dexterité des

⁸ Jacques Margeret, Estat de l'empire de Russie et Grande Duché de Moscovie (Paris: Jacques Langlois fils, 1610) VIII-X.

Russes à cacher et taire les affaires de leurs
Estat. (XI-XII)

During his trip to Russia Margeret witnessed and described in more detail what Jehan Sauvage had already noticed some twenty years before and what many other French travellers venturing to the Muscovy later were also to observe, namely the propensity of the Russians to heavy drinking, their idleness, their moral dissoluteness and, last but not least, the miserable state and backwardness of Russian economic life:

Combien qu'il y ait grande abondance de vivres, et à bon marché, si est-ce que la commune se contente de fort peu. Car ils ne pourroient fournir à la despence, n'ayans nulle industrie, et estant fort parresseux. Car ils ne s'addonnent au travail, ains sont tellement addonnez à l'ivrognerie que rien plus. (...) Tous indifferemment, tant hommes que femmes, filles et enfans, et les Ecclesiastiques autant ou plus que les autres, s'addonnent à ce vice d'ivrognerie, sans mesurer leur portée. (11-12)

At the end of the seventeenth century another important work about Russia, entitled Voyage en divers Etats d'Europe et d'Asie, was published in France. Its author, Philippe Avril, sponsored by the Jesuits and by the King of Poland, under whose auspices he had organized a religious mission to China, intended to travel through Russia on his way to the Orient. After preliminary negotiations with the Muscovite government, however, he was denied the right of transit and ordered to leave Russia immediately, regardless of the letters of recommendation issued by the Polish monarch. After a long and tedious period while awaiting the Czar's permission to continue his journey and after

countless secretive meetings of the Imperial Council, which to the modern reader might seem like an almost kafkaesque setting of complete uncertainty and insecurity, a negative verdict was delivered to Avril:

Toutes ces raisons plausible en apparence, obligerent enfin les Boyars à prononcer contre nous, et à nous refuser le passage, dont l'esperance nous avoit engagez à tant de frais et de fatigues. Ce fut là le résultat de toutes les délibérations du Conseil, que nous apprimes dans la Chancellerie, où le premier Secrétaire, qui nous y avoit fait appeller par ordre de la Cour, nous dit d'une voix tremblante, en nous rendant nos Lettres de Mathématiciens, que les Czars nous ordonnoient, pour des raisons que nous ne pouvions ignorer, de sortir au plutôt de leurs Terres, et de nous disposer à partir avec le même Député qui nous avoit conduit à Moscou.⁹

Unable to proceed across the Russian Empire, Père Avril was forced to continue his long journey to China through Moldavia, Asia Minor and India. On account of various misfortunes experienced in the Muscovy his portrait of that country might seem devastating, but his detailed picture of the Russian bureaucracy, often secretive and always incomprehensible for a Westerner accustomed to a stable French judicial system, however imperfect it might have been, was accurate and justified. Avril's principal target was the Russian obsession with official titles, so typical of many other despotic societies:

Comme il n'est point de peuple au monde plus formaliste que celui de Moscovie, on est obligé non seulement dans les lettres qu'on écrit aux Czars, de spécifier distinctement toutes les qualitez dont ils se font l'honneur, mais encore dans les Harangues qu'on leur fait en public toutes les fois qu'on prononce leur nom;

⁹ Philippe Avril, Voyage en divers états d'Europe et d'Asie (Paris: C. Barbin, 1692) 262-63.

de forte que pour peu que la mémoire vienne à manquer à un Ambassadeur ou à quelque autre, dans l'énumération de tous ces superbes Titres, il court risque de recevoir un affront de la part des Ministres, qui aimeroient mieux qu'on enlevât une province à l'Etat que de souffrir qu'on ravît à leurs Maîtres la moindre de ces qualitez, qu'ils considerent comme autant d'appanages à la Couronne. (206-07)

Most picturesque, however, was Avril's description of the Russian Carnival, and especially his humorous representation of the grotesque excesses and debaucheries that were traditionally associated with this rather peculiar popular feast. His account of the Carnival can only be compared with some passages found in the works of Rabelais. The carefully chosen and precise vocabulary used by Avril accentuates the state of total disorder and chaos that reigned during these festive days in Moscow, or rather in the entire malheureux Empire, as he justly called Russia. In our dissertation we shall have a chance to encounter a very similar terminology pertaining to Russia once again, particularly in the chapters dedicated to the most critical eighteenth-century authors. For now let us present Avril's wonderful description of the Russian Carnival:

C'étoit pour lors le Carnaval des Moscovites, qu'on peut appeller le temps des debauches les plus outrées, et des crimes les plus énormes. L'usage de la chair n'est point alors permis; mais seulement celui de beure, dont on fait de si horribles escés, qu'après l'avoir fait fondre on le boit, comme la liqueur la plus agréable. L'eau de vie et les autres boissons de cette nature, n'y sont pas aussi epargnées: De sorte que toute la Moscovie n'est à proprement parler en ce tems-là qu'un malheureux Empire, où toutes sortes de vices débordent. Les violences, les perfidies, les trahisons s'y commettent avec impunité, et malheur aux Etrangers, qui sans être bien escortez, paroissent alors en public. Les desordres étoient à la verité

beaucoup plus grandes autrefois qu'ils ne sont à présent, et les meurtres plus ordinaires, on m'assura pourtant, que la première nuit de ces jouissances brutales, dont il nous fallait attendre la fin, on avoit assassiné plus de quarante personnes dans la seule ville de Moscou, et que le peuple, qui par je ne sais quelle superstition impie, augure bien ou mal de l'année par la quantité des meurtres qui se font en ces tems-là, paroissoit mecontent de ce petit nombre, qui n'étoit rien en comparaison de celui des années précédentes. (268-69)

After browsing through several accounts of the old Muscovy, written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and before tackling a lengthy analysis of the Russian themes in eighteenth-century French literature, let us consider briefly a work published in 1843 by Alphonse de Custine, entitled La Russie en 1839, which is generally considered one of the most important publications dealing with the history of the Russian Empire. The author of this voluminous book, based on his direct observations made during a prolonged trip to Russia and enriched by later readings, analyzed with a surprising insight the intricacies of early Russian imperialism and the totalitarian character of the Russian socio-political system. It is amazing to see that Custine's account agrees with the impressions of much earlier travellers, those who went to Russia in the seventeenth century. In both cases one of the commonly observed phenomena is the ubiquitous secrecy and reticence regarding the affairs of state or public issues, which, as we have come to know, is a primary foundation of every totalitarian and repressive regime. The following statement of Custine might appear as an elaborate

version of a passage taken directly from Margeret's book or like a commentary on the unexpected expulsion of Philippe Avril from Russia:

En Russie, le secret préside à tout; secret administratif, politique, social; discrétion utile et inutile, silence superflu pour assurer le nécessaire; telles sont les inévitables conséquences du caractère primitif de ces hommes, corroboré par l'influence de leur gouvernement. Tout voyageur est un indiscret; il faut le plus poliment possible garder à vue l'étranger toujours trop curieux, de peur qu'il ne voie les choses telles qu'elles sont, ce qui serait la plus grandes des inconvenances.¹⁰

In many passages of Custine's work the reader will easily find a not too distant echo of Avril's famous notion of malheureux Empire. It is not by coincidence or prejudice, but rather by perspicacious observations, made directly while travelling in Russia, that both authors arrived at analogous conclusions, stressing unanimously the uncontrolled passions and a significant degree of animality of the Russian populace. This analogy proves that many aspects of Russian national character had changed very little in the course of several centuries. Even after one hundred and fifty years, which separated the missionary voyage of Père Avril in the late seventeenth century from the trip undertaken by Custine in the eighteen thirties, these national traits were still quite similar, if not identical. This was so regardless of the passage of time or

¹⁰ Astolphe de Custine, La Russie en 1839 in Le voyage en Russie. Anthologie des voyageurs français aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles 984-85

the implementation of the large-scale reforms, which took place in Russia in the eighteenth-century under Peter the Great and his successors, and which were destined to shake that nation to its very foundations:

Au physique le climat, au moral le gouvernement de ce pays dévorent en germe ce qui est faible, tout ce qui n'est pas robuste ou stupide succombe en naissant; il ne reste debout que les brutes et que les natures fortes dans le bien comme dans le mal. La Russie est la patrie des passions effrénées ou des caractères débiles, des révoltés ou des automates, des conspirateurs ou des machines; ici point d'intermédiaire entre le tyran et l'esclave, entre le fou et l'animal; le juste milieu y est inconnu, la nature n'en veut pas; l'excès du froid comme celui du chaud pousse l'homme dans les extrêmes. Ce n'est pas à dire que les âmes fortes soient moins rare en Russie qu'ailleurs, au contraire, elles y sont plus rares, grâce à l'apathie du grand nombre; l'exagération est un symptôme de faiblesse. Les Russes n'ont pas toutes les facultés qui répondent à toutes leurs ambitions.(1206)

The enormous works undertaken by the Russian reformers in the eighteenth century, which were supposed to change that country once and for all, to diminish its infamous image, as presented by the foreign travellers visiting the malheureux Empire before 1700, and to place Russia in the family of modern European nations, seemed, at least to Alphonse de Custine, to be an illusion and indeed a total failure. His commentaries on Peter the Great or Catherine II and their projects to modernize the old Muscovy are very critical and perhaps even slightly exaggerated. And yet, as we will see in the following chapters, they are in perfect accordance with what several other French writers of the Enlightenment, particularly those who had a chance to witness personally the tortuous process of Russian reforms,

had already written many years before the publication of La Russie en 1839. According to Custine, as well as certain eighteenth-century thinkers whose works we shall discuss later, the source of all Russia's evils was a hasty and irrational attempt on the part of her rulers to imitate the ancient political institutions of the much more advanced European countries. Such an imitative procedure eliminated a more natural process of gradual perfection of Russia's native, indigenous character and resources. Custine certainly subscribed to the popular eighteenth-century saying comparing the Russian Empire of Peter the Great and Catherine II to a fruit, which rotted long before it had a chance to mature:

En remontant à la source du mal, on trouve que toutes les fautes ne sont que l'inévitable conséquence du système de fausse civilisation adoptée il y a cent cinquante ans par Pierre Ier. La Russie ressentira les suites de l'orgueil de cet homme plus longtemps qu'elle n'admira sa gloire, (...). Si le tsar Pierre, au lieu de s'amuser à habiller des ours en singes, si Catherine II, au lieu de faire de la philosophie, si tous les souverains de la Russie enfin eussent voulu civiliser leur nation par elle-même, en cultivent lentement les admirables germes que Dieu avait déposé dans le coeur de ces peuples, les derniers venus de l'Asie, ils auraient moins ébloui l'Europe, mais ils eussent acquis une gloire plus durable et plus universelle, et nous verrions aujourd'hui cette nation continuer sa tâche providentielle, c'est-à-dire la guerre aux vieux gouvernements de l'Asie. (...) Il faut le répéter, Pierre le Grand ou plutôt l'Impatient, fut la cause première de cette erreur, et l'admiration aveugle dont il est encore aujourd'hui l'objet justifie l'émulation de ces successeurs, qui croient lui ressembler parce qu'ils éternisent la fausse politique de ce demi-génie, rival acharné des Suédois plutôt que régénérateur des Russes. Copier éternellement les autres nations afin de paraître civilisé avant de l'être, voilà la tâche imposée par lui à la Russie. (1221-22)

This brief review of the perception of Russia in French literature before the beginning of the eighteenth century and shortly thereafter has allowed us to recreate the historical context in which we are going to place our main subject of interest, Russia and France during the Siècle des Lumières. As title of this dissertation Image of Russia in Eighteenth-Century French Literature indicates, this work will focus on the comments of a number of French authors writing about various Russian issues during the Age of Enlightenment. We will attempt to show how the picture of Russia gradually evolved from Avril's vision of the malheureux Empire, construed just before 1700, and investigate what factors contributed to such a change. We shall also see that certain traditional views on Russia have never been modified and were carried over in extenso from the seventeenth century right into the nineteenth, as Custine's example indicates clearly. We shall analyze these permanent traits and attempt to explain why and how they maintained themselves in spite of the enormous task of transformation and reshaping the Muscovy by the Russian despotes éclairés. In the course of our work we shall encounter not only the voices of several apologetic but also of many critical thinkers, whose writings about Russia polarized public opinion in Paris and sometimes even created, as was the case of the unpublished, yet notorious account of Rulhière, an open ideological dispute among the major philosophes. This dissertation is concerned mainly

with secondary figures of French eighteenth-century letters, and overlooks, or rather reduces to a necessary minimum, the role of the giants, such as Diderot, Voltaire and Rousseau, about whose involvement in Russian matters much has already been written.¹¹ The goal of our work is to reverse these proportions and, while it is impossible to neglect entirely the giants, our intention will be to place the great authors of the Enlightenment in a broader literary context and to review this very diversified subject matter, the picture of Russia in eighteenth-century France, from a more complex perspective. For that purpose we shall discuss in detail works of other literary figures of the period, whose names, although forgotten today, were very well known in France two hundred years ago. Since most of the books of these secondary writers were never republished after the beginning of nineteenth century and remain in total oblivion, we found it necessary to present extensive passages of their works and to quote these minor French authors in length. This procedure shall enable us to illustrate in a more complete fashion the subject of our analysis and to familiarize the reader with many interesting texts, which in our opinion deserve to be resurrected from the neglect of previous generations.

¹¹ Typical of this trend are the following publications: L'opinion française face à l'inconnu russe by Charles Corbet (1967), La culture française en Russie by Emile Haumant (1910), La France et la Russie au XVIII^e siècle by Charles de Larivière (1909).

The corpus of our thesis will be divided into three major sections. The first will be concerned with the reflections of the lesser French philosophes and writers on the various socio-political reforms occurring in Russia during the reign of Peter the Great and Catherine II. The second part will deal with the image of Russia presented in French fictional literature, namely in poetry, drama and the novel. Finally, the third part will include a detailed analysis of several diaries and mémoires de voyage, published by a number of talented diplomats and writers who travelled to eighteenth-century Muscovy personally and thus had a chance to experience that immense country in a direct way.

The image of Russia in eighteenth-century French literature is a very complex one. It covers a wide spectrum, starting from the initial infatuation with the Petrine reforms at the beginning of the century and the creation of dangerous Russian myths by Fontenelle, Voltaire, Diderot and other enlightened philosophes, who pleaded the Russian cause in France and all over Europe with just a minimum or, as happened frequently, without any degree of sound criticism. With the passage of time this initial trend was somewhat subverted by unflattering accounts of eye-witnesses and finally ended in the last decades of the eighteenth century with the pre-romantic reveries of the Count de Ségur. It is unfortunate indeed that the vast majority of the publications dealing with

this subject treat almost exclusively the well known literary figures and overlook entirely, or at best marginalize, the minor writers. The aim of our dissertation is to restore from oblivion some less known, completely unknown or long forgotten names and to analyze the works of these minor French authors in a general literary context of the period, with, of course, a special focus on eighteenth-century Franco-Russian intellectual relations and bilateral cultural exchange.

Part I

French Philosophes and the New Russia

Chapter 1

If in French historiography the liminal dates for the eighteenth century are 1715 and 1789, marking respectively the death of Louis XIV and the outbreak of the French Revolution, the beginning and the end of the Russian eighteenth century coincided with the ascent to power of Peter the Great in 1696 and the death of Catherine II in 1797. Both rulers, the first responsible for creating the solid foundations of the Russian Empire, the second obsessed with preserving and enlarging the tremendous heritage left to Russia by her predecessor, can undoubtedly be placed among the most outstanding figures of their century. Indeed, one can say without injustice to the other important, so called enlightened monarchs of the period, such as Frederick II of Prussia, Maria-Teresa of Austria, Gustavus III of Sweden or Stanislaus-Augustus Poniatowski of Poland, that they were the most illustrious actors on the European cultural and political scene. Therefore it is not surprising that both Peter the Great and Cathrerine II occupied such an enviable place in French letters during the Age of Enlightenment and attracted the curiosity of a great number of contemporary French writers, thinkers, politicians, diplomats and even simple citizens.

It would be an exaggeration to claim that Peter the Great was the first reformer of Russia and that nothing worthy of attention existed there in the decades preceding

his reign. And yet, in comparison with the modest accomplishments of the earlier Romanoffs, who, even if unwillingly, introduced some political changes long before 1689, the Petrine reforms surpassed in many ways anything the old Muscovy had witnessed in the past. Peter the Great was not the first Czar to start the territorial expansion of Russia either, initiated by Ivan the Terrible in the sixteenth century, but his victory at Pultava in 1709 over the armies of the enfant terrible of Central-Eastern Europe, the Swedish King Charles XII, gave the necessary impetus for the creation and rapid growth of the new Russian Empire. It is precisely this newly emerged Russia and her status of a major European superpower that was so admired by various figures of the French Enlightenment.

The process of modernizing Russia, enhanced by Peter's fascination with the West and his educational trips to the leading European countries, was epitomized by the creation in 1703-1704 of the new capital, St. Petersburg, a window to the outside world facing Europe directly. Peter the Great implemented his reforms by introducing new laws and customs. He reduced to the absolute minimum the influence of the Orthodox Church and laid the foundations for a modern, non-ecclesiastic system of higher education, resulting in the emergence of the Academy of Sciences. Peter's unprecedented socio-political projects, even if their implementation often required the usage of brutal physical force, remain a monumental testimonial to his

wisdom and clairvoyance. By the time of his death in 1725, Russia was already a major European power, whose voice and influence reached out far beyond its natural borders. Nothing could halt the process of its internal transformation and external expansion. Nothing seemed able to stop the new imperial machine once it had been set in action. Even the mediocre reigns of Peter's immediate followers, who were less talented than their predecessor and who after 1725 had to compromise with the strong revisionist forces centered around the conservative Russian clergy and old noble families, were not able to divert the country's new course and change its political destiny. Russia's fate was clearly to lead Eastern Europe and to become for a great number of French philosophers an example of Enlightenment incarnate.

The greatest revolution that the Petrine reforms caused in Russia was the spiritual change they wrought among the upper classes, that is to say the aristocracy and gentry. Before Peter's reign Russian society was still quite closed to outside influences and any contact with foreigners was considered undesirable and highly detrimental to the welfare of the state. Ideas which did not agree with Greek Orthodoxy were regarded as a work of Satan and destined never to penetrate the territory of Holy Russia. As we pointed out earlier, some timid experimentation with reform had already occurred in the course of the seventeenth century. Russia's antiquated

religious isolationism, as well as her spiritual disdain for the corrupt West were viewed by several rulers preceding Peter as a source of weakness. They regarded these issues as a potential threat making the Muscovy more vulnerable to foreign invasions by more advanced countries, such as neighboring Sweden and Poland. Thus the reforms undertaken before the time of Peter the Great, and even to a considerable extent during his own rule, had a military character for the most part, as A. Lentin stated in his Russia in the Eighteenth Century:

Seventeenth-century Czars were worried by the effects of this spiritual exclusiveness on Russia's political position. They recognized that isolationism, deeply attractive though it was, would defeat its own ends: unless Russia was prepared to keep pace with the west - which meant taking lessons from the Europeans - she would lay herself permanently open to aggression. (...) To this end various measures were taken: an armament-works under Dutch management was founded in Tula in 1632; and foreign mercenaries were invited to Russia to remodel her armies and to demonstrate western firearms. (...) but the foreigners, so essential to Russia's recovery, were received by the people and the Church with sullen suspicion and hostility. For fear of spiritual contamination and for their own safety they were confined to a special ghetto in Moscow, the so-called German Quarter.¹

At the core of the Petrine reforms was the realization that foreigners were essential to Russia's recovery and development. The Czar did everything to ensure that they would never again be treated by the people and particularly by the conservative clergy with disdain and suspicion. This goal was to be achieved either by means of friendly

¹ Anthony Lentin, Russia in the Eighteenth Century (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1973) 5.

persuasion, or, whenever it was necessary, by use of physical force. Peter's opening to the outside world led to the gradual revocation of the traditional doctrine of Orthodox isolation and facilitated the introduction of new military techniques. His first foreign commitment was a coalition directed against the Turks, who at the end of the seventeenth century controlled the entire coastal area of the Black Sea. Needless to say, Peter was determined to challenge that domination. His first attempt to destroy Turkish power in Azov in 1695 failed, but this failure taught him a very important lesson, namely that Russia was in dire need of foreign expertise and know-how. Therefore, shortly after the initial disaster, foreign experts from the West were summoned to Russia en masse to supervise a construction of a modern galley-fleet. The next year, in 1696, another attempt on Azov took place. This time, however, the Turkish forces were completely destroyed and the first Russian naval victory was celebrated by the jubilant crowds marching through the streets of Moscow with restored national pride. Another novelty introduced by Peter the Great in the earlier years of his reign was his personal embassy to the West between 1697 and 1699. Never before had a Russian Czar ventured outside Muscovy. His first foreign trip may be considered as a turning point in the change of attitude of the Russian ruling classes. Peter's mission to the West was partly diplomatic, for he intended to create a political coalition against Turkey. On

the other hand, however, it also originated in his insatiable curiosity, so common in the eighteenth-century. Peter's objective was to become more knowledgeable about advanced technology which previously he had seen only in Moscow's German Quarter. A typical example of this enlightened urge to learn was Peter's apprenticeship at a Dutch shipyard, where he willingly offered his hard physical labor. The experience of the crowded docks and arsenals of Amsterdam or Portsmouth only confirmed his conviction of Russia's historical backwardness and the need for Russia to undergo an accelerated modernization. The Czar's first foreign contacts also strengthened his resolve to take advantage of Russia's long neglected, yet unlimited resources in manpower or material, and thus to exercise more political influence outside of her natural borders. Peter's principal goal was therefore to ensure Russia's status as a great power. (Lentin, 7)

The first diplomatic success of Peter the Great was the peace treaty signed with Turkey in 1700. After that year he was finally able to take care of another formidable enemy, namely Sweden and her adventurous monarch, Charles XII. The capture of Narva, which allowed the foundation of the city of St. Petersburg, was just the first step in the long battle of the two Northern powers. The fatal blow to Sweden came in 1709, when Peter managed to crush Swedish forces in a decisive victory at Pultava. The year 1709 was also an important date for the image of Russia abroad. For

the first time the West, including France, viewed Peter the Great not just as another accidental Russian ruler, but as a military genius, who from now on was to be taken seriously and considered as a maker of a new superpower in the North and in the East of Europe. Thus the new Russia, whose military and political strength eclipsed forever the other local powers, namely Poland and Sweden, was born. This change of attitude in the West regarding the emergence of a new Russian Empire was noted by Lentin:

Statesman in the west had viewed Peter's early failures with derision; after Poltava, their attitude changed to respect or alarm, as Peter set about gathering the fruits of victory. (10-11)

The commanding figure of Peter the Great became almost mythical in France. Numerous articles, works of literature and memoirs were dedicated to him. Even the Encyclopédie praised the Czar and divided the history of Russia into two distinct periods, the first covering the years before 1689, the second encompassing the reigns of Peter the Great and of his immediate followers. Although the Encyclopédie did not share the naive and uncritical attitude of Fontenelle (see chapter 2), and to a certain extent that of Voltaire in his La Russie sous Pierre le Grand, its authors did not hesitate to portray Peter as the most outstanding monarch of Russian history. Let us present some passages from the article written by Louis de Jaucourt, describing the contemporary situation of the Russian Empire and its founder, passages that are representative of the general philosophical attitude towards Russia and the views of the

French learned elite about that country's destiny. Jaucourt's article, regardless of the author's exaggerated enthusiasm, remains the most objective and perhaps the most judicious statement about Russia that the eighteenth century produced:

La Russie qui doit à Pierre le grand sa grande influence dans les affaires de l'Europe, n'en avoit aucune depuis qu'elle étoit chrétienne. (...) Il s'en falloit beaucoup avant Pierre le grand que la Russie fût aussi puissante, qu'elle eût autant de terres cultivées, autant de sujets, autant de revenus que de nos jours; elle n'avoit rien dans la Livonie, et le peu de commerce qu'on faisoit à Astracan étoit desavantageux. Les Russes se nourrissoient fort mal; leurs mets favoris n'étoient que des concombres et des melons d'Astracan, qu'ils faisoient confire pendant l'été avec de l'eau, de la farine et du sel; cependant les coutumes asiatiques commençoient déjà à s'introduire chez cette nation.²

Louis de Jaucourt knew very well that the process of Russia's modernization had started long before Peter the Great, sometime in the course of the seventeenth century, and that the Petrine reforms did not meet such widespread popular opposition as was generally believed. He contradicted the famous statement of Fontenelle that in Russia "tout était à faire et rien à perfectionner". It is interesting to note that according to the Encyclopédie, women played a principal role in the modernization of Russia and in changing customs in that antiquated, half European, half Asiatic Empire. With complete seriousness

² Louis de Jaucourt, "Russie" in L'Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, vol. 14 (Neufchatel: Samuel Faulche et Compagnie, 1765) 444.

and without a sign of irony, Jaucourt describes the influence of women, as seen by this eighteenth-century Parisian:

Dès ce tems-là, les femmes russes surent se mettre du rouge, se peindre les sourcils, ou s'en former d'artificiels; elles prirent du goût à porter des pierreries, à se parer, à se vêtir d'étoffes précieuses; c'est ainsi que la barbarie commençoit à finir chez ces peuples, par conséquent Pierre leur souverain n'eut pas tant de peine à policer sa nation, que quelques autres ont voulu nous le persuader. (444-45)

The general image of Peter the Great that the authors of the Encyclopédie intended to convey was that of a major reformer and maker of a new Russia, whose effort was truly unprecedented. Louis de Jaucourt made clear that Peter went far beyond his predecessors. The following statement found in the same article recapitulates and reconfirms what many figures of French literature, from Fontenelle and Montesquieu to Voltaire and Diderot, had already said. But the Encyclopédie pointed out that Peter's personal genius was not the only agent of change and attributed the Czar's phenomenon to propitious political conditions in Russia, which, according at least to Jaucourt, were already in place:

Sous le regne de Pierre, le peuple russe, qui tient à l'Europe, et qui vit dans les grandes villes, est devenu civilisé, commerçant, curieux des arts et des sciences, aimant les spectacles, et les nouveautés ingénieuses. Le grand homme qui a fait ces changemens, est heureusement né dans le tems favorable pour les produire. Il a introduit dans ses états les arts qui étoient tout perfectionnés chez les voisins, et il est arrivé que ces arts ont fait plus de progrès en 50 ans chez ses sujets, déjà disposés à les goûter, que partout ailleurs, dans l'espace de trois ou quatre siècles; cependant ils n'y ont pas encore jetté de si profondes racines, que quellque intervalle de barbarie,

ne puisse ruiner ce bel édifice commencé dans un empire dépeuplé, despotique, et où la nature ne répandra jamais ses bénignes influences.(445)

Before turning to an analysis of the attitude of minor French authors of the eighteenth century toward the myth of Peter the Great, it would be interesting to present the remarks regarding this Russian monarch made by another main figure, whose influence can only be compared to that of the Encyclopédie, namely Voltaire. His enthusiasm for the Petrine reforms was almost unlimited. In La Russie sous Pierre le Grand Voltaire portrayed the Czar as one of the most important legislators in the history of humankind and by comparing him to his rival, Charles XII, King of Sweden, he took every opportunity to emphasize the significance of Russia's socio-political modernization. In the context of irresponsible and ruinous military adventures of the Swedish monarch, the Petrine reforms looked even more impressive than they really were. Another important work in which Voltaire showed himself to be a true and rather uncritical advocate of Peter the Great is his Dictionnaire philosophique, where under a lengthy entry entitled Pierre-le-Grand the Patriarch of Ferney attacked virulently the following derogatory statement of Jean-Jacques Rousseau about Russia, taken from the Contrat social:

Pierre avait le génie imitatif, il n'avait pas le vrai génie, celui qui crée et fait tout de rien. Quelques-unes des choses qu'il fit étaient bien, la plupart étaient déplacées. Il a vu que son peuple était barbare, il n'a point vu qu'il n'était pas mûr pour la police; il l'a voulu civiliser quand il ne fallait que l'aguerrir. Il a d'abord voulu faire des Allemands, des Anglais, quand il fallait commencer par faire des Russes; il a empêché ses sujets de jamais devenir ce

qu'ils pourraient être, en leur persuadant qu'ils étaient ce qu'ils ne sont pas. C'est ainsi qu'un précepteur français forme son élève pour briller un moment dans son enfance, et puis n'être jamais rien. L'empire des Russes voudra subjuguier l'Europe, et sera subjugué, lui-même. Les Tartares, ses sujets ou ses voisins, deviendront ses maîtres et les nôtres; cette révolution me paraît infaillible; tous les rois de l'Europe travaillent de concert à l'accélérer.³

Voltaire's commentary on Rousseau's statement is a perfect example of both his admiration for Peter and his sense of irony, or rather mockery, directed poignantly against the author of the Contrat social, or rather "insocial", as he called it.⁴ Voltaire's point of view is that before Peter the Great nothing existed in the Muscovy and that this vast empire had no tradition whatsoever. Peter was not just another ordinary figure in the long line of Russia's rulers, he was instead, as Voltaire's argumentation shows, Russia's true beginning, her genesis:

Les Russes, dit Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ne seront jamais policés. J'en ai vu du moins de très polis, et qui avaient esprit juste, fin, agréable, cultivé, et même conséquent, ce que Jean-Jacques trouvera fort extraordinaire.(...)

"Il n'a pas vu que son peuple n'était pas mûr pour la police;" en ce cas, le czar est admirable de l'avoir fait mûrir. Il me semble que c'est Jean-Jacques qui n'a pas vu qu'il fallait se servir d'abord des Allemands et des Anglais pour faire des Russes.(...)

"Il a empêché ses sujets de jamais devenir ce qu'ils pourraient être, etc." Cependant ces mêmes Russes sont devenus les vainqueurs des Turcs et des Tartares, les conquérants et les législateurs de la Crimée et de vingt peuple différents; leur souveraine a donné des

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Du contrat social, ed. Robert Derathé in Oeuvres complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1973) 386.

⁴ Voltaire, Dictionnaire philosophique in Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire, ed. Louis Moland, vol. 20 (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1879) 220.

lois à des nations dont le nom même était ignoré en Europe.(...)

Si les Russes n'étaient pas mûrs pour la police du temps de Pierre le Grand, convenons qu'ils sont mûrs aujourd'hui pour la grandeur d'âme, et que Jean-Jacques n'est pas tout à fait mûr pour la vérité et pour le raisonnement.(220-22)

When Voltaire claimed in his Dictionnaire philosophique that "ces mêmes Russes sont devenus les vainqueurs des Turcs et des Tartares, les conquérants et les législateurs de la Crimée et de vingt peuples différents"(221), he did not intend to impress the contemporary readers with his originality or his socio-political insight, but rather followed the popular, at least two generations-long myth, developed in French literature by many writers since the times of Peter's stay in Paris in 1717. This was a pragmatic visit, an attempt to create a political alliance with the court of the Regent. In a symbolic sense, it was also a spectacular coronation of Peter's previous educational voyages to the countries of Western Europe. The Russian Czar started his long journey in 1716 by travelling first to Denmark, where he decided to spend three months. Then he went to Hamburg and Hanover and from there to Holland, where he left his wife, the Empress Catherine, and continued his voyage alone. On May 7th 1717, he finally arrived in Paris, the capital of European refinement and sophistication, as Fontenelle remarked in the following statement:

Il n'avoit plus rien d'essentiel à apprendre ni à transporter chez lui: mais il lui restoit à voir la France, un pays où les connoissances ont été portées

aussi loin, et les agrémens de la société plus loin que par-tout ailleurs.⁵

The Czar's prolonged stay in France caused a vivid reaction on the part of the French public. However, with few exceptions the attitude of the Parisian elite to this exotic guest was rather indifferent, if not negative. Peter was judged severely on account of his very modest clothing, his old-fashioned hair-style and his lack of proper manners. But, as everything fluctuated in France according to the latest fashions, such negative opinions should not be taken too seriously, for they were constantly changing during Peter's trip. So the initial curiosity of the French transformed itself quickly into disdain, then to a kind of admiration, and then again to harsh criticism and even indignation. This impressionistic attitude of the French toward the Russian ruler is characterized by Albert Lortholary:

Arrivé à Paris le 7 mai 1717, il y séjourne six semaines, et suscite la curiosité générale. (...) les premiers jours on observe, étonné, ce souverain qui s'habille mal, et fait fi de l'étiquette. On se répète à l'oreille ses singularités, celles de sa suite; on s'entretient de l'invraisemblable voiture qu'il s'est construite lui-même, de son lit tendu dans une garde-robe, du linge qui disparaît des chambres où couchent ses gens, etc. Puis, la première semaine et la première surprise passées, on commence à ne parler de ce prince qu'avec éloges, étant affable pour tout le monde. (...) Huit jours après, le jugement s'aggrave. Le 11 juin, l'économie (of Peter the Great) est devenue lésinerie: décidément ce souverain a des manières de petit-

⁵ Bernard le Bouvier de Fontenelle, Éloge du Czar Pierre Ier in Oeuvres, vol. 7 (Paris: Jean-François Bastien et Jean Servièrre, 1792) 182-83.

bourgeois. Un monarque bourgeois! On a peine à admettre cette idée au lendemain du grand règne.⁶

This superficial attitude toward the Russian monarch was criticized by d'Alembert in the Mémoires et réflexions sur Christine, Reine de Suède. This major contributor to the Encyclopédie deplored the lack of political insight and imagination of the French, who were not able to discover in the person of Peter the Great a formidable ruler and a military genius. D'Alembert compared the cold and rather indifferent reception of the Czar in France to that of Christina, Queen of Sweden, who had visited Paris only few decades earlier. In both cases he criticized the shallowness of the French courtesans and their proneness to hasty conclusions, devoid of any deeper reflection and thought:

Ceux qui croyaient la mieux connaître, la comparaient au château de Fontainebleau, grand, mais irrégulier. On ne sera pas étonné du peu d'accueil qu'elle reçut, quand on songe au peu d'impression que fit en 1717 sur cette même cour le czar Pierre le Grand, bien supérieur à Christine; la plupart des courtisans ne virent dans ce monarque qu'un étranger qui n'avait pas les manières de leur pays, et nullement un souverain plein de génie qui voyageait pour s'instruire, et qui avait quitté le trône pour s'en rendre digne. Il semble que notre nation ait porté plus loin que les autres cette attention subalterne dont parle Tacite, qui cherche la réputation des grands hommes dans leur contenance et s'étonne de ne l'y pas démêler.⁷

⁶ Albert Lortholary, Le mirage russe en France aux dix-huitième siècle (Paris: Boivin, 1951) 19.

⁷ Jean-le-Rond d'Alembert, Mémoires et réflexions sur Christine, Reine de Suède in Oeuvres, vol. 2 (Paris: A. Belin, 1821) 13.

Another eighteenth-century French writer, Antoine-Léonard Thomas, described the reaction of the French elite to Peter the Great in terms analogous to those of d'Alembert. He also criticized the lack of sound judgement on the part of his compatriots and, just like d'Alembert, in a letter to M. Lesuire written in April, 1782, compared Peter's visit to that of the Swedish Queen Christina:

En France, quelques femmes jugèrent Christine assez légèrement, parce qu'elle dansait mal; et le czar Pierre fut regardé par des courtisans comme un homme assez médiocre, parce qu'il portait toujours un habit brun, et qu'il était assez mal coiffé. On applique encore cette méthode de juger à des ouvrages qui vaudraient la peine d'être examinés de plus près.⁸

One of the few exceptional accounts of Peter's trip to France is to be found in the Mémoires of Saint-Simon. Saint-Simon was indeed the first French courtesan to grasp fully the true genius of the Russian monarch. Opposing the mostly unfavorable opinion of the general public, which viewed Peter the Great as a barbaric, uncivilized individual lacking the most basic aristocratic manners, Saint-Simon's enthusiastic attitude contributed enormously to the creation of a certain myth that was to pervade the minds of the French intellectual elite for the rest of the eighteenth century. Typical of this highly apologetic perspective is the introductory paragraph to chapter XXXIV of volume V of the Mémoires, concerning the Czar's visit to the French court:

⁸ Antoine-Léonard Thomas, Correspondance in Oeuvres, vol. 6 (Paris: Firmin Didiot, 1822) 313.

Pierre Ier, czar de Moscovie, s'est fait avec justice un si grand nom chez lui et par toute l'Europe et l'Asie, que je n'entreprendrai pas de faire connoître un prince si grand, si illustre, comparable aux plus grands hommes de l'antiquité, qui a fait l'admiration de son siècle, qui sera celle des siècles suivants, et que toute l'Europe s'est si fort appliquée à connoître. La singularité du voyage en France d'un prince si extraordinaire m'a paru mériter de n'en rien oublier, et la narration n'être point interrompue.⁹

In the same introductory paragraph, Saint-Simon also mentioned the indifference of the French public toward Peter, particularly that of Louis XIV and the present Regent. He emphasized the fruitless efforts of the Czar to pay an official visit to the French court before the death of the Sun King, and remarked that even during the 1717 visit the Regent was not enthusiastic about his Russian guest. Saint-Simon was aware of his role in the creation and propagation of the myth of Peter the Great:

On a vu en son temps diverses choses de ce monarque; ses différents voyages en Hollande, Allemagne, Vienne, Angleterre et dans plusieurs parties du Nord; (...) On a vu aussi qu'il avoit voulu venir en France dans les dernières années du feu Roi, qui l'en fît honnêtement détourner. N'ayant plus cet obstacle, il voulut contenter sa curiosité, et il fit dire au Régent par le prince Kourakine, son ambassadeur ici, qu'il alloit partir des Pays-Bas où il étoit pour venir voir le Roi. Il n'y eut pas moyen de n'en pas paroître fort aise, quoique le Régent s'en fût bien volontiers passé. (660-61)

Saint-Simon is one of the outstanding portraitists of French literature. His descriptions of both the physical and spiritual qualities of the men he met at the French court during his long life are of a surprising accuracy,

⁹ Louis de Rouvroy, duc de Saint-Simon, Mémoires, ed. Gonzague Truc, vol. 5 (Paris: Gallimard, 1965) 660.

which testifies to the author's genuine insight and talent for profound psychological observation. Saint-Simon's literary genius is justly compared to that of Honoré de Balzac and Marcel Proust, who owe so much to their illustrious predecessor both in style and in ability to construe truly captivating images of human individuals. The French courtesans described by Saint-Simon, a true forerunner of Balzac, combine their physical and spiritual traits which seem to be inseparable from each other and constitute a harmonious unity. The remarkable description of Peter the Great in the Mémoires is a perfect example of Saint-Simon's mastery and his stylistic genius. Let us therefore present in extenso two separate passages dealing respectively with physical and spiritual aspects of the Russian Czar, or rather with the marvelous combination of two:

C'étoit un fort grand homme, très bien fait, assez maigre, le visage assez de forme ronde, un grand front, de beaux sourcils; le nez assez court sans rien de trop, gros par le bout; les lèvres assez grosses; le teint rougeâtre et brun; de beaux yeux noirs, grands, vifs, perçants, bien fendus; le regard majestueux et gracieux quand il prenoit garde, sinon sévère et farouche, avec un tic qui ne revenoit pas souvent, mais qu'il lui démontoit les yeux et toute la physionomie, et qui donnoit de la frayeur. Cela duroit un moment, avec un regard égaré et terrible, et se remettoit aussitôt. Tout son air marquoit son esprit, sa réflexion et sa grandeur, et ne manquoit pas d'une certaine grâce. Il ne portoit qu'un col de toile, une perruque ronde, brune, comme sans poudre, qui ne touchoit pas ses épaules, un habit brun justaucorps, uni à boutons d'or, veste, culotte, bas, point de gants ni de manchettes, l'étoile de son ordre sur son habit et le cordon par dessous, son habit souvent déboutonné tout à fait, son chapeau sur une table, et jamais sur sa tête, même dehors. Dans cette simplicité, quelque mal voituré et accompagné qu'il pût être, on ne s'y

pouvoit méprendre à l'air de grandeur qui lui étoit naturel. (666-67)

This physical portrait of Peter is preceded by the psychological one. Both descriptions combine spiritual and material aspects of the Czar's person and create a perfect unity. In comparison with the opinions of the contemporary French public, as presented later by Thomas and by d'Alembert, Saint-Simon's description of Peter superseded the narrow attitudes of his compatriots, for whom the revolutionary character, political genius and curiosity of the Czar to learn from the best examples the West had to offer, was overshadowed by his lack of polite manners and ignorance of French courtly etiquette. The eighteenth century is the period of reawakening of human curiosity, so admired later by Voltaire and the Encyclopedists. Let us emphasize that Saint-Simon noticed this typically enlightened aspect of Peter the Great's personality long before these later French writers did. How different was his vision of the Russian Czar from that of his contemporaries, who did not understand Peter's true greatness. The courtesans of the Regency still lived in the illusory shadow of the aristocratic magnificence of the best years of Louis XIV. The spirit of Enlightenment had not yet penetrated their minds, nor did it have any effect on their Weltanschauung. Saint-Simon was therefore quite exceptional in his nearly prophetic observations about the Russian ruler:

Ce monarque se fit admirer par son extrême curiosité, toujours tendante à ses vues de gouvernement, de

commerce, d'instruction, de police, et cette curiosité atteignit à tout et ne dédaigna rien, dont les moindres traits avoient une utilité suivie, marquée, savante, qui n'estima que ce qui méritoit l'être, en qui brilla l'intelligence, la justesse, la vive appréhension de son esprit. Tout montrait en lui la vaste étendue de ses lumières et quelque chose de continuellement conséquent. Il allia d'une manière tout à fait surprenante la majesté la plus haute, la plus fière, la plus délicate, la plus soutenue, en même temps la moins embarrassante quand il l'avoit établie dans toute sa sureté, avec une politesse qui la sentoit, et toujours, et avec tous, et en maître partout, mais qui avoit ses degrés suivants les personnes. Il avoit une sorte de familiarité qui venoit de liberté; mais il n'étoit pas exempt d'une forte empreinte de cette ancienne barbarie de son pays qui rendoit toutes ses manières promptes, même précipitées, ses volontés incertaines, sans vouloir être contraint ni contredit sur pas une; sa table, souvent peu décente, beaucoup moins ce qui la suivait, souvent aussi avec un découvert d'audace d'un roi partout chez soi; ce qu'il se proposoit de voir ou de faire toujours dans l'entière indépendance des moyens, qu'il falloit forcer à son plaisir et à son mot. (665-66)

For Saint-Simon Peter's trip to France was not only a diplomatic mission, but above all an important educational experience. In several passages of the Mémoires dedicated to the Czar's visit in Paris the author brings into focus his curiosity and his insatiable desire to learn. Saint-Simon's most frequently used words in such cases are "examiner" and "longtemps", both accentuating Peter's talent for careful and perspicacious observation. The brief account of the Czar's visit to the Louvre is a perfect example of the author's classical stylistic condensation, characterized by precision and accuracy in creating, and subsequently developing the future myth of Peter the Great. Passages like the following one are very powerful in spite of their brevity and simplicity. The image of the Czar

becomes clear, succinct, and will be easily remembered. Peter is glorified here. He becomes a true hero of early Enlightenment. The reader has a feeling that it is not a human being who walks through the chambers and gardens of the Louvre, but rather a God-like figure. We shall see later that another eighteenth-century writer, the poet Antoine-Léonard Thomas, created a very similar divine image of Peter in his epic poem entitled La Pétréide:

Le vendredi 14, il alla dès six heures du matin dans la Grande Galerie du Louvre voir les plans en relief de toutes les places du Roi, dont Asfeld avec ses ingénieurs lui fit les honneurs. (...) Il examina fort longtemps tous ces plans. Il visita ensuite beaucoup d'endroits du Louvre, et descendit après dans le jardin des Tuileries, dont on avoit fait sortir tout le monde. On travailloit alors au Pont-Tournant. Il examina fort cet ouvrage, et y demeura longtemps. (668-69)

Saint-Simon's account of Peter's visit to Les Invalides is another example of the author's emphasis on the Czar's intellectual curiosity and his willingness to learn about new developments in France. Let us pay special attention to an extremely powerful expression: "tout voir et tout examiner partout", used with strong effect by the author. Classical stylistics and rhetorical concentration are highly efficient in the portrait he paints. Once again the reader of the Mémoires has an impression of being in the presence of a very special figure, rather than in that of an ordinary man:

Le 16 mai, jour de la Pentecôte, il alla aux Invalides, où il voulut tout voir et tout examiner partout. Au réfectoire, il goûta de la soupe des soldats et leur vin, but à leur santé, leur frappant sur l'épaule et les appelant camarades. Il admira beaucoup l'église, l'apothicaire et l'infirmier, et parut charmé de l'ordre de cette maison. (669)

Peter's curiosity is also underlined in another passage of the Mémoires, depicting the Czar's visit to the Duchess de Berry and then to Pajot d'Ons-en-Bray:

Vendredi 21, il alla voir Mme la duchesse de Berry au Luxembourg, où il fut reçu comme le Roi. Après sa visite il se promena dans les jardins. Mme la duchesse de Berry s'en alla ce pendant à la Meute, pour lui laisser la liberté de voir toute sa maison, qu'il visita fort curieusement. (...) Samedi 22, il fut à Bercy chez Pajot d'Ons-en-Bray, principal directeur de la poste, dont la maison est pleine de toutes sortes de raretés et de curiosités, tant naturelles que mécaniques. (...) Il s'y amusa tout le jour, et y admira plusieurs belles machines. (670)

The creation of the Petrine myth in the Mémoires goes much further than a simple presentation of the Russian Czar as an example of a new enlightened man, a curious and adventurous human being transgressing the limits of the obsolete tradition and of the superstitious beliefs in immuability of the world. Peter, as described by Saint-Simon, is not only a God-like icon of the Enlightenment, but also, and this is unfortunately quite far from the truth, a tender, compassionate Father of his country. In spite of his unquestionable achievements and revolutionary reforms, compassion and tenderness were not qualities Peter possessed. Saint-Simon's touching account of Peter's idyllic contacts with the future Louis XV, still a child in 1717, is an example of how stylistic manipulation enabled the author to create around the Czar an atmosphere of serenity, pristine calmness, genuine father-like affection and kindness. How could any potential reader of the following passage believe the numerous unflattering stories

spread all over Europe about the cruelty and innate barbarity of the Russian ruler? According to many sources, he disposed of his subjects and even of the members of his own immediate family at his will and without a trace of scruples or remorse. Saint-Simon's literary account of the friendly and intimate meetings between the Russian Emperor and the future Louis XV contradicted the popular belief of the French. It served as a very effective means to propagate the myth of Peter the Great and to polish his not always positive image. But creation and development of the legend have their own rights and dynamics. Combining the supra-human qualities of the Czar with an all too human tenderness and kindness, although completely fictional, was the best way to succeed in constructing the foundation of a potentially dangerous myth. This truth is valid not only for the propagation of the Petrine legend in France, for which the literature of the period was the major vehicle, but for the legend of any other outstanding individual:

Le lundi suivant 10 mai, le Roi alla voir le Czar, qui le reçut à sa portière, le vit descendre de carosse, et marcha de front à gauche du Roi jusque dans sa chambre, où ils trouvèrent deux fauteuils égaux. (...) On fut étonné de voir le Czar prendre le Roi sous les deux bras, le hausser à son niveau, l'embrasser ainsi en l'air, et le Roi à son âge, et qui n'y pouvoit pas être préparé, n'en avoir aucune frayeur. On fut frappé de toutes les grâces qu'il montra devant le Roi, de l'air de tendresse qu'il prit pour lui, de cette politesse qui couloit de source, et toutefois mêlée de grandeur, d'égalité de rang, et légèrement de supériorité d'âge; car tout cela se fit très distinctement sentir. Il loua fort le Roi; il en parut charmé, et il en persuada tout le monde. (668)

This passage is, in our opinion, a peculiar example of how Saint-Simon's classical rhetoric, combining the notion of the most grandiose and noble with the most human and natural, was able to produce, by virtue of such hyperbole, the solid and infractable foundation of the myth of Peter the Great. The image of the Czar built up by Saint-Simon is not only that of a supra-human, quasi-divine hero of the early Enlightenment, curious to learn and willing to change the existing world of imperfection, but this passage also presents the portrait of a tender Father, unrivaled in his innate kindness, even if slightly dominating. This loving Pater familias understands perfectly the needs not only of a limited familial setting, as exemplified by the affectionate relationship between father and child, but also of the entire state, or rather, of the entire European continent, as made explicit by the highly symbolic greeting and relationship of the two rulers. The rhetorical construction of this passage is essential in order to understand the subsequent development in France of the Petrine myth, which reached its peak at a later period, long after his death in 1725. We shall analyze this in more detail in the following chapter.

Chapter 2

On January 28, 1725, Peter the Great, the Czar of Muscovy and the founder of the new Russian Empire, died. His premature death caused political uncertainty in Russia, yet he was destined to remain immortal and for ever remembered by the French Académie des Sciences, which had elected him to membership on December 22, 1717. The Académie, in accordance with traditional customs, charged its perpetual secretary, Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, to prepare a lengthy praise of the late Russian Czar with the purpose of communicating to the French public the great loss which Europe of the early Enlightenment had suffered thereby. Fontenelle produced a solid piece of apologetic literature, entitled Éloge du Czar Pierre I which, along with the Mémoires of Saint-Simon, helped to establish and propagate the Petrine myth. The heroic and quasi-divine figure of Peter is not only accentuated in Fontenelle's text by the enumeration of his socio-political reforms and military victories, but is also represented in a short paragraph depicting the Czar's agony and death:

Il n'avoit que 52 ans, lorsqu'il mourut le 28 janvier 1725 d'une rétention d'urine, causée par un abcès dans le col de la vessie. Il souffrit d'extrêmes douleurs pendant douze jours, et ne se mit au lit que dans les trois derniers. Il quitta la vie avec tout le courage d'un héros et toute la piété d'un chrétien.¹

¹ Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, Éloge du Czar Pierre Ier in Oeuvres, vol. 7 (Paris: Jean-François Bastien et Jean Servièrre, 1792) 193.

If Peter's ordinary death was depicted by Fontenelle with inflated rhetoric and his agony represented as the exemplary trespassing of a true Christian hero, one can only imagine the highly apologetic nature of the remaining fragments of the Éloge. This uncritical attitude toward the Russian Czar, so typical not only of Fontenelle or the early Enlightenment, but of later eighteenth-century French writers as well, was mentioned by Albert Lortholary, who stressed Fontenelle's highly selective approach to the subject:

En novembre 1725 l'Académie des Sciences chargeait son secrétaire de prononcer l'éloge funèbre de Pierre le Grand. Elle ne pouvait moins faire. Le tsar, lors de son voyage à Paris, l'avait honorée d'une visite. Elle lui avait décerné le titre d'académicien hors de tout rang, puis celui d'associé étranger. Il avait fait parvenir à l'assemblée divers plans et cartes de Russie. Il avait par ailleurs composé des traités de marine, établi les sciences et les arts dans les vastes Etats de sa domination, fondé - sur le papier - une Académie des Sciences analogue à la nôtre. Bref, son oeuvre était assez riche, son règne avait été assez rempli pour fournir à l'un de ces éloges où le Secrétaire perpétuel triomphait. Il ne s'agissait que de choisir, de cacher le barbare derrière le réformateur, et derrière l'homme d'Etat le bourreau. Fontenelle y réussit à merveille: son éloge est habile, élégant, superficiel à souhait.²

Fontenelle's Éloge du Czar Pierre I is an example of a greatly oversimplified Manichean vision of the world that the Age of Enlightenment produced. For many writers and thinkers of the period, even for the most outstanding

² Albert Lortholary, Le mirage russe en France au dix-huitième siècle (Paris: Boivin, 1951) 22.

ones such as Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot and other Encyclopédistes, history was a battleground between forces of darkness and light. The eighteenth-century vision of the infamous domain of darkness encompassed various elements, particularly organized religion and its anti-rational dogmatic character, obsolete socio-political systems, the remnants of feudal patriarchy, popular superstition, intolerance due to lack of genuine education, and last but not least, poverty resulting from insufficient economic development. The realm of light was composed of everything that contradicted the traditional way of thinking. The illuminating splendor of philosophy, which was expected to penetrate even the most distant regions of Europe and bring them a new, enlightened truth, was associated with progress and change, socio-political mobility and economic reform. The Manichean struggle, as imagined by various thinkers of the Enlightenment, was fierce indeed, but the final victory was near and the new era of humankind, the new day was soon to come. Jean Starobinski recapitulates this mythical belief in a new beginning and a more promising life on Earth in his book entitled 1789. Les emblèmes de la raison, dedicated particularly to the esthetics and rhetoric of the revolutionary period in France. However, this Manichean perspective, the metaphorical concept of opposing forces of light and darkness, or rather those of antiquated tradition and progress, was not only typical

of the decades preceding the French Revolution, but was also characteristic of the entire eighteenth century, as the analysis of Fontenelle's Éloge du Czar Pierre Ier will show:

Les métaphores de la lumière victorieuse des ténèbres, de la vie renaissant du sein de la mort, du monde ramené à son commencement, sont des images qui s'imposent aux approches de 1789. Métaphores simples, antithèses sans âge, chargées de valeur religieuse depuis des siècles, mais auxquelles l'époque semble vouloir se prêter avec une prédilection passionnée. L'ordre ancien ayant pris, par une réduction symbolique, l'apparence d'une nuée obscure, d'un fléau cosmique, la lutte contre celui-ci pouvait se donner pour l'objectif, selon le même langage symbolique, l'irruption du jour. Lorsque l'évidence de la raison et du sentiment prend force de loi radieuse, toute relation d'autorité et d'obéissance qui ne se fonde sur cette base, est condamnée à n'être plus que les ténèbres.³

Almost the entire text of Fontenelle's Éloge is based on the dichotomy of darkness and light, contrasting Russia before and during the reign of Peter the Great, or rather before and after the Petrine reforms. The message which the author attempts to convey is that seventeenth-century Russia was a cultural, economic and political desert where nothing worthy of the attention of a cultivated person existed. Peter's predecessors were, according to the perpetual secretary, inadequate, nearsighted and detrimental to Russia's fate. Fontenelle's representation of Peter, like the one of Saint-Simon, is that of a supra-human hero. However, in

³ Jean Starobinski, 1789. Les emblèmes de la raison (Paris: Flammarion, 1979) 31.

the Éloge Fontenelle goes even one step further than the author of the Mémoires. Peter the Great is for him not only a heroic individual or maker of a new Russia, but indeed a true God. He attributed divine powers and prerogatives to him, such as the ability to create the entire universe out of pure nothingness, ex nihilo. We may safely claim, just to paraphrase Boileau's immortal "enfin Malherbes vint", that Fontenelle's highly apologetic text can be reduced to the following message: "enfin Pierre le Grand vint". Let us now consider for a moment a passage from the Éloge, which resumes the major lines of Fontenelle's rhetoric and exemplifies his binary vision of Russian history:

Tout étoit à faire en Moscovie, et rien à perfectionner. Il s'agissoit de créer une nation nouvelle; et, ce qui tient encore de la création, il falloit agir seul, sans secours, sans instrumens. L'aveugle politique de ses prédécesseurs avoit presque entièrement détaché la Moscovie du reste du monde: le commerce y étoit ou ignoré, ou négligé au dernier point; et cependant toutes les richesses, et même celles de l'esprit, dépendent du commerce. Le Czar ouvrit ses grands états, jusques là fermés. Après avoir envoyé ses principaux sujets chercher des connoissances et des lumières chez les étrangers, il attira chez lui tout ce qu'il put d'étrangers capables d'en apporter à ses sujets, officiers de terre et de mer, matelots, ingénieurs, mathématiciens, architectes, gens habiles dans la découverte des mines et dans le travail des métaux, médecins, chirurgiens, artisans de toutes les espèces.⁴

There is no more evident example of Fontenelle's binary vision than the opening line of the above quoted

⁴ Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, Éloge du Czar Pierre Ier 173-74.

passage. The author attempts to persuade his readers that nothing in Russia could have been perfected, for everything had to be done from the very beginning. The question for Peter was not really to reform, but rather to create a new nation. He had to call it into existence from nothingness, like God, who created the universe ex nihilo. The Manichean struggle between the forces of light and darkness is emphasized in this passage by a careful choice of rhetorical devices, such as the following sentence: "aveugle politique de ses prédécesseurs", which "avoit détaché (...) la Moscovie du reste du monde". It was the obsolete national tradition prior to Peter the Great, which, according not only to Fontenelle, but also to the other thinkers of the period, obstructed the passage of light in old Russia and kept that country away from its source, meaning from the rest of the civilized world. This passage also illustrates Fontenelle's tendency to divide Russian history into two distinct parts, corresponding respectively to the times before and after Peter. In the past all the arts, crafts, sciences and industry in the Muscovy were either ignored or gravely neglected, but then came Peter the Great and suddenly Russian misery ended. Fontenelle praised the influx of foreign craftsmen and professionals. His long and somewhat tedious enumeration of those foreign experts effectively serves the purpose of the Éloge, which was to convince the members of Académie des Sciences and the

European public of the genius of the late Russian Czar. The contrast of the insignificant before, reduced in that passage to merely one or two lines, with the after, emphasized by the progressive enumeration of newly implanted arts and crafts on the Russian soil, cannot escape anyone's attention. It convinced at once. This is what Fontenelle, by means of skillful rhetoric, intended it to do.

In a different passage of the Éloge Fontenelle describes in more detail the Russian status quo ante. He gives the reader a chance to descend directly into the heart of darkness, to penetrate for a short moment the bottomless source of evil. Fontenelle's rhetoric is analogous to that encountered before in the text of Pilippe Avril. The dantesque visions of the Russian malheureux Empire were very tempting to the imagination of Western intellectuals not only in the seventeenth, but particularly in the eighteenth century, during which the Manichean struggle between obsolete past and the new civilization, based on progress and enlightenment, became one of the most important components of universally accepted ideology. Behold Russia before Peter the Great, as Fontenelle imagined it:

Il régnoit par-tout une extrême dépravation de mœurs et de sentimens, qui n'étoit pas seulement, comme ailleurs, cachée sous des dehors légers de bienséance, ou revêtue de quelqu'apparence d'esprit, et de quelques agrémens superficiels. Cependant ce même peuple étoit souverainement fier, plein de mépris pour tout ce qu'il ne connoissoit point; et c'est le comble de l'ignorance que d'être orgueilleuse. Les Czars y avoient contribué, en ne

permettant point que leurs sujets voyageassent: peut-être craignoit-on qu'ils ne vinssent à ouvrir les yeux sur leur malheureux état.(165-66)

In this passage Fontenelle develops once again his metaphorical vision of struggle between light and darkness. The source of all Russian misfortunes is ignorance, lack of true light, from which originate progress and happiness for humankind. The Czars who preceded Peter the Great kept their country in complete isolation, thus perpetuating Russia's obdurate misery. The old Muscovy, according to Fontenelle, was the country of the blind deprived of light by their ignorant rulers. The Russian Empire, as presented in this passage, is analogous to Plato's cave. It is the realm of eternal shadows and desolation, both spiritual and physical. Fear of light and changing the obsolete, quasi infernal conditions, which were preserved during several centuries by the oppressive Russian culture, rooted in the isolationist ideology of the Orthodox Church, could only have been overcome by an extraordinary ruler, a supra-human figure, that of Peter the Great, of course. Fontenelle did not hesitate to compare the late Czar to the other outstanding heroes of European history, Caesar Augustus and Charlemagne, so highly regarded by all writers and thinkers of the Enlightenment:

Les sciences en faveurs desquelles il s'abaissoit au rang de simple particulier, doivent l'élever en récompense au rang des Auguste et des Charlemagne, qui leur ont aussi accordé leur familiarité.(184)

Fontenelle's binary perspective, that of la transparence et l'obstacle, is also noticeable in another passage, in which the author of the Éloge gives us a portrait of Peter as a young man, or rather as a young hero in the process of discovering his genius and coming to terms with his extraordinary destiny. This destiny was obstructed by the forces of Russian tradition, namely the fruitless efforts of the Princess Sophia, who attempted to curb Peter's powers and to reduce his imperial prerogatives. Fontenelle's vision is very propagandistic. The reader knows his thesis already: light must and will conquer darkness. There is no other possible solution and progress shall triumph anyhow, it is only a matter of time:

Pierre déjà Czar, dans un âge si tendre, étoit très-mal élevé, non seulement par le vice général de l'éducation Moscovite, par celui de l'éducation ordinaire des princes, que la flatterie se hâte de corrompre (...) mais encore plus par les soins de l'ambitieuse Sophie, qui déjà le connoissoit assez pour craindre qu'il ne fût un jour trop grand prince, et trop difficile à gouverner. Elle l'environna de tout ce qui étoit capable d'étouffer ses lumières naturelles, de lui gâter le coeur, de l'avilir par les plaisirs. Mais ni la bonne éducation ne fait les grands caractères, ni la mauvaise ne les détruit. Les héros en tout genre sortent tout formés des mains de la nature, et avec les qualités insurmontable. (166-67)

Peter's initial victory over the reactionary forces of Sophia and her partisans is only the first entry in the long list of his heroic actions, presented by Fontenelle in the Éloge. The Czar's reforms not only refurbished Russia's negative image or infused life into

an old and decaying organism, but rather, according to Fontenelle, created a brand new political entity. The author of the Éloge juxtaposes Peter's reign with Russian historical tradition, the significance of which he either completely ignored, marginalized, or simply decided to overlook. When he referred, for example, to the new printing industry in eighteenth-century Russia, stimulated by Peter, he did not miss a chance to compare it with the previous inadequate conditions:

On ne peut que parcourir les differens établissemens que lui doit la Moscovie, et seulement les principaux. (...) Des imprimeries, dont il (Peter the Great) a changé les anciens caractères trop barbares et presque indéchiffrables, à cause des fréquentes abréviations. D'ailleurs, des livres si difficiles à lire étoient plus rares qu'aucune marchandise étrangère. (188-90)

In the grip of his French taste, Fontenelle could not understand the beauty and originality of old Russian Orthodox architecture and arts. The magnificent medieval churches of the Byzantine Muscovy were of no value for him. This was certainly not only his personal point of view, but that of the entire Enlightenment, whose esthetics were based on classical concepts. Fontenelle once again employed his binary method to compare the barbaric era of ignorance with the resplendent new times of Peter the Great:

Après avoir donné à son ouvrage des fondemens solides et nécessaires, il y ajouta ce qui n'est que de parure et d'ornement. Il changea l'ancienne architecture grossière et difforme au dernier point, ou plutôt il fit naître chez lui l'architecture. (...) Il a fait venir d'Italie et de France beaucoup de tableaux, qui apprennent ce que c'est que la peinture à des gens qui ne la connoissoient que par

de très-mauvaises représentations de leurs saints.(190-91)

Fontenelle construed in the Éloge a very particular image of Peter. The Russian Czar was represented in this text not only as a simple reformer, promoting some cosmetic changes, but rather as a creator, who shaped the future destiny of Russia in his own hands and called her into existence ex nihilo. For Fontenelle, as well as for many other figures of the French Enlightenment, Russia's history began with Peter the Great and nothing worthy of consideration had occurred in the Muscovy before the beginning of the eighteenth century. We must emphasize, however, that Fontenelle's Éloge was the first major literary document to establish a solid foundation for the Petrine myth in the West. Voltaire's bipolar vision of Russia's gloomy past and luminous future, as found in his historical works, is similar in essence to that of Fontenelle, for the author of the Dictionnaire philosophique owed much in this regard to the earlier writings of his predecessor. With all due respect to his literary significance, Voltaire was just an exemplar of many other eighteenth-century thinkers who followed uncritically Fontenelle's pioneering Éloge and then contributed to the propagation of the myth. It is precisely Fontenelle who created a new school and whose works started the infatuation of the French Enlightenment with Russian reforms. To recapitulate his unquestionable

role let us present the last passage of the Éloge du Czar Pierre Ier:

Il aura eu l'avantage de prendre tout dans l'état où l'ont mis jusqu'à présent les nations les plus savantes et les plus polies, et elles lui auront épargné cette suite si lente de progrès qu'elles ont eue à essayer; bientôt elles verront la nation Russe arriver à leur niveau, et y arriver d'autant plus glorieusement, qu'elle sera partie de plus loin. (191)

Various Russian themes, particularly those concerning the monumental reforms of Peter the Great, were not neglected by the most outstanding political theoretician of the entire French eighteenth century, Charles Louis de Montesquieu. Unlike Fontenelle, however, whose approach to Russia derived from the popular concept of the struggle between the forces of tradition and progress, and who in the Éloge erected the myth of Russia's absolute beginning or its cultural point zero, Montesquieu created in his writings, especially in De l'esprit des lois, a radically different Russian vision. In an attempt to develop his own mythology and to analyze Russia's recent modernization from a more original perspective, Montesquieu did not discredit its barbaric past, as did Fontenelle, but rather tried to dive deeply into Russia's forgotten national history and to rediscover the hidden remains of its Nordic tradition of political liberty. His approach to the subject is that of an archeologist, who unfortunately, as we will try to demonstrate, confused the premises with final conclusions. During his descent into the misty Russian

past, Montesquieu was primarily interested in proving his own theories, established a priori, rather than to critically evaluate the available material. His attitude toward Russia, although different from Fontenelle's, is nonetheless another example of wishful thinking, and not that of sound rational analysis.

The traces of Montesquieu's initial preoccupation with Russian topics can be found in his Lettres persanes, published in 1721, four years before Fontenelle wrote the Éloge. However, the picture of Russia presented in this work is very fragmentary. It seems that Montesquieu simply repeated, without any trace of originality or new approach, what the cultivated public already knew about that mysterious country. In letter LI of the Lettres persanes, for example, Montesquieu attributes the Russian Orthodox conservatism to complete isolation from the rest of Europe, sanctioned and meticulously observed by the Czars, and to lack of any foreign contacts:

Les Moscovites ne peuvent point sortir de l'Empire, fût-ce pour voyager. Ainsi, séparés des autres nations par les lois du pays, ils ont conservé leurs anciennes coutumes avec d'autant plus d'attachement qu'ils ne croyoient pas qu'il fût possible d'en avoir d'autres.⁵

Montesquieu perpetuates in the same letter LI, the only one dedicated exclusively to Russia, the old myth about the predilection of the Russian women for physical

⁵ Charles Louis de Montesquieu, Lettres persanes in Oeuvres complètes, ed. Roger Caillois, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1979) 206.

abuse, which, according to the popular belief of the period, they traditionally expected from their husbands as a sign of love and respect. He claims that for Russian women lack of marital violence signified a serious crisis of the conjugal relationship. To demonstrate this particular aspect of Russian society more effectively, Montesquieu inserted into letter LI another letter, written by a young Russian woman to her mother, in which its fictional authoress explains how she attempted to win her indifferent husband's attention and thus to strengthen their mutual affection:

Je suis la plus malheureuse femme du Monde! Il n'y a rien que je n'aie fait pour me faire aimer de mon mari, et je n'ai jamais pu y réussir. Hier, j'avois mille affaires dans la maison; je sortis, et je demeurai tout le jour dehors. Je crus, à mon retour, qu'il me battroit bien fort; mais il ne me dit pas un seul mot. (...) J'ai résolu de me faire aimer de mon mari à quelque prix que ce soit; je le ferai si bien enrager, qu'il faudra bien qu'il me donne des marques d'amitié. Il ne sera pas dit que je ne serai pas battue, et que je vivrai dans la maison sans que l'on pense à moi. (...) Je vous supplie, ma chère Mère, de vouloir bien représenter à mon mari qu'il me traite d'une manière indigne. Mon père, qui est un honnête homme, n'agissoit pas de même, et il me souvient, lorsque j'étois petite fille, qu'il me sembloit quelquefois qu'il vous aimoit trop. (205-06)

The portrait of Peter the Great presented by Montesquieu in letter LI is just as fragmentary and incomplete as all other remarks on Russia in the Lettres persanes. This should be of no surprise, for letter LI is the only fragment of the entire text dedicated exclusively to Russian themes. Due to the limited scope of this letter, Montesquieu could state only a few

obvious and rudimentary facts about the Czar, facts that the cultivated society of the early eighteenth century certainly did not ignore. His stereotypical image of the Russian ruler is thus that of an outstanding reformer who attempted to modernize the country regardless of the growing grass-root opposition of the conservative forces interested in preserving Russia's Orthodox isolationism and its cultural backwardness. Peter the Great, as briefly presented by Montesquieu, is the symbol of progress and civilization. We shall see that with time Montesquieu's attitude toward the Czar changed rather dramatically. But there is no trace in 1721, the year of publication of the Lettres persanes, of what will come later, a more detailed analysis of the Russian political system, which preoccupied Montesquieu during the next twenty seven years and which was finally elaborated in his De l'esprit des lois in 1748. Letter II gives us therefore a very traditional image of Peter. His reforms are presented in the light of the main precepts of mercantilism, the dominant economic ideology of the early Enlightenment, inherited from the seventeenth century, from the period of Louis XIV and his minister Colbert:

...le prince qui règne à présent a voulu tout changer: il a eu de grands démêlés avec eux (his subjects) au sujet de leur barbe; le clergé et les moines n'ont pas moins combattu en faveur de leur ignorance. Il s'attache à faire fleurir les arts et ne néglige rien pour porter dans l'Europe et l'Asie la gloire de sa nation, oubliée jusques ici et presque uniquement connue d'elle-même. Inquiet et sans cesse agité, il erre dans ses vastes états, laissant partout des marques de sa sévérité naturelle. Il les quitte, comme s'ils ne pouvoient

le contenir, et va chercher dans l'Europe d'autres provinces et de nouveaux royaumes. (206)

Montesquieu's fragmentary treatment of Russia in the Lettres persanes changes into a more detailed study in his monumental De l'esprit des lois, where Russia is placed in a much wider socio-political context and her system analyzed comparatively along with the systems of various other European, Asian, American and even African countries. However, the author's interest in Russia was quite peculiar. In De l'esprit des lois Montesquieu did not follow the other French seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers who presented Russia as the malheureux Empire needing drastic reforms in order to become more European. For Montesquieu, Russia had always been an integral part of Europe and its present despotic character was the product of various foreign invasions originating from Asia, a plague which that vast country suffered throughout its history beginning with the early Middle Ages. Recent Russian despotism was alien to the democratic spirit of Northern Europe, of which Russia, in Montesquieu's opinion, was an important component. Montesquieu's advice to the Muscovite elite was not to attempt to modernize the country in a hasty and irresponsible manner by simply copying Western patterns, but rather to rediscover the forgotten spirit of the North, supposedly still existing in Russia in spite of many foreign invasions and centuries of Asian influence.

Montesquieu's myth about the rediscovery of the Russian endemic democracy agrees with his general philosophical concepts, according to which climate plays an important role in shaping the socio-political system of groups of people and even entire nations. In the first chapter of book XIV of De l'esprit des lois, Montesquieu links human behavior and human passions to climatic differences in various parts of the world. This argument leads him to claim that the social fabric of a nation depends on the climate of the region it inhabits and thus its laws will be different from nations living under different geographical conditions:

S'il est vrai que le caractère de l'esprit et les passions du coeur soient extrêmement différents dans les divers climats, les lois doivent être relatives à la différence de ces passions, et à la différence de ces caractères.⁶

In De l'esprit des lois, Montesquieu makes an important distinction between the North and the South. The countries situated in the North, i.e. most European states, are in general freer, better governed and less tyrannical than empires in warmer climates, particularly those located in the vast territories of Asia. Montesquieu claims that this fundamental difference originates primarily in human physiology, which, in turn, depends on geographical influence:

On a donc plus de vigueur dans les climats froids. L'action du coeur et la réaction des extrémités des

⁶ Charles Louis de Montesquieu, De l'esprit des lois, ed. Roger Caillois, (Paris: Gallimard, 1951) 474.

fibres s'y font mieux, les liqueurs sont mieux en équilibre, le sang est plus déterminé vers le coeur, et réciproquement le coeur a plus de puissance. Cette force plus grande doit produire bien des effets: par exemple, plus de confiance en soi-même, c'est-à-dire plus de courage; plus de connoissance de sa supériorité, c'est-à-dire moins de désir de la vengeance; plus d'opinion de sa sûreté, c'est-à-dire plus de franchise, moins de soupçons, de politique et de ruse. Enfin cela doit faire des caractères bien différents. (474-75)

In Montesquieu's presentation, the Nordic spirit of liberty spread throughout the European continent, including the territories of historical Russia before the Mongol invasions in the Middle Ages. To this spirit of freedom Montesquieu sharply opposes the southern state of serfdom and tyranny, so characteristic of Asia. This opposition is best illustrated in the following passage from chapter V, book XVII of De l'esprit de lois:

C'est ce qui a fait que le génie de la nation tartare ou gétique a toujours été semblable à celui des empires de l'Asie. Les peuples, dans ceux-ci, sont gouvernés par le bâton; les peuples tartares, par les longs fouets. L'esprit de l'Europe a toujours été contraire à ces moeurs: et, dans tous les temps, ce que les peuples d'Asie ont appelé punition, les peuples d'Europe l'ont appelé outrage. (528)

Montesquieu claims that even within the European continent there are fundamental differences among states. The further one ventures towards the North, the freer is the political climate. The respective fates of the Roman Empire, conquered by northern, thus by definition more liberal Germanic tribes, and of the Byzantine Empire, destroyed by tyrannical Asiatic invaders, exemplify the political discrepancies originating in geographical differences:

Les Tartares détruisant l'empire grec, établirent dans les pays conquis la servitude et le despotisme; les Goths conquérant l'empire romain, fondèrent partout la monarchie et la liberté.(528)

Montesquieu's admiration for Northern Europe was nearly unlimited. He found the sources of modern European political liberties in the North, and more precisely, in the Scandinavian countries. Scandinavia became in his political archeology a mythical birthplace of a profoundly democratic Europe, a Europe that he ceaselessly praised and compared with the despotic governments of Asia. Montesquieu believed that the true light came from the North. It was there that the concept of democracy was born. Scandinavia was the cradle of the unique spirit of Europe:

Je ne sais si le fameux Rudbeck, qui, dans son Atlantique, a tant loué la Scandinavie, a parlé de cette grande prérogative qui doit mettre les nations qui l'habitent, au-dessus de tous les peuples du monde; c'est qu'elles ont été la source de la liberté de l'Europe, c'est-à-dire de presque toute celle qui est aujourd'hui parmi les hommes. Le Goth Jornandès a appelé le nord de l'Europe la fabrique du genre humain. Je l'appellerai plutôt la fabrique des instruments qui brisent les fers forgés au midi. C'est là que se forment ces nations vaillantes, qui sortent de leurs pays pour détruire les tyrants et les esclaves et apprendre aux hommes que, la nature les ayant faits égaux, la raison n'a pu les rendre dépendants que pour leur bonheur.(528)

In De l'esprit des lois Montesquieu never considered Russia an Asiatic political entity, but rather a European country, whose true spirit of freedom was analogous to that of the entire northern part of the continent. Russia's historical deviation from its traditional liberal course was ascribed to the invasions

of the Tartars, who not only devastated its vast and fertile lands, but introduced different customs and imposed foreign laws, alien to the primordial nature of the Russian people. The effect of those invasions was so overwhelming that Russia, as well as other countries of the region, never recovered from that initial trauma:

Les parties les plus tempérées de la Perse, de la Turquie, de la Moscovie et de la Pologne, n'ont pu se rétablir des dévastations des grands et petits Tartares. (532)

Montesquieu's archeological quest for a mythical democratic Russia of the past is best exemplified by chapter XIV of book XIX of his De l'esprit des lois, entitled "Quels sont les moyens naturels de changer les mœurs et les manières d'une nation?" It focuses on the reforms of Peter the Great. In contrast to many other figures of the early Enlightenment, especially the enthusiastic Fontenelle, Montesquieu considered Russia's recent reforms a fundamental error of the Czar. He claimed that Peter did not understand the true spirit of his own nation and instead of gradually reintroducing the political liberties that had already existed in Russia sometime in the early Middle Ages, attempted to change the country by means of tyrannical decrees and arbitrary laws. Montesquieu's ideal version of the adoption of Russian reforms would have been that of a premeditated archeological quest and resurrection of an edenic past, followed by a gradual revival of all major lines of the long forgotten liberal tradition, abandoned as a result

of the Tartar invasions. There is no doubt that the following passage is directed against Peter's inability to comprehend the real needs of his nation and against his hasty reforms:

Ainsi, lorsqu'un prince veut faire de grands changements dans sa nation, il faut qu'il réforme par les lois ce qui est établi par les lois, et qu'il change par les manières ce qui est établi par les manières: et c'est une très mauvaise politique de changer par les lois ce qui doit être changé par les manières. (564)

Peter's ignorance of Russia's remote, more liberal past resulted, according to Montesquieu, in the Czar's use of "incorrect" methods to civilize his nation. Fontenelle and other thinkers of the Enlightenment, including Voltaire, either never discussed, or reduced to a minimum, the utterly repressive character of the Petrine reforms and their enormous human cost. Fontenelle never really mentioned the massive resistance of the Russian Orthodox clergy and their supporters against Peter's policies and the Czar's brutal repression of the political opponents. His image of Russian history of the first two decades of the eighteenth century was somewhat oversimplified and one-sided. Let us not forget, however, that Fontenelle's goal was to write a monumental eulogy of the late Russian Emperor and not to denounce his crimes. Montesquieu, on the other hand, did not hesitate to speak of Peter's repressions, but he also distorted the picture. The resistance of Russian conservative forces was, according to him, not so significant as to

justify the enormous violence which Peter used during the implementation of his reforms. Montesquieu claims that Peter had a false image of his subjects. The willingness and speed with which the Russians supposedly accepted the Petrine reforms was for Montesquieu the proof that the remnants of the premordial European spirit of the Russian nation were still in existence and that they were not completely eradicated by the Asiatic influence:

La facilité et la promptitude avec laquelle cette nation s'est policée, a bien montré que ce prince avoit trop mauvaise opinion d'elle, et que ces peuples n'étoient des bêtes, comme il le disoit. Les moyens violents qu'il employa étoient inutiles; il seroit arrivé tout de même à son but par la douceur.(565)

In accordance with his social theories developed in De l'esprit des lois, Montesquieu claims that the implementation of the Petrine reforms was relatively easy because Russia's political system of the late seventeenth century was alienated from the ancient customs of the Russian people, who in the innermost soul had internalized the natural conditions existing in Northern Europe in the early Middle Ages. Montesquieu's ideal image of Peter the Great would have been that of a conscientious archeologist, unearthing the primordial European character of his nation, lost in the violent process of foreign domination. This archeological rediscovery would have brought back the liberal past and would have sufficed; nothing else would have been necessary. But Peter missed his chance. The Russian Czar

misunderstood his nation and misjudged its democratic spirit, residing in all Nordic peoples:

Ce qui rendit le changement plus aisé, c'est que les mœurs d'alors étoient étrangères au climat, et y avoient été apportées par le mélange des nations et par les conquêtes. Pierre Ier, donnant les mœurs et les manières de l'Europe à une nation de l'Europe, trouva des facilités qu'il n'attendoit pas lui-même. L'empire du climat est le premier de tous les empires. Il n'avoit donc pas besoin de lois pour changer les mœurs et les manières de sa nation: il lui eût suffi d'inspirer d'autres mœurs et d'autres manières. (565)

The two authors studied in this chapter, both Fontenelle and Montesquieu, created a purely mythical image of Russia. Fontenelle believed strongly in the new Russian beginning that was to abolish the infamous and obsolete past of that country. His thesis was that with the appearance of Peter the Great the forces of light conquered the realm of darkness and that they found in him their most complete embodiment. Montesquieu's Russian myth is not that of a recent, splendid origin. It rather derives from his belief in the ancient spirit of freedom preserved almost intact in the nations inhabiting Northern Europe, including naturally the vast regions of Russia. His theory, based on the influence of climate and geography, attempted to explain with all due scientific competence the diversity of political systems. At least in one instance, in the case of Russia, it failed and cannot be treated in any other way than metaphorically. Montesquieu's conviction that an archeological quest for Russia's long forgotten past and that resurrection of the

primordial character of this typically Nordic nation would suffice to reform its antiquated system and to abolish the traces of Asiatic despotism was just as illusory as Fontenelle's fantasy of the Russian new beginning. But both voices, although belonging to the realm of mythology, or at best to that of wishful thinking, rather than to political reality, were very important, for they presented fairly unknown Russian themes to the wider European public. Thanks to the writings of Fontenelle and Montesquieu, Russia was no longer a marginal political entity, a malheureux Empire or an exotic subject to be discussed on not too serious occasions, as was the case only one generation earlier. The new Muscovy finally entered the salons of enlightened France and therefore those of the rest of Europe as well.

Chapter 3

The literary representation of Catherine the Great was another important step in the propagation of the Russian myth in France. Catherine's long and memorable rule, which began in 1762 and ended in 1797, corresponded with one of the most productive and intellectually stimulating periods of Western Civilization, namely with the mature Enlightenment, with the crusading years of Voltaire, with the publication of Rousseau's major works and finally with the constitutional and liberal movements which at the end of the century transformed the image of both France and Europe. As Catharine's political career coincided with the increasing fame of the stars of French letters, it should not come as a surprise that from the very beginning of her reign she entered into close and even intimate contacts with several French philosophes and stayed on friendly terms with many of them until she died in 1797.

Catherine's role in the propagation of the Russian myth in France differed significantly from that of her illustrious predecessor, Peter the Great. In contrast to Peter, whose semi-barbaric and semi-civilized figure became the symbol of Russia's historical new beginning, and who, in spite of his notorious atrocities, was regarded as a creator of the modern Russian Empire, Catherine was granted a more complex image by the French. She was generally considered a skillful and conscientious

consolidator of the Petrine heritage, a wise legislator who magnified the remnants of Russia's past glory, rescued from the gradual decline into which that country plunged after Peter's death in 1725. Peter the Great was a true hero of the early Enlightenment. He was an embodiment of the first decades of the eighteenth century, during which many European intellectuals searched intuitively for new truths by means of trial and error, without codifying or systematizing their eclectic ideas or naive socio-political thoughts. Catherine, on the other hand, was regarded by the French thinkers as a true heroine of the second phase of the Enlightenment, where the general political lines and philosophical movements were more developed than in the first half of the century and during which period Europe was irrevocably set on a course leading toward more liberty and democracy. The difference in the attitudes of the French and other Western Europeans toward Peter the Great and Catherine II can be easily observed in the case of Voltaire, who was always interested in the impact of great historical rulers. The earliest monarch to whom Voltaire dedicated his attention was Henri IV, one of the most important kings in the history of France, who ended the religious wars and proclaimed freedom of conscience in his lands. Yet the Patriarch of Ferney found Henri IV much too militaristic for his esthetic tastes. Henri's crude manners and his bellicose spirit did not agree with Voltairian

predilection for intellectual refinement and peaceful contemplation of arts. Next in line was Louis XIV, whom Voltaire did not hesitate to call the Great. And yet, regardless of his diplomatic genius and talent for leading the development of arts and crafts, Louis XIV was far from perfection in Voltaire's eyes. In fact, the philosophe's quest for an ideal ruler, for a philosopher-king, never ended. After Louis XIV the Patriarch's attention shifted toward Peter the Great. But even this outstanding monarch, in spite of his contribution to the creation of a new Russia and his success in making it one of the major powers in Europe, was for Voltaire not much more than a barbarian, although one of true genius. Peter the Great, cruel and unpredictable at times, was regarded by Voltaire as a late newcomer rather than an ideal figure of the Enlightenment. That figure was precisely Catharine II, with whom Voltaire entered into a long-lasting correspondence and whom he did not hesitate to call the Sémiramis of the North.¹

G. P. Gooch, author of Catherine the Great and Other Studies, a monumental work concerning the political career of the Russian Empress, in which special attention is paid to her contacts with various French philosophes of the period, states the following about Voltaire's so greatly admired heroine:

Of the three celebrated "Philosophic Despots" of the eighteenth century Catherine the Great could boast of

¹ Albert Lortholary, Le mirage russe en France au XVIIIe siècle (Paris: Boivin, 1951) 86.

the most astonishing career. (...) It was her achievement to restore the prestige of Russia and the authority of the Crown, to enlarge her dominions, to make her voice heard in the councils of Europe - in a word, to win for her empire the place among the Great Powers which since her day has never been lost. (...) Peter the Great, a barbarian of genius, had been more interested in cannon and shipbuilding than in literature and arts. It was Catherine's aim to Europeanise her adopted country by establishing direct contact with the High Priests of the Aufklärung, and to remove the stigma that the Collossus of the North stood for nothing except brute strength.²

It was neither her political convictions nor her military victories leading to the subjugation of Eastern Europe that attracted to the Russian Empress so many French and other Western thinkers; what intrigued them the most were her literary and artistic interests. Catherine's intellectual curiosity and her admiration for the precepts of the Enlightenment were certainly a major reason for her high regard and willingness to let herself be influenced by the writings of Voltaire, Diderot and d'Alembert. Yet, when discussing Catherine's philosophical inclinations, we must not forget that they were inseparable from her equally insatiable political ambitions. She was born in 1729 in Stettin as a Princess of Anhalt-Zerbst. She descended from a rather mediocre ducal family, which at the time of her birth was merely one of the eight branches, not at all the most significant nor the most affluent one, of the old Anhalt line. (G.P. Gooch, 3) Following her arrival in Russia in 1744, where she was

² George Peabody Gooch, Catherine the Great and Other Studies (London: Longmans Green, 1954) 1-2.

sent to marry her distant cousin and the future Emperor Peter III, Catherine worked very hard to master the Russian language; she played the piano, learned how to ride and above all she read extensively, keeping her mouth shut and her eyes wide open. Her talent for observation and for making the right decisions and political alliances was remarkable. She did not care too much about her husband, but she cared a lot about the crown.(5) The history of her marriage to Peter, which took place on August 21, 1745, was far from the ideal picture of conjugal happiness. Her husband took almost no notice of her. Instead, he was always busy with his valets with whom he played, pretending they were soldiers, and with whom he exercised in his room, changing his military uniforms several times a day.(6) Catherine was left alone, and thus, out of boredom, she read. Her reading list consisted mainly of the works written by French authors whom she greatly admired and whose writings she truly appreciated. She particularly admired Mme de Sévigné, as well as early works of Voltaire, Montesquieu and Bayle.(7) Taking into account Catherine's intellectual appetites, her political ambitions and her husband's emotional instability or rather mental illness, one should not be surprised that the abyss separating the married couple grew bigger and bigger with every passing year and that such situation was unbearable for both parties involved. This conjugal misery had to be ended at one point and so it was, after 17 years

of their tumultuous coexistence. This sudden change of fortunes, leading to a major transformation of the imperial policies, proved to be salutary for Russia. It is not the scope of this thesis to analyze in detail all the reasons and behind-the-scene plots responsible for the bloody events of the palace revolution, which took place in July of 1762, and which made Catherine the sole Empress of Russia. But in order to represent the general atmosphere of Peter III's court, to show the extent of his political ineptitude and finally to see Catherine's alleged regicidal act in a more favorable light, it would be interesting to quote a passage from a letter written on August 12, 1762, by an eye-witness of the events, Claude-Carloman de Rulhière, addressed to his close friend, Jean-Jacques Rousseau:

Je vous dirai peu de choses de ce pays. Il faut seulement que vous connoissiez ce que c'étoit Pierre III, afin de mieux juger ce qui vient de se passer ici. Il a pendant toute cette guerre trahi cet empire. Tous les projets de campagne, communiqués à la cour de Russie et concertés avec elle, il les faisoit passer au Roy de Prusse. Il s'en est vanté en pleine cour en adressant la parole au complice de sa trahison. Il faudroit être Petrone pour peindre ses plaisirs et Tacite pour peindre sa cour. Cependant, il n'avoit point encore montré de cruauté, la mollesse du regne précédent ne lui laissoit point l'idée de repandre du sang, mais il le seroit devenu, car il étoit violent et lâche.³

Another description of the utterly depressing atmosphere reigning at Peter III's court and his inability

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Correspondance complète, édition critique établie et annotée par R.A. Leigh, vol. 12 (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1970) 175.

to rule effectively the Russian Empire may also be found in a letter of Monsieur Pictet, a Swiss citizen residing in St. Petersburg, written to Voltaire on August 4, 1762. In this letter Pictet attempts to justify Catherine's coup d'état and praises in highly apologetic terms her political genius:

Je me persuade que tous ceux qui ont connu le caractère de Pierre III, son peu de génie, la manière dont il se conduit et ses projets, ne pourront qu'approuver la nation russe d'avoir expulsé un tel homme pour mettre sur le trône la plus digne et la plus grande impératrice qui ait jamais régné dans l'univers. (...) Ce qui a produit la révolution est uniquement la différence des caractères de Pierre III et de Catherine; que devait, en effet, penser le peuple russe quand il a vu Pierre III, après avoir passé sa jeunesse à s'amuser avec des bouffons, monter sur le trône, donner de grandes espérances pendant les premières semaines, mais bientôt oublier la promesse qu'il avait faite de s'appliquer aux affaires, pour se livrer entièrement à la débauche et à la crapule la plus honteuse? Que devait-il penser, lorsqu'il voyait son empereur passer les jours et les nuits à table, paraître communément ivre aux yeux de tout le monde.⁴

The palace revolution of July 1762 was followed with an enormous interest not only in Russia, but also abroad. Although there was no direct evidence that Catherine killed her dethroned husband, rumors circulating all over Europe accused her of a premeditated regicidal act. In France, just as everywhere else, public opinion concerning this issue was divided, yet Catherine's ascent to the imperial throne was regarded by most of the philosophes in a rather favorable light. Typical of this positive

⁴ Voltaire, The Complete Works of Voltaire, ed. Theodore Besterman, vol. 109 (Banbury: The Voltaire Foundation-Thorpe Mandeville House, 1973) 165-66.

attitude toward Catherine's regicide is Voltaire's letter to Bernard Louis Chauvelin, in which the author of Candide treats this highly delicate matter with a characteristic Voltairian sense of humor and irony. Voltaire claims that even the gravest misfortunes may sometimes turn into truly propitious situations and that an evil action can indeed produce good and desirable results. The Patriarch of Ferney does not seem a bit scandalized by the alleged crime of the new Empress:

Je vous crois bien persuadé que les rois et les représentants des rois n'ont rien de mieux à faire que de se bien porter. On parle d'une colique violente qui a délivré Pierre Ulric du petit désagrément d'avoir perdu un empire de deux mille lieues. Il ne manquera plus qu'un Ninias à votre Sémiramis pour rendre la ressemblance parfaite. J'avoue que je crains d'avoir le coeur assez corrompu pour n'être pas aussi scandalisé de cette scène qu'un bon chrétien devrait l'être. Il peut résulter un très-grand bien de ce petit mal. La Providence est comme étaient autrefois les Jésuites: elle se sert de tout. Et d'ailleurs, quand un ivrogne meurt de la colique, cela nous apprend à être sobres.(163)

Voltaire's unconditional support for Catherine's political ascent and his ironic statement on the mysterious ways in which providence operates should not be surprising, especially if we take into account that several years before Russian coup d'état, namely in 1748, the future Patriarch of Ferney wrote a tragedy entitled Sémiramis, in which he justified political murder, as long as it might result in a general good, that is in welfare and prosperity for society. The play's heroine, Queen Sémiramis, disposing violently of her husband Ninias, is undoubtedly a distant prototype of the Russian Empress.

The analogy is obvious to anyone familiar with both cases. Who knows if some passages from Voltaire's tragedy did not inspire young Catherine and did not lead this ambitious Princess into her alleged crime? Who knows if she did not indeed take Voltaire's play a bit too seriously, the play which, as a person of outstanding culture and perfect knowledge of French literature, she certainly knew very well? Aren't the following lines from Sémiramis a sufficient justification for any regicidal act, particularly that attributed to young Catherine II?

Perdez-en pour jamais l'importune mémoire,
 Que de Sémiramis les beaux jours pleins de gloire
 Effacent ce moment heureux et malheureux,
 Qui d'un fatal hymen brisa le joug affreux.
 Ninus, en vous chassant de son lit et du trône,
 En vous perdant, madame, eût perdu Babylone.
 Pour le bien des mortels vous prévîntes ses coups,
 Babylone et la terre avaient besoin de vous:
 Et quinze ans de vertus et de travaux utiles,
 Les arides déserts par vous rendus fertiles,
 Les sauvages humains soumis au frein des lois,
 Les arts dans nos cités naissant à votre voix,
 Ces hardis monuments que l'univers admire,
 Les acclamations de ce puissant empire,
 Sont autant de témoins dont le cri glorieux
 A déposé pour vous au tribunal des dieux.⁵

Catherine's biggest aspiration, in fact it became an obsession, was the accelerated integration of Russia into the economic and artistic life of the West. In the years following the events of 1762, having stabilized the state and consolidated her absolute power, Catherine attempted to win the support of public opinion of the entire learned

⁵ Voltaire, Sémiramis in Oeuvres complètes, vol. 3 (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1877) 517.

Europe, and particularly that of France, for her far-reaching cultural and political projects. One of her major targets was Voltaire, who had not only supported in the past Catherine's coup d'état and minimized her crime, but had become her true intellectual patron. The Empress attempted through the intermediary of her Swiss secretary Pictet to invite Voltaire to St. Petersburg, but in spite of his interests in Russian reforms and the growing fame of Catherine's court the author of Candide was not too enthusiastic about a prospective visit to Russia. In a letter written to Pictet, in addition to expressing his unreserved admiration for the new monarch, Voltaire gives his advanced age as the major reason for his reluctance to travel to Russia:

Votre auguste Catherine seconde est assurément Catherine unique; la première ne fut qu'heureuse. (...) 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. (...) 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?⁶

The letter to Pictet is accompanied by a short poem dedicated to Catherine, in which Voltaire mentions again his unlimited admiration for the wisdom and political talents of the Empress. The modern reader may argue that the somewhat inflated rhetoric of this work, so typical not only of Voltaire, but also of the entire classical

⁶ Voltaire, Correspondance, ed. Theodore Besterman, vol. 7 (Paris: Gallimard, 1981) 297.

period, diminishes the author's alleged fondness of Catherine. However, in spite of its artificiality, this short poem is a strong evidence of Voltaire's genuine interest in Russian matters and in the person of the Russian ruler:

Dieux qui m'ôtez les yeux et les oreilles,
Rendez-les moi, je pars au même instant.
Heureux qui voit vos augustes merveilles,
O Catherine! heureux qui vous entend!
Plaire et régner, c'est là votre talent;
Mais le premier me touche davantage.
Par votre esprit vous étonnez le sage,
Qui cesserait de l'être en vous voyant. (1240)

D'Alembert was another Frenchman whom Catherine attempted to invite to Russia. One of the major reasons for this invitation was her desire to designate d'Alembert as the official tutor of her son and also to enable him to continue his work on the Encyclopédie, work that by virtue of various political reasons and royal censorship was very difficult to accomplish in France. Catherine initiated her advances to d'Alembert as early as September 1762, but even her repeated promises of gifts, privileges and high salary, which during long months of negotiations undertaken by Pictet doubled and even tripled, did not change the philosopher's reluctance to come to her court. In 1763 Catherine finally gave up her hopes of embellishing St. Petersburg with another French star.⁷ But in spite of this failure, her long-term double goal of integrating Russia into the sophisticated culture of the

⁷ Albert Lortholary, Le mirage russe en France 87.

West and of strengthening intellectual contacts between St. Petersburg and Paris, was never abandoned. On October 1st, 1764, Catherine decided to start her subscription to the Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique, published by Friedrich Melchior Grimm with the cooperation of Denis Diderot and other prominent writers of the French Enlightenment. (Lortholary, 101) In 1765 Catherine made a decision to buy Diderot's library and transport it to St. Petersburg.(97) This famous acquisition was a true milestone in the cultural relations between Russia and France, and Catherine's act quickly became one of the major subjects for discussion all over Europe.

But the purchase of Diderot's library was only one of many steps in Catherine's plan to unite Russia with the West, and to augment her personal popularity in educated circles of the continent. From 1765 until 1767 the Empress was occupied with an ambitious task to modernize Russia's antiquated legal system. Her voluminous socio-political treatise, entitled Nakaz ou l'instruction, which was inspired by Montesquieu's earlier De l'esprit des lois and by the recently published book of Beccaria⁸, also became a major source of Catherine's international notoriety. During two years while writing this work, the Russian Empress was in close contact with many French philosophes and often took their opinion into serious consideration.

⁸ George Peabody Gooch, Catherine the Great and Other Studies 93.

Although the new laws developed in the Nakaz ou l'instruction were never fully implemented in Russia, and Catherine's work was to remain as a theoretical treatise only, its fame grew very quickly, especially after the book was published in four different languages: French, Latin, German and Russian. In 1767, on account of its progressiveness and its somewhat revolutionary ideas, the Nakaz ou l'instruction was banned in France.(105) Paradoxically, the Russian Empress felt persecuted by the French censorship and the suppression of her book kindled in her heart the spirit of solidarity with other French philosophes, whose works, just like the Nakaz ou l'instruction, were also banned by Louis XV. The battle against l'infâme became thus part of her own political career. At least theoretically and on paper.

Another of Catherine's ambitious attempts to integrate Russia into European culture was her invitation extended to Denis Diderot, which the great French philosopher, having finally completed the Encyclopédie, graciously accepted. Diderot arrived in St. Petersburg on October 1, 1773.(221) His relatively long stay in Russia limited itself only to the country's new capital, thus the author of Jacques le fataliste did not have a chance to learn more about all aspects of that immense empire. His major occupation was the enjoyment of various entertaining events offered by the court, as well as an intimate intellectual contact with the Empress. The only important

tasks that Diderot was able to accomplish in Russia under Catherine's benevolent supervision was Le Plan d'une université, a proposal for establishing a new univeristy in St. Petersburg, which unfortunately, due to the author's erroneous assessment of Russian reality and his tendency to think in abstractions, has never been implemented.(238) Catherine preferred to rely in that matter not on Diderot's vague ideas, but rather on a more realistic plan presented by Friedrich Melchior Grimm, a truly cosmopolitan European of German extraction and French culture. Thus it was Grimm, not Voltaire, Diderot, or d'Alembert, who became her closest, her most intimate and most reliable intellectual friend and correspondent. In fact, Grimm's attachment to Catherine surpassed that of any other French philosophe of the period.

This long-lasting contact between the Russian Empress and Grimm came into existence, just as everything else in Catherine's political career, through her ambitious desire to establish close cultural ties with the West and her wish to promote Russia's reputation as a modern European state. To accomplish her perennial dream she needed someone from France to offer her reliable services and provide her with detailed information regarding the most recent events of Parisian artistic life. Far away from the cultural capitals of the West, she wished to find the proper person to keep her in touch with the latest developments in literature and philosophy. Such important

position required a combination of critical talents and intellectual qualifications of the highest degree. Although in close contact with Voltaire, Diderot and d'Alembert, the Russian Empress quickly realized that she could not fully rely on these giants, since all of them were too busy with their own voluminous publications and authorship. Catherine needed someone less grandiose, but more modest and subordinate than the renowned, perpetually occupied and intellectually overwhelming Voltaire or Diderot, not to mention radical and highly undisciplined Jean-Jacques Rousseau. She did not intend to establish a relationship between two equals, but rather one between a dominating sovereign and a plain citizen, skillful and sufficiently renowned both in France and in the rest of Europe, yet willing to keep a low profile in contacts with Her Imperial Highness. It was Friedrich Melchior Grimm who came to be the perfect choice for carrying out Catherine's ambitious plan to recruit a devoted cultural informer from Paris, a sort of French factotum:

In Grimm alone she found exactly what she sought: a man who knew all the stars, who was a welcome guest in every salon, who could assess the latest publications and report the gossip of the capital, who, though himself a professional man of letters, was never too busy to answer inquiries and execute commissions, whose tact, fidelity and financial probity were beyond reproach. (Gooch, 72)

Catherine's first direct contact with Grimm occurred when she subscribed to the Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique in 1764. But it took another nine years before they finally met each other in St.

Petersburg. Grimm's long-awaited trip to the North was prepared and facilitated by one of his closest friends, Denis Diderot, who himself ventured to Russia at the same time. Grimm's intellectual capacities, as well as his natural modesty and reserve enchanted the Empress, who invited him to become her principal cultural adviser shortly after the first interview. (78-79) Grimm's second visit to Russia, which began in September 1776 and lasted for almost a year, strengthened their mutual ties.(81) This intellectual partnership continued until Catherine's death in 1797 without a single cloud to trouble it. With passing years Grimm developed a true affection for the Empress. He always thought of her in the most superlative terms:

(...) cette glorieuse et auguste souveraine dont le nom retentit d'un bout de l'hémisphère à l'autre; qui gouverne son empire avec la sagesse de Solon, et le défend avec le génie et la fortune des Scipions.⁹

Grimm's long-lasting admiration for Catherine, his devoted cultural services of more than twenty five years, which no other French writer of the period could rival, his position as the imperial educator and his particular role in Catherine's private life, were noted by André Cazes, author of Grimm et les Encyclopédistes:

(...) il a aimé cette Impératrice, à qui la vigueur tenait lien de beauté; il était pour elle le confident à qui l'on peut parler des favoris (...). Il l'écoutait dans le ravissement disserter sur la

⁹ Friedrich Melchior Grimm, Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique, ed. Maurice Tourneux, vol. 5 (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1877-1882) 431.

politique et la littérature comme un homme d'État et comme un écolier.¹⁰

Testimony concerning the story of Grimm's long and intimate relationship with the Russian Empress can be found in two separate documents. Each one of them, both Catherine's voluminous French correspondence with her friend, as well as Grimm's work entitled Mémoire historique sur l'origine et les suites de mon attachement pour l'Impératrice Catherine II jusqu'au décès de Sa Majesté Impériale, may be considered the most fascinating literary works of the period. Both sources testify equally to an astonishing intimacy, an unmatched degree of ideological affinity and to Catherine's unreserved confidence in her Parisian friend. The following passage, depicting the initial stage of that friendship and Grimm's first impressions of the Empress, is only an echo of what was to become of that bondage in the future. It seems that Grimm's first stay in St. Petersburg was an intellectually intoxicating experience. His infatuation with Catherine had no limits:

L'hiver de 1773 à 1774 s'écoula ainsi, pour moi, dans une ivresse continuelle. Les bontés de l'Impératrice semblaient s'accroître de jour en jour, et, avec elles, sa confiance. La mienne était telle, que j'entrais dans son appartement avec la même sécurité que chez l'ami le plus intime, sûr de trouver dans son entretien un fonds inépuisable du plus grand intérêt sous la forme la plus piquante. J'y trouvais aussi le courage et la facilité de dire tout ce qui s'offrait à ma pensée, et quoique, dans la chaleur de la conversation, l'expression ne s'adapte pas toujours à

¹⁰ André Cazes, Grimm et les Encyclopédistes (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1970) 372.

la pensée avec la corection et la précision qu'on est en droit d'exiger d'un écrivain, l'Impératrice possédait un talent rare que je n'ai jamais connu à personne au même degré. C'était de saisir toujours juste la pensée, de n'entendre jamais que ce qu'on avait voulu dire, par conséquent de ne jamais prendre change sur une expression inexacte et hasardée, encore moins de s'en formaliser.¹¹

The word "pensée" appears three times in this passage. It clearly indicates that the contact between two friends was of strictly intellectual character, which, given Catherine's reputation, cannot be taken for granted. Thus from the very beginning their mutual friendship was regarded by Grimm as a purely spiritual phenomenon. During many years to come, when the intimacy between friends became even more intense, it was always represented by Grimm as such. In spite of the ambiguous vocabulary of the quoted passage, there was no explicit eroticism in Grimm's attachment to Catherine. The greatest delight for our Parisian philosopher was not the physical presence of the Empress, but rather the opportunity to hear her words, to revel in the impenetrable layers of her great mind and to enjoy her thoughts. In another passage of the Mémoire historique, related to Grimm's second stay in St. Petersburg, we see the same obsession regarding his intimate dialogues with Catherine, or rather her unending

¹¹ Friedrich Melchior Grimm, Mémoire historique sur l'origine et les suites de mon attachement pour l'Impératrice Catherine II jusqu'au décès de Sa Majesté Impériale in Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique, ed. Maurice Tourneux, vol. 1 (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1877-1882) 20.

stream of ideas, produced by words engendering avalanches of other meaningful words:

J'y revins (...) au mois de septembre de 1776. (...) Accueilli avec la même bonté avec laquelle j'avais été congédié, je passai, jusqu'en 1777, une année presque entière auprès de mon auguste protectrice, la voyant, comme à mon premier voyage, tous les jours, (...) tête à tête avec elle, sans que la conversation tarît un instant.(21)

After this brief introductory presentation of his daily activities in Russia on the second trip, Grimm offers the reader a more specific account of his never-ending conversations with the Empress. The following lines may be justly considered one of the most sophisticated statements about the nature of human verbal contact written in the eighteenth century. Grimm's understanding of what we might designate today as theory of free association, his insight into the intricate process of thinking, of producing ideas and meaning, is truly astounding:

C'était, puisqu'il faut dire ce qui ne pourra jamais se croire, un commerce d'épanchements entre deux amis qui se rendaient compte réciproquement de ce qui les avait occupé, intéressé dans la journée, de ce qui les occuperait le lendemain. (...) C'étaient des causeries où tout se tenait souvent par des fils imperceptibles, mais d'autant plus naturellement que rien de ce qui devait être dit n'avait été amené à dessein, ni préparé d'avance. Ordinairement le premier mot dit fortuitement décidait de l'enchaînement des idées de toute la soirée; quelquefois aussi la conversation se trouvait en un clin d'oeil loin du point d'où elle était partie, parce que le premier mot avait réveillé une idée de côté et ouvert à l'improvisiste une route qu'on n'avait pas projeté d'enfiler, mais qui menait par des chemins variés à d'autres résultats également intéressants.(22)

Grimm's biggest regret was that he could not register and copy on paper his dialogues with Catherine, which, if only preserved, would have been of inestimable value for posterity. His melancholic comment on the impossibility of capturing the brief enchantment brought forth by the beauty and tenderness of his intimate contact with the Empress, has a romantic dimension. A sense of loss, a deep feeling of the inadequacy of words in recreating the distant scenes from the past, is another trace of a truly romantic spirit:

Que n'a-t-il été en mon pouvoir de coucher littéralement par écrit ces causeries! Le monde aurait possédé un fragment précieux, et peut-être unique, pour l'histoire de l'esprit humain. L'imagination et l'entendement étaient également frappés par ce coup d'oeil d'aigle profond et rapide, dont la portée immense passait comme un éclair. Et comment, dans ce passage subit, saisir au vol cette foule de traits lumineux, déliés, fugitifs? Comment les fixer sur le papier?(22)

The powerful impact of his dialogues with Catherine created a feeling of unreality in Grimm. Their long and intimate discussions astonished him. They became the philosopher's obsession. Grimm's only desire, as is the case of every true lover, even if his emotions were strictly Platonic, was to share his great joy with the rest of the world. He wished to glorify his mistress, to show her pure and untroubled image. Grimm's amorous languish, produced by the fundamental impossibility to resurrect, after almost thirty years, the hours of his ultimate bliss, betrays again a pre-romantic rather than classical state of mind:

Je quittais Sa Majesté pour l'ordinaire tellement ému, tellement électrisé, que je passais la moitié de la nuit à me promener dans ma chambre, obsédé, poursuivi par tout ce qui avait été dit, et me désolant que tout cela ne fût que pour moi et dût rester perdu pour tout le monde. Mon refrain de tous les soirs était: Quelle étrange étoile que la mienne. Le sort me conduit deux fois en Russie, et c'est pour y passer ma vie avec l'Impératrice et pour trouver dans son commerce journalier, malgré la distance du rang suprême au rang le plus obscur, les douceurs de la confiance et de l'intimité réservées à l'égalité et à l'amitié. (22)

Grimm's amorous rhetoric flows unobstructed through several initial pages of the Mémoire historique. But the author's paroxysm reaches its climax when he gives an explanation for his sudden departure during the second visit to Russia. Grimm claims that the reason for leaving St. Petersburg was a fear that his extended stay at the court might diminish Catherine's affection toward him. The best solution, naturally, was to flee before their mutual happiness had a chance to degenerate into boredom and indifference. In a truly pre-romantic spirit, reminiscent of Rousseau, Grimm speaks about the uniqueness of his decision and about his extraordinary situation. He claims that his voluntary separation from the source of love and from the only raison d'être of his existence is so uncommon that nobody else experienced it before. The analogy with the author of the Confessions is striking and Grimm's tenderness, as well as the subtlety of his amorous vocabulary, truly remarkable. Even if the philosopher's rhetoric is only a literary convention, as was the case of many intimate accounts written during that period, and his words do not represent his genuine state

of mind, Grimm's preoccupation with Catherine seems to be most unusual:

Jamais je ne fus plus tenté de me jeter aux pieds de l'Impératrice et de la supplier de me garder au nombre de ses chiens; mais la funeste idée que plus ma faveur augmentait, moins elle pouvait durer, et que sa diminution, son moindre décroissement (...) me plongeraient dans une douleur mortelle, en me remplissant l'imagination de sinistres et effrayants présages, ne me permettait que d'écouter en tremblant les vœux de mon cœur. (...) Je quittai donc la cour de Russie, bientôt après le départ de Sa Majesté suédoise, pour me rendre par la Finlande à Stockholm. En m'arrachant des pieds de l'Impératrice, il me semblait que je m'arrachais à ma propre existence. Ne plus la voir, ne plus l'entendre me paraissait le plus grands des malheurs, impossible à soutenir seulement pendant huit jours, et cependant je la quittai! C'est sans doute la première fois, depuis que le monde existe, que la crainte de perdre un bien dont on ne peut pas se passer ait déterminé un homme à hâter cette perte, et l'ait porté à renoncer volontairement à sa possession avant d'en avoir joui. (23-24)

Grimm's second departure from Russia in 1777, this time for good, since the German philosopher and Catherine were never to see each other again, produced one of the most interesting correspondences in eighteenth-century French literature. This correspondence was much more than just an ordinary exchange of letters. It became Catherine's diary in which the Empress shared with Grimm the most intimate secrets of her life. It was an extension of her daily conversations with her friend during his stay in Russia, a friend to whom she gave precedence over many other French writers and whom she genuinely respected. Grimm considered his correspondence with Catherine the only true ornament of his life. This unique epistolary contact became at the same time one of the most detailed

portraits of the Russian Empress produced in eighteenth-century French literature. Nowhere else can we find a better picture of Catherine than in her frequent letters, so desired by Grimm, as the following lines indicate:

C'est cependant cette correspondance qui, depuis ce moment, n'a pas cessé ni languir un seul instant, que sa bonté a entretenue avec une suite sans exemple, c'est cette correspondance qui est devenue le seul bien, l'unique ornement de ma vie, le pivot de mon bonheur, tellement essentiel à mon existence que la respiration me paraissait moins nécessaire à sa conservation que l'arrivée des paquets de l'Impératrice et l'envoi des miens à Sa Majesté.(24)

In fact, the image of the Russian Empress created in her letters to Grimm is not exclusively that of Catherine as ruler and statesman, but rather that of an average human being, an aging woman who conversed with a devoted friend about her existential problems, about her joys, her fears and sorrows, her trials and tribulations, her obsession with death and the inexorable passage of time. There is a surprising degree of honesty and humility in this correspondence. A very common eighteenth-century practice was to use secretaries to write less important letters and the Russian Empress was certainly not opposed to this idea. But in our opinion, most of Catherine's letters addressed to Grimm were written by herself. The astounding intimacy, Catherine's simplicity and frankness in discussing a variety of personal issues, unknown to the general public, exclude any other possibility. By reading Catherine's letters we witness how the ruler of the biggest European nation gradually becomes an ordinary

citizen, a private person whose grandiose image dissolves as it joins the rest of humanity. There is nothing imperial in these letters; they are strictly human. They reveal the unknown depth of the Russian Empress. Catherine's letters, as she said herself, were spontaneous and unpretentious. They were, as she claims, destined for a friend, not for posterity, thus she had no need of representing herself in an inflated manner. A strong desire for self-agrandizement, so typical for many other figures of historical importance, is absent from this correspondence. Catherine's letters are consubstantial with her ordinary life, they develop, as Montaigne's Essais, in accordance with the rhythm of her individual character and with the rhythm of her daily activities:

Mes lettres ne sont pas écrites pour la postérité. Je ne vous écris presque jamais qu'avec grande hâte et tenant vos pancartes de la main gauche tandis que la droite griffonne, lisant des yeux et jetant les idées que les articles de votre pancarte produisent. Voilà comme ces beaux chefs-d'oeuvre viennent au monde la plupart du temps, et puis ils s'en vont et vous font rire, pleurer, pester, jurer, deviner, trépigner, récrier, agiter et courir çà et là, on ne sait trop pourquoi.¹²

The consubstantial nature of Catherine's epistolary contact with Grimm and the perfect harmony between her literary style and her physical or mental state while writing, so reminiscent of Montaigne's work, is best exemplified by a letter dated on November 19, 1778:

¹² Louis Réau, Correspondance artistique de Grimm avec Catherine II in L'Art français dans les pays du nord et de l'est de l'Europe (Paris: Armand Colin, 1932) 186.

Un rhume de cerveau, qui m'incommode beaucoup depuis quelque temps, m'oblige de rester aujourd'hui au lit. Il me semble que ma plume est enrhumée aussi...(34)

The authenticity of Catherine's letters to Grimm, their intimate character and their consubstantiality with her daily activities or her frequently shifting mental states was observed by Louis Réau. The French scholar justly stressed the fundamental difference between her correspondence with Voltaire or Diderot and with Grimm. He points out that Catherine's letters addressed to the authors of Candide and La Religieuse betray a certain degree of artificiality and testify to her conscientious attempt to construct an image of a grand civilized monarch, whereas in her letters to Grimm she portrays herself in a modest and more natural light. She becomes, as we might claim once again after Montaigne, an ideal of authenticity, a transparent homme nu, or rather, femme nue:

Dans ses lettres à Voltaire, à Diderot où même à Falconet, on sent que l'impératrice s'applique ou se surveille; avec Grimm, au contraire, elle rejette toute formule officielle, toute contrainte et ne craint pas de se montrer en déshabillé: c'est le ton de libres confidences, des jaseries de Tsarskoé-Sélo, qui se poursuivent par la poste, malgré les huit cents lieues qui séparent Pétersbourg de Paris. (Louis Réau, 2)

One of the dominating and recurrent themes of Catherine's correspondence with Grimm was her profound concern, indeed genuine obsession, with aging and with the passage of time. This subject was present from the very beginning of their contact and continued persistently

during many years. Yet Catherine's existential despair or fear of dying underwent significant modifications. Although omnipresent, it manifested itself particularly when the Empress learned from Grimm about the deaths of her French artistic acquaintances and other important literary figures. The sense of irrecuperable loss and human decrepitude always preoccupied her thoughts and never deserted her. Here is how on April 25, 1774, Catherine responded to Grimm's birthday greetings, which the German philosopher extended to her upon his first departure from St. Petersburg:

Je vous félicite de la grande joie que vous avez eue de célébrer mon quarante-sixième jour de naissance en Courlande. Je hais ce jour comme la peste: le beau présent qu'il me fait! Chaque fois il me fait don d'un an de plus, chose de laquelle je me passerais bien. Dites la vérité, ce serait une chose charmante qu'une impératrice qui toute sa vie n'aurait que quinze ans.(10)

One of the most traumatic events of Catherine's life was the death of Voltaire. In a letter dated on June 21, 1778, she deplored this irreparable loss. Grimm's sad news caused a sudden feeling of profound discouragement in her mind. She gave up temporarily her interests in mundane activities. The consecutive deaths of important figures of the Enlightenment, but especially the death of Voltaire, convinced Catherine that her old world was starting to crumble. She knew too well that through Voltaire's death Europe lost her master, her devoted teacher, and the irreplaceable educator of the elite. The Russian Empress wanted to cry and we should believe her sincerity. The

author of Candide had been for many years her own intellectual mentor, her guide in the domain of letters and philosophy and in the struggle againsts the infâme. Catherine's sorrow was certainly genuine:

Jusque-là j'espérais que la nouvelle de la mort de Voltaire était fausse; mais vous m'en avez donné la certitude et tout de suite je me suis senti un mouvement de découragement universel et d'un très grand mépris pour toutes les choses de ce monde. Le mois de mai m'a été très fatal: j'ai perdu deux hommes que je n'ai jamais vus, qui m'aimaient et que j'honorais. Voltaire et milord Chatham. Longtemps, longtemps et peut-être jamais, surtout le premier, ne seront-ils remplacés par deux égaux et jamais par des supérieurs, et pour moi ils sont irréparablement perdus; je voudrais crier.(36)

Catherine's sense of loss, growing steadily with the process of aging, her feeling of existential insecurity and abandonment, reached their climax after the death of general Lanskoi, a young Russian nobleman who was her protégé and the only hope for her old age. In an exquisite letter dated July 2, 1784, one of the most touching and most beautiful letters she ever wrote, Catherine describes in moving terms her deep sorrow, her anger, her lost expectations and her desolation caused by her young friend's premature death. This letter is too personal to have been written by a secretary, thus it testifies to the authenticity of Catherine's correspondence with Grimm. We can compare her suffering after Lanskoi's death with Montaigne's grief brought forth by the trespassing of his beloved friend, Etienne de la Boétie:

Lorsque je commençais cette lettre (le 7 juin), j'étais dans le bonheur et la joie, et mes journées se passaient si rapidement que je ne savais ce qu'elles devenaient. Il n'en est plus de même; je suis plongée

dans la douleur la plus vive et mon bonheur n'est plus (...), j'ai pensé moi-même de mourir de la perte irréparable que je viens de faire, il y a huit jours, de mon meilleur ami. (163)

The remainder of this astonishing letter contains a very powerful and highly emotional description of the misfortunes Catherine had to endure on account of Lanskoi's unexpected death. The subtle sensuality, indicated by means of a gradual enumeration of increasing physical and mental pain, the feeling of impending doom and abandonment, and last but not least, the atmosphere of solitude and hopelessness that pervaded Catherine's mind, make this letter a masterpiece, a truly pre-romantic expression of existential void and pessimism, too intimately experienced to have been written by someone not involved in this personal tragedy:

J'espérais qu'il deviendrait l'appui de ma vieillesse; (...) C'était un jeune homme que j'élevais, qui partageait mes peines quand j'en avais et qui se réjouissait de mes joies; (...) Une fièvre maligne accompagnée d'esquinquancie l'a emporté en cinq jours au tombeau, et ma chambre, si agréable pour moi ci-devant, est devenue un antre vide, dans lequel je me traîne à peine comme une ombre. Un mal de gorge m'a gagnée la veille de sa mort (...). Cependant je suis hors du lit, mais faible et si douloureusement affectée qu'à l'heure qu'il est je ne puis voir face humaine sans que les sanglots ne m'ôtent la parole; je ne puis ni dormir, ni manger; la lecture m'ennuie et l'écriture excède mes forces; je ne sais ce qu'il adviendra de moi; mais ce que je sais, c'est que de ma vie je n'ai été si malheureuse que depuis mon meilleur ami m'a ainsi abandonnée. (163)

Catherine's growing obsession with aging, physical decadence and solitude is also present in two other letters. In one of them, written on September 21, 1785, the Russian Empress rejected Grimm's project of

comissioning a well known sculptor to execute her life-size statue. The fifty-six year old Catherine was not comfortable with her image and she made it clear to her dear friend, her souffre-douleur, as she often called the German philosopher:

Je n'ai pas envie de faire faire mon buste; je deviens vieille; j'aimerais mieux qu'on copiât ceux qui sont faits... Pour ma statue, elle n'existera pas de mon vivant. (168)

In the letter dated April 26, 1787, written after the meeting near Kiev with the King of Poland, Stanislaus-Augustus Poniatowski, who thirty years before used to be her lover and whom she had not seen since her youth, Catherine once again deplores the passage of time and the impossibility to resurrect the past. There is a touch of melancholy and a sense of subtle resignation in her calm, yet accusing words:

Le roi de Pologne a passé hier neuf heures à mon bord; nous avons dîné ensemble; il y a trente ans à peu près que je ne l'ai vu; vous pouvez juger si nous nous sommes trouvés changés. (175)

With the advent of the French Revolution Catherine's obsession with aging became more intense than ever before. The violent events of 1789 and what followed afterwards created a sense of ideological vacuum in her mind. Not only the passage of time took away most of her French correspondents and literary friends, Voltaire and Diderot being only two among many other philosophers already deceased, for now, during the revolutionary period, Catherine also had to witness what she felt was the total

disappearance, a forcible annihilation of her own aristocratic world, of her innermost values and her strong royalist convictions. The sense of loss, resulting from a complete destruction of the French noble traditions of the ancien régime, a loss which was probably the most intense one she ever experienced, dictated the following words addressed to Grimm. When reading them we can imagine how the process of Catherine's own aging and gradual decadence of her body coincided with the terrible events occurring in France, the cradle of modern European civilization. Her micro and macrocosm blended together in perfect unity, creating one powerful, magnified voice of sorrow and desolation. This dramatic lamentation predicts the impending doom of Catherine's own universe. After the French Revolution there was nothing left to aspire to:

Puisqu'en France vous convenez qu'il n'y a plus d'agrémens, ce pays-là a donc perdu sa première qualité. Quelle chute! Les ronces vont croître sur les grands chemins (...). Il faudra que l'Assemblée nationale fasse jeter au feu tous les meilleurs auteurs français et tout ce qui a répandu leur langue en Europe; car tout cela dépose contre l'abominable grabuge qu'ils font. Jusqu'ici on regardait comme méritant la potence quiconque s'avisait de méditer la ruine d'un pays et voilà toute une nation ou plutôt mille deux cents députés de cette nation qui s'en occupent.(178)

The sense of loss, which often produces in us a desire to escape into an idealized world of the distant past, dictated another famous statement of Catherine about the French Revolution. This statement indicates that Catherine's paradise lost, her imaginary utopia of la douce France, was the period of Louis XIV. The Russian

Empress proves again and again to be a true disciple of Voltaire, whom she read as a child and as a young woman, and whom she would never forget:

Il faut dire la vérité; le ton régnant chez vous est le ton de la crapule; ce n'est pas cependant ce ton-là qui illustra la France, mais bien celui de la cour de Louis XIV. (178)

Another example of Catherine's fear of dying and her obsessive preoccupation with the passage of time can be found in the letter of August 31, 1795, written just two year before her death. This letter informs Grimm of the decease of another person who abandoned the Empress and left her with a premonition of her own impending end. It is also a powerful comment on the misery of the human condition. It reveals Catherine's profound pessimism and portrays her ignorance vis-à-vis the ultimate questions of the universe. The physical decadence, blindness, suffering and deception of the late Mr. Betski, the subject of this sad letter, not only characterize him; Catherine knew too well that they applied to the entire human race, for men are no more than instruments in the hands of the Fates. The Empress sensed this strongly. She felt her own world coming to its end and she shared her apprehensions with her devoted friend, Grimm. There is a certain Pascalian touch in her discourse:

M. Betski vient d'expirer à l'âge de quatre-vingt-treize ans; il y en a près de sept qu'il était absolument tombé en enfance et quelquefois en démence; il y a dix ans qu'il était aveugle. Quand quelqu'un venait chez lui, il disait: Si l'impératrice vous demande ce que je fais, dites-lui que je travaille avec mes secrétaires. Il se cachait surtout de moi au sujet de la perte de la vue afin que je ne disposasse

pas de ses places; au fait, tous ses départements étaient remplis, mais il l'ignorait.(197)

Catherine's death in 1797 ended one of the most fascinating correspondences in eighteenth-century French literature. The epistolary contact between Grimm and the Russian Empress should be paid greater attention and given its due. Unfortunately, this correspondence remains almost forgotten today. Yet so many aspects of Catherine's letters to Grimm can be very instructive for the contemporary reader. They portray her not only as a dominating imperial figure, but above all as a weak, suffering human being, vulnerable to the trials and tribulations of life, a person who loved intensely and who was obsessed with the devastating passage of time. Her correspondence with Grimm, personal and intimate, is consubstantial with her existence. It is like the Essais of Montaigne or the Pensées of Pascal projected into the future. It is also a testimony of her close ties not only with Grimm, but also with all of French culture, which she adopted in her early childhood and which shaped most of her socio-political ideas. Catherine the Great was German by birth and Russian by marriage and political ambitions, but she was above all French, a true product of the Enlightenment. It is precisely during her reign that Russia finally was acknowledged by the French public as a European country and an equal partner.

Part II

Russia in French Fictional Literature

Chapter 1

The emergence of Russia as a new European power, effectuated at the beginning of the eighteenth century by Peter the Great and his followers, was a topic of great interest for French writers. As we indicated in one of the preceding chapters, the literary works concerning Russian reforms were already written during Peter's reign, or shortly after his death in 1725. However, in the seventeen thirties the focus of French literature about Russia underwent a significant modification. From purely theoretical considerations, such as the Éloge du Czar Pierre Ier, it shifted toward more fictional and less historical genres. The elaborate treatises concerning predominantly Russian geography and politics gave place to novels, poems and even theatrical plays. Russia, although still barbaric and not as enlightened as it looked in the eyes of a Fontenelle, was nonetheless a serious subject of interest for the Parisian elite. The intricacies and mysteries of that distant Empire became a topic worthy of representation in different literary accounts. In the seventeen thirties, two works, both concerned almost exclusively with Russian themes, played an important role in altering the French public's view of Russia. The first of these two books, written by an Italian traveller and aventurier, the Count Francesco Locatelli Lanzi, entitled

Lettres moscovites, was published in Paris in 1736. The second, entitled Lettres chinoises, influenced to a great extent by the former,¹ was written by a Provençal nobleman, the Marquis d'Argens, and printed in Holland in 1739. It would be impossible to overestimate the significance of both writers for the propagation of the Russian myth in France, as well as in Europe. Both works, particularly the Lettres chinoises, a book which had several new editions in just a few years, became widely known and both were translated into foreign languages.

Francesco Locatelli Lanzi, the author of the Lettres moscovites, an Italian-born aristocrat, was a typical example of an enlightened eighteenth-century cosmopolite. He was an inveterate traveller and aventurier, who led an eventful and truly picturesque life. Locatelli, after visiting various countries and cities on the continent, decided to settle down in Paris and to embrace both the French language and culture. He was born in Bergamo in 1687 to the Conte Gianandrea Locatelli Lanzi and to Caterina Grumelli Pedroca. In his youth, he received a solid education, suitable to his noble origins and social rank. But very early the unpredictable traits of his restless character came to the fore and never disappeared. At the age of 17, Francesco Locatelli escaped from his parental home, carrying away all the jewelry of his beloved mother. Once on the run, he never stopped. He

¹ Albert Lortholary, Le mirage russe en France aux dix-huitième siècle (Paris: Boivin, 1951) 93.

fought in several Franco-Italian wars at the beginning of the century, travelled throughout the southern part of France and Northern Spain, visited Constantinople, and then, around 1720, came to Paris, where he attached himself to an affluent widow, Madame Pleneuf. As could be expected, his Parisian life did not differ at all from his previous dissolute experiences. In 1733, after being involved in several ambiguous love affairs and financial scandals, he was forced to flee the French capital.² The escape from Paris set him on a long route to Russia via Germany and Poland, where he spent two memorable years, most of the time behind bars in various Russian prisons. His unedifying encounter with the Russian judicial and penitentiary system was no doubt a shocking experience for him. For us, however, who after more than two hundred years read his scrupulous testimonials written in form of letters to a close friend, they offer an inestimable source of first-hand information on early eighteenth-century Russia and the Russian people, on the cruelty of Russian political life and its violent character. Locatelli's Lettres moscovites are a scathing accusation of the unreformable, in his opinion, Russian barbarism, which, he claimed, will never decrease. No work written during that period reveals better the reality of Russian

² G.B. Gallizioli, Memorie per servire alla vita del conte Francesco Locatelli Lanzi, ed. Aldo Manetti (Milano: Cisalpino-Goliardica, 1982) 2.

life. Locatelli's criticism is always concrete. A close perusal at the Lettres moscovites brings into sharp focus the fundamental difference between this curious book, based on personal experience, and the excessively optimistic Éloge of Fontenelle, who, as we have seen before, analyzed the emergence of the new Russia from strictly theoretical perspective, without the necessary attention to all historical facts.

The publication of the Lettres moscovites has an interesting history, due to a large extent to the author's extraordinary criticism of Russia. In 1735, upon his final release from prison and departure from St. Petersburg, Locatelli arrived incognito in Paris. His immediate thought was to share his Russian experiences with a wider public and to rectify Fontenelle's erroneous vision of that country. He intended his highly critical account to be a warning to unaware French and European readers. His main objective was to show the reality of Russia. The Lettres moscovites were published anonymously. This was a result of Locatelli's awareness of the book's potential success, which would surely bring him to the attention of all his former creditors and powerful enemies, encountered during his previous stay in Paris prior to the Russian trip. (Gallizioli, 3) Interestingly enough, Locatelli did not arouse any objections from the official French censorship, which welcomed his new book with genuine enthusiasm. This may be explained by the fact that during

the period following the War of the Polish Succession of 1733, the French court, supporting the father-in-law of Louis XV, Stanislas Leszczyński, as the pretender to the Polish throne, was in open conflict with Russia, which favored the claims of Augustus III of Saxony. This political configuration was thus the major reason for the royal permission to publish immediately Locatelli's book and, to a certain extent, for its subsequent popularity both in France and in other parts of Europe.³

The Lettres moscovites open just like many other eighteenth-century works of fictional literature. The editor of the allegedly anonymous letters claims to have discovered them in a wooden box, rescued miraculously from a shipwreck. Thus at the very beginning of the book, in the Avertissement de l'éditeur, we have a very typical device used at that time to legitimize the text and to promote its validity. Given the fact that the adventures represented by Locatelli might have seemed to the contemporary reader just as incredible as many other fictional accounts of the period depicting places even more distant than Russia, the author's preoccupation with

³ Francesco Locatelli's Lettres moscovites were translated from French into English by William Musgrave as early as in 1736 and published the same year in London under the title of Lettres moscovites or Muscovian Letters in Pope's Literary Correspondence. Since no original French version of Locatelli's book was available at the major American libraries consulted in the process of our research, we had to use the contemporary English translation.

establishing the verisimilitude of his book is not surprising.

The Lettres moscovites start with a promenade, which the future French editor of the manuscript made along the beach. This editor finds a wooden trunk and naturally, after few moments of deliberation, decides to open it. His curiosity is raised by an ominous Latin inscription attached to the trunk's cover, written on a paper pasted inside the lid, which shocked and perplexed him profoundly. This Latin inscription was a warning to those, who ever had a chance to glance at it, not to go to Russia and to abstain from travelling to that God-forsaken place: "Cum monitu ne adeant ad istam inhumanem nationem nisi ferro et igne eam depopulandum".⁴ [Warning not to venture to that inhuman nation other than with the purpose of depopulating it by means of iron and fire] But the unusual inscription is just the beginning. Although terrifying, it does not fail to incite the solitary wanderer to continue his exploration. As we can guess, his curiosity will be soon rewarded, for the content of the opened trunk reveals the existence of a peculiar manuscript, depicting an extraordinary story beyond imagination. The ominous Latin text found on a paper pasted inside the lid is only an introduction to a long epistolary account, entitled the

⁴ Francesco Locatelli, Lettres moscovites or Muscovian Letters, trans. William Musgrave in Pope's Literary Correspondence (London: 1736) iii. All quotations come from this English edition.

Lettres moscovites, an account which describes in detail its author's disastrous trip to the Muscovy between 1733 and 1735, and which, as the editor claims in his avertissement, should inform the public about the truth about Russia and denounce its barbaric image:

The public will (...) be desirous to know by what accident these letters fell into my hands and what induced me to publish them. I do not question, but many will be apt to blame my temerity to expose the foibles of so powerful a nation. To these critics I shall only answer, that the interest of all the rest of Europe has, with me, taken place of every other consideration. Besides, our author says no more than the bare evident truth: and, for my part, I shall think my labour more than recompenced, if the reading of these letters may have the wished-for effect, to deter every man of worth from travelling into Muscovy, where he would run the risk of being exposed to the same tragical events our Italian here relates.(ii)

What are then these tragic events, which Locatelli relates to a close friend in his Lettres moscovites? Was the course of his adventures in the snowy expanses of Russia as incredible and astounding as he claims? Was the Muscovy indeed such a strange place, where unimaginable misfortunes could become reality and where everything is put upside down? The answer seems to be: yes!

Locatelli's predicament began at the moment when, travelling from St. Petersburg to Persia with the purpose of joining a friend, he was intercepted in Kazan by the Russian police and arrested on account of his alleged spying. However, this grave accusation was never proven to be valid. The Italian traveller was initially placed into the local jail and then transported by the police escort across snowy Russia back to the country's new capital. For

the entire duration of his ordeal, Locatelli was never informed about the precise reason of his detention. He was refused any legal assistance; he was kept in total isolation from the outside world and, what was perhaps the most unbearable, he did not know what kind of treatment to expect from his Muscovite oppressors. He compared his long trip from one Russian prison to another, which hardly was a pleasant one, to a voyage throughout land of the Dead. The incredible nature of this experience, reminiscent of pure fiction rather than reality, might at the first glance look like perfect material for a fantastic novel, even though it was far from it. Locatelli's ghostly Russian adventure has the appearance of a morbid, surreal fairy-tale. It transcends the tangible world and escapes the sphere of rational understanding. The image of Russia as an imaginary rather than concrete entity, Russia's formlessness and her never clearly defined character, are the constant element of Locatelli's critical account:

You say, you cannot forbear looking at me, as a person risen from the dead; and you are so far right: I am not dead, indeed, because "mors miseris fugit", but I may, nevertheless, be esteemed a ghost, since I am actually returned from another world, where I have made no short abode. (1)

This tension between real and unreal, between concrete and purely fictional, transpires throughout the entire text. According to Locatelli, one can never capture the true essence of Russia, for this semi-barbaric empire functions on a different level than most European countries. The Westerners who wish to understand Russia

should abandon their traditional system of values and suspend their previous socio-political concepts. Russia has an existence of its own, incomparable to anything else experienced by the Italian traveller in the past:

I am persuaded, there is no other country, in which I could have been exposed to the like events. I shall leave you to judge of these matters; be prepared only to give attention to what I am about to relate. You will find some things to amuse you, and others will justly raise your indignation, and compel you to allow, that it is with truth, I say, I am returned from another world.(3)

Locatelli brings into sharp focus the instability of Russian political system and relativity of moral concepts when he speaks about the peculiar notion of time the Russians have. Nothing in that vast empire, according to him, is perceived within a linear chronological order. Issues that need to be addressed immediately are usually postponed until later. No political or economic decision is implemented with seriousness and nobody knows what to expect from the inept government. The Russian reality is beyond time; it can be grasped only if we suspend our traditional perception:

Nothing is done there today, everything is put off till tomorrow, which I have too often experienced to my cost, and been forced to put up with those todays and tomorrows for three months together.(12)

The ineptitude of Russian rulers, the lack of solid socio-political foundations or clearly defined laws struck Locatelli already at the very beginning of his trip. Nothing escaped the attention of this perspicacious observer. He grasped the full extent of the Russian

absurdity as soon as he left St. Petersburg for Persia. One of Locatelli's earliest critical comments on the purely fictional nature of most Russian institutions and projects regarded the total uselessness of the famous Ladoga canal, built by Peter the Great in order to connect the Volga river with the Baltic sea. This canal was an ambitious, yet thoroughly ridiculous endeavor. Although its completion required enormous sums and manpower, it proved to be a financial disaster. The Ladoga canal story is only the first example presented in the Lettres moscovites of how the Russians understood or rather misunderstood the economic reality. It illustrates how they wasted human intelligence, industriousness and hard labor. The fruits expected from the Ladoga canal were, as almost everything else in the Muscovy, purely imaginary:

This canal is situated in a very marshy soil, and is of a vast extent; but I very much question, whether the advantages accruing from it answer the immense sums it cost at first; not to mention the prodigious number of lives sacrificed in that undertaking. I make little or no doubt, but it will insensibly fall into decay. (13)

The universal state of confusion is the most characteristic element of Locatelli's perception of Russia. According to his observation, the Muscovy is a place where man's natural desire for progress, liberty and individuality is regarded with suspicion and has no value. The Russians do not understand the notion of order, their customs and behavior defy logic and the arbitrariness of their tyrannical rulers squanders the nation's resources.

Russia, as seen by Locatelli, is in a permanent state of chaos. The Russians are deprived of elementary rights, nobody is certain of the future, there is no civilized judicial system to defend ordinary subjects from the abusive power of the Czars or their local representatives. We find this critical attitude almost everywhere in the Lettres moscovites, but it is particularly poignant in the description of an interrogation, inflicted upon the Italian traveller by the Governor of Moscow. The following passage testifies to Locatelli's astonishing comprehension of Russia's totalitarian system with all its absurdities. No other eighteenth-century writer painted a better and more comprehensive picture of it. The facetious interplay of sense and non-sense, as well as the truly grotesque mixture of reality and false pretense, combined in the person of the Governor of Moscow, create in this memorable scene a very peculiar setting, calling to mind a much later literary work, Alfred Jarry's Ubu roi. The strange coexistence of comical and serious, of grotesque and dangerous, symbolizes the volatility of Russian political scene, immaturity of Russia's institutions and unpredictability of its vague laws. The Russia of Locatelli is not an ordinary European country. It is indeed the other world, the experience of which can only bewilder and astonish:

To dismiss me, he at length gave me a gracious nod; But as I did not seem to understand these apish tricks, he was constrained, at length, to tell me, by the mouth of the interpreter, that I must retire. And thus ended this formal appearance, which I was forced

to make before the Governor of the great city of Muscow. I do not doubt, but you have seen the play called *Arlichin finto Prencipe*. Imagine, you see me received much with the same grimaces, as Harlequin receives his people with, and that the discourse which passed was not much unlike that of the illustrious buffoon, I have just mentioned. The farce which followed, did not in the least deviate from the absurdity which preceeded it.(46-47)

The analogous feeling of absurdity is also present in Locatelli's bitter commentary on how the Russians view their own national identity and how they envision their Orthodox religion. He compares them to the brutes who revel in their inveterate ignorance and cannot distinguish between the truth, inaccessible to them, and fiction, in which they are submerged. According to Locatelli, the Russians live in a shadow of their own imaginary universe, they resemble the cavemen in Plato's Republic, who lost contact with reality and take false pretense for the ultimate wisdom:

But since I am speaking of religion, you must know, the Muscovites think they alone have a title to the name of Christians. They look upon all other people, the Europeans not excepted, to be idolaters, who have no knowledge of the true God. *Qualibus in tenebris vitae*. Wretches that they are! They are not sensible of the profound ignorance, in which they themselves are immersed. What a strange worship is theirs?(35)

The implicit reference to Plato, especially the symbolism of the cave, can also be found in Locatelli's remarks about the most recent attempts of the Czars to introduce more democratic elements into Russia's ossified socio-political system, thus making it more European. His pessimism about Russia, seen as a realm of deceiving appearances, reminiscent of the Platonic underground,

reaches its climax in the following sarcastic passage. One can only admire Locatelli's sense of humor and his uncompromising attitude toward this strange country, where everything is in utter disorder and has a potential of becoming its own caricature:

(...) a motion was then made to form the government into a commonwealth. If this project had taken place, we should have seen a plan of government very different from Plato, a Muscovian Republic! It would, without doubt, have been a masterpiece.(63)

Another critical comment on the Russian formlessness and the ineptitude of the Muscovite government can be found in Locatelli's facetious description of the Russian Senate. This allegedly supreme political body, whose task is to deliberate the most urgent issues of the state, is presented in the Lettres moscovites as a purely fictional entity, the daily operations of which fluctuate between complete inaction and frustrating indolence. Like everything else in Russia, its Senate is only an illusion, it has no real significance. It passes no laws, thus it has no effect whatsoever on the course of the political life of the country. Its existence is only nominal and so are the problems it pretends to solve:

(...) they (the senators) generally meet four or five hours a day, (...) they take a great deal of pains themselves, and give no less to others, without advancing the interest of the state. (...) as they cannot venture to deliver their opinions with an entire freedom, they are often necessitated to defer the most urgent affairs to another time. The door of this illustrious Areopagus might be properly adorned with the following device: Hic operose nihil agitur.[Nothing is being done here](61-62)

Locattelli's vision of Russia as unable to govern itself and his remarks about the fictional power of that immensely vast, yet vulnerable empire, are rooted in his ambivalent attitude towards the role Peter the Great played in Russian history. His negative verdict on this figure should not surprise anyone. According to Locatelli, the Petrine reforms did not promote genuine changes; rather, they only perpetuated the oppressiveness of Russian absolutism and injected Western technology into the Russian militaristic machine. In his opinion, Peter's decision to implement reforms was based on his fundamental misconception, on his misunderstanding of the spirit of his subjects, whom he took for what they were not. The Czar's erroneous assessment of the Russian nation served to create a new fiction. Peter believed too easily in the reformability of the Muscovites, which Locatelli seems to regard with utmost scepticism. Most of the French thinkers of the period considered Peter the Great a genius. For Locatelli, however, he was not the epitome of the early Enlightenment, he was rather a supreme priest of the biggest and the most detrimental illusion in Russian history. Peter's belief in success of his reforms and ability of the Russians to adopt European customs was in his opinion wishful thinking, a naive vision of an ambitious, yet unrealistic ruler. The Italian traveller claimed that instead of pulling the Russians in such a haste out of their native barbarity, the Czar should have

allowed them to preserve their natural character, that of uncivilized beasts, which, as he claimed, they really were:

(...) was Peter the Great with all his fine schemes and establishments, sufficiently acquainted with the genius of his subjects? I have great room to doubt it, and this is my reason: There is not to this day a single Muscovite who is not better pleased with his village, and his oven, than with the most eminent post of honour. They would have been better pleased, if Peter the Great, instead of attempting to change beasts, as they were, into men, had, on the contrary, laboured to reduce them from a state of humanity to that of brutes. (63-64)

Locatelli's criticism of Russia's unfounded claims to be treated by the West as a civilized country, is expressed in another passage of the Lettres Moscovites. The author's personal experience, his prolonged captivity and inhuman treatment, which he suffered in various Russian prisons, were perhaps the major cause of his uncompromising attitude. Locatelli's Russia is a land of demons, it is a kafkaesque domain of arbitrariness, where there is no logic, no relation between causes and effects, where every imaginable absurdity is possible and nothing certain. The human person, our individuality and dignity mean very little in that repressive system. The analogy between the totalitarian nature of early eighteenth-century Russia and that of the Soviet Union during the most cruel period of purges and persecutions is striking. The modern reader might be tempted to call Locatelli a prophet, which, it has to be clearly stated, the Italian traveller was not. He was simply a talented observer, who

witnessed Russia's cultural complexities without the touch of partiality and bias, so characteristic of some Parisian political theoreticians, like Fontenelle:

Their way is to seize a person without any cause, without any examination, and, without any alledging the least pretext for it; they treat him immediately as a state criminal, he is guarded within view, and with sword in hand, he is refused the use of his knife and fork, and his equipage is rifled. Can a people, who behave in this manner, be called civilized? And who then are barbarians, if they are not so?(30-31)

Locatelli was deeply perplexed by the pervading state of sadness and melancholy of the Russian people. What distressed him the most, however, was the thought that all the reforms of Peter the Great were implemented in vain and that this ambitious monarch failed dismally to elevate his empire to the rank of a European state. According to Locatelli, the fruits of Peter's unprecedented projects were wasted before they even had a chance to mature. The following passage exemplifies Locatelli's concern and shows his genuine comprehension of the Russian illusion. His sharp words were not meant as a criticism, even though they may seem so. Rather, they testify to his profound pity for the Russians and to his frustration with the vicious circle in which their civilization functioned:

I first called to mind all that Peter, the Great, had done, the pains he had taken, and the torrents of blood he had shed, to extricate his subjects from that barbarity and ignorance into which they were plunged. I then reflected on his voyages, enquiries, labours and establishments; and I said to myself; where are now the effects of all the pains this great monarch took to reform his people? Is it possible that his subjects should be yet in the same state of barbarity, they were in, long before his reign? Where are the fruits of his labour? I could not find that this

prince had changed the genius of his nation, and I had but too much experience of the contrary.(28)

Locatelli's pessimistic image of Russia is somewhat mitigated by his contemporary, Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d'Argens, who not only read the Lettres moscovites, but also used them as a principal source of information while writing his monumental Lettres chinoises ou correspondance philosophique, historique et critique entre un Chinois voyageur à Paris et ses correspondants à la Chine, en Moscovie, en Perse et au Japon. As the long title of this work suggests, some fragments of it are dedicated to Russia. Yet the fictional representation of that country is of a very peculiar nature. The Russia of Argens, experienced and described in detail by an Oriental traveller, is in reality seen through the eyes of the author himself, or rather through his previous readings and contacts with those, who had ventured to the Muscovy earlier. Argens had never been in Russia, so his account is purely literary. It recapitulates all major lines mentioned and discussed in previously published French books. Since the Lettres chinoises are an erudite compilation of different sources, often conflicting and heterogeneous, the absence of ideological unity and central perspective of the work may be regarded as a proof of the diversity of French popular opinion about contemporary Russia.

Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, known by the name of the Marquis d'Argens, was born on June 27, 1703. His father,

Pierre Jean de Boyer, Seigneur d'Eguilles et de Joyeuse Garde, was Procurateur Général in Aix-en-Provence. The intellectual formation of the young Marquis d'Argens was not excessively strict. Very early he was introduced to the ideas developed by many fashionable philosophers of the period, particularly to the works of Gassendi, whose writings became very popular in the circles associated with the Aix-en-Provence Parliament.⁵ As the eldest son, Jean-Baptiste was entitled to inherit his father's position of Procurateur Général, but like many other young noblemen of his times, including the previously discussed Locatelli, he preferred an errant life of an aventurier, filled with exciting voyages to various European, North African, and even Asian countries, with innumerable amorous adventures, countless fights and arguments with people of similar inclinations and temperament. (Bush, 9)

After visiting Constantinople, where he was exposed to non-European cultures and customs, after studying music and painting in Italy, and finally after a serious accident during the French military expedition to Germany, Argens decided to settle down in Holland and to engage in a full-scale literary career, initiated by the publication of his Mémoires in 1735. (11-13) The main reason for this decision was the fact that Pierre Jean de Boyer,

⁵ Newell Richard Bush, The Marquis d'Argens and His Philosophical Correspondence (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1953) 7.

exasperated by his eldest son's dishonorable conduct, disinherited him. Henceforth the young Marquis d'Argens had to find alternative sources of steady income. Poverty and constant need for money were thus the principal cause of his truly prolific literary activity, which between 1735 and 1737 resulted in several popular libertine novels, all published in Holland and entitled respectively: Mémoires de Mademoiselle de Mainville, Mémoires du Marquis de Mirmon, Mémoires du Marquis de Vaudreville, Mémoires du Comte della Valle, and finally Mémoires du Comte de Vaxère.⁽¹⁴⁾ But the most important work of Argens, which gave him a genuine international fame and a considerable amount of money, was the trilogy conceived in a form of an epistolary novel, entitled the Lettres juives (1736), the Lettres cabalistiques (1737-1738) and the Lettres chinoises (1739). The Correspondance philosophique, which is the collective title of the entire trilogy, was originally written as a series of bi-weekly pamphlets, published under the auspices of two French protestant ministers: Chaix and de la Chapelle.⁽¹⁶⁾ The successive publication of the trilogy enabled the author to establish several valuable friendships with many outstanding philosophers and statesmen of the period, friendships which he preserved until his death. It is precisely as a result of the international fame of his Correspondance philosophique that Argens entered the circle of Frederick II of Prussia, at whose royal court in

Potsdam he spent almost thirty years.(16) This acclaimed philosophical trilogy also enabled Argens to come to the notice of Voltaire, who often considered him one of his closest associates. In a letter written on September 4th, 1736, the Patriarch of Ferney expressed gratitude to Argens after he had taken his side in a quarrel with Jean-Baptiste Rousseau:

Je ne puis assez vous remercier, monsieur, de la manière obligeante dont vous avez bien voulu prendre mon parti dans vos "Lettres" contre le cruel et l'infâme ennemi qui m'honore de sa haine depuis longtemps. (...) Je n'avais pas besoin de cette conformité avec vous pour désirer d'être avec vous en liaison: je vous étais déjà attaché par cette heureuse liberté avec laquelle vous écrivez des choses pleines d'esprit. Mais enfin me voilà lié avec vous, monsieur, par les motifs de l'estime et de la reconnaissance.⁶

Voltaire's attachment to Argens was not only due to his friend's uncompromised attitude toward their mutual enemies. It also resulted, as he claimed, in commonly shared philosophical interests and in the Provençal writer's literary talents. Voltaire often expressed a feeling of intellectual solidarity with his "cher Isaac", as he used to call the author of the Lettres juives:

Si les "Lettres juives" me plaisent, mon cher Isaac! Si j'en suis charmé. (...) Elles sont agréables et instructives, elles respirent l'humanité et la liberté. Je soutiens que c'est rendre un très-grand service au public que de lui donner, deux fois par semaine, de si excellents préservatifs. J'aime passionnément les "Lettres" et l'auteur. (...) Je suis bien fâché de l'avoir vu si peu.(913)

⁶ Voltaire, Correspondance, ed. Theodore Besterman, vol. 1 (Paris, Gallimard, 1977) 817-18.

The third part of the Correspondance philosophique, the Lettres chinoises, is the only work of the entire trilogy in which Argens speaks directly about Russia. His narrative, however, does not have the same continuity of Locatelli's highly negative, or even prejudiced attitude of the Lettres moscovites. The author's several different perspectives, sometimes very optimistic, sometimes rather critical, and his often mutually exclusive conclusions regarding analyzed issues betray the mixture of various sources of information used in the process of writing. When compared to Locatelli's account, who experienced Russia personally and then decided to publish a devastating denunciation of the Muscovite tyranny, the Russian part of the Lettres chinoises seems to be a purely fictional work in which the author gathered several eclectic images of Russia circulating in the West in the seventeen thirties. It is interesting to note, for example, how the admiration of Argens for the Petrine reforms alternates with his description of the Czar's shortcomings and how some critical remarks taken directly from Locatelli's book intermingle with his enthusiastic comments on the new status of Russian women. However, the general tone of the vast majority of the Lettres chinoises is moderately pessimistic. Argens did not attempt to create another inflated myth, analogous to that of a Fontenelle. Rather, he proved to be a realist having a

sound judgement and reasonable convictions about the nature of Russia's history and civil development.

The account of Argens is not that of a visionary or of a disenchanted traveller, whose aim is to warn the Westerners not to venture into tyrannical Russia. It is a rather solid work of intellectual investigation based, as we said, on previous texts. The author does not pretend to discover the profound mysteries of the Muscovy and to predict its future. He simply wants to recapitulate in a very accessible and informative manner, reminiscent of the encyclopedic endeavors of his followers, what the French public already knew, at least in part.

It is interesting to note the usage of traditional, yet very effective agricultural metaphors of Argens's introductory letters. Although the author is somewhat critical about Russia, he also realizes that with the passage of time this immense empire will eventually succeed in reforming its system. Argens is certainly not original in his opinion, since many French writers shared a similar view, but originality was not his main objective. He wanted to educate the public in the most entertaining and simple fashion, so typical of eighteenth-century literature, a goal he undoubtedly achieved:

Les Moscovites me paraissent, malgré les soins que l'on a pris depuis plusieurs années de cultiver leur génie, le peuple le moins poli et le moins spirituel de l'Europe; il faudra encore bien du temps pour arracher entièrement les anciennes coutumes et pour éclairer leur esprit. Je regarde les Moscovites, comme ces terres arides et incultes abandonnées pendant plusieurs siècles, et qu'on ne peut défricher qu'avec de grandes peines; lors même qu'on est venu à bout, il

faut encore bien des années avant qu'on puisse y recueillir une moisson abondante.⁷

The influence of Locatelli's Lettres moscovites is evident in various passages of the Lettres chinoises. The similarity with which Argens criticizes the tendency of the Russians to consider themselves far superior to other nations and to ignore the backwardness of their own civilization is not accidental. Neither is his facetious description of the false pretenses of the Russians and of their illusion of greatness. The reader of the Lettres chinoises may easily detect an analogy to Plato's cave, which we already discussed in the case of Locatelli:

Quelque grande que fût, il y a quarante à cinquante ans, leur ignorance, ils se comparoient sans cesse aux anciens Grecs: aujourd'hui que leurs connoissances sont augmentées, leur orgueil est accru à proportion, ils se regardent comme les peuples les plus parfaits de l'Univers. Au lieu que les arts et les sciences que leur ont appris et que leur apprennent journellement les étrangers, devroient leur faire sentir qu'à peine ont-ils atteint au premier degré des connoissances humaines, ils pensent être arrivés à la perfection. (34)

The Russian part of the Lettres chinoises not only shows the influence of Locatelli, but also of the entire tradition of the early Enlightenment. According to Argens, as well as many other writers of the period, the major obstacles to human progress were antiquated national prejudices and obsolete local customs. For the sake of a

⁷ Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d'Argens, Lettres chinoises ou correspondance philosophique, historique et critique entre un Chinois voyageur à Paris et ses correspondants à la Chine, en Moscovie, en Perse et au Japon, vol. 2 (La Haye: Pierre Paupie, 1739) 33-34.

better future, they should be eradicated immediately. The author of the Lettres chinoises was a true disciple of his close friend and intellectual mentor, Voltaire. Speaking about future developments in the Muscovy, he envisioned only one remedy to cure that country, a remedy which follows the major lines of the enlightened cosmopolitism à la française: the Russians should abandon their national past and eliminate their worthless barbaric heritage:

L'Entêtement des Moscovites pour leurs usages est au-delà de toute expression, jugez-en par les peines que le feu Czar a eues pour leur faire couper la barbe. Le plus grand obstacle que trouve la cour à détruire les anciens préjugés, c'est l'obstination de ceux qui les ont reçus. Il est facile de policier bientôt un peuple docile, mais il faut des siècles pour instruire à demi une nation, obstinée à chérir des erreurs.(96)

Many of the Lettres chinoises indicate that Argens, following Fontenelle's classic pattern, also envisaged Russia in a binary manner. According to him, there is Russia "before", and Russia "after", with the Petrine reforms separating these two distinct historical periods. When speaking about the old Muscovy and of the disadvantages of its civilization, he clearly had Moscow in mind. When discussing the westernization of that country, he highly praised the court of St. Petersburg, which for him was the epitome of the new, progressive Russia. The reader has no doubts about the author's sympathies. Argens proves again to be a true disciple of the Enlightenment and specifically of Voltaire's Le Mondain. Once introduced, this binary perspective will never abandon the Russian section of the Lettres

chinoises. The Russian "before" and "after" will be the constant element of Argens's analytical discourse:

Moscou est une grande ville, mais sale, mal bâtie, et qui n'a rien de digne de la curiosité d'un voyageur. Ses habitants se ressentent encore beaucoup de la grossièreté de leurs ancêtres: comme la cour reste à Petersbourg, ils n'ont pas le moyen de profiter des exemples journaliers qu'auroient pû leur donner les courtisans civilisés, et les étrangers qui sont attachés à la suite du souverain, dont le nombre est fort considérable.(49)

What a big difference there is when the Chinese traveller, guided by the imagination of Argens, arrives from Moscow to St. Petersburg. Suddenly the perspective changes. The utterly depressive atmosphere of the old Muscovy, filth and disorder found in its antiquated capital, disappear and the reader experiences a magical transformation. The Chinese correspondent is rescued from the state of boredom caused by the cultural backwardness of provincial Russia. Now, having finally arrived in the new capital, a different life-style awaits him. He finds himself bombarded with various activities unheard of during his entire trip across the empire. St. Petersburg is, according to his letter, a bustling metropolis, it is the success-story of modern Russia. The Chinese traveller is so busy there that he has no time to write to his friend. A somewhat naive vision of Argens, emphasized by the striking contrast between the old medieval and the new, more European Russia, makes St. Petersburg a virtual Paris of the East:

Depuis que je suis arrivé à Petersbourg, je n'ai pu trouver un moment pour t'écrire: j'ai été accablé d'affaires et je saisis le premier instant dont je

suis le maître. Petersbourg est une ville d'une grandeur assez considérable, elle est infiniment mieux bâtie que Moscou. Les rues sont tirées au cordeau, plusieurs sont entrecoupées par des canaux, il y a des bâtiments publics d'une architecture régulière. Cette ville doit sa fondation au feu Czar Pierre le Grand, qui prétendoit en faire le centre d'un des plus grands commerces de l'Univers. (201-02)

The Chinese traveller's stay in St. Petersburg is naturally a perfect occasion to bring up the subject of Peter the Great, founder of the city. For the Marquis d'Argens, this ambitious Czar is a dividing line between the old and modern Russia. There is certainly nothing original in his point of view, for many writers who discussed this issue in the early eighteenth century said more or less the same thing. But as we mentioned before, Argens did not aspire to originality. His epistolary novel is purposely an eclectic compilation of the existing sources and his goal is to make accessible the gathered information to the widest public possible. What is new in the Lettres chinoises, however, is the author's stress on the role of Russian women in transforming their country from barbarism to civilization. It seems that one of the major interests of Argens was always the issue of freedom and equality for women. In fact, the treatment of women was often one of the major factors which the Provençal writer took into consideration when making a judgement as to the status of a given civilization. Thus when Argens developed his detailed analysis of Russia, he did not overlook the situation of women in that land. But as was the case of every aspect of Russian life discussed in the

Lettres chinoises, history of Russian women also had its "before" and "after". Once again, the Petrine reforms were the dividing point of the issue in question:

Avant qu'il y eût autant d'étrangers qu'il y en a actuellement dans l'Empire les femmes étoient excessivement observées, et presque aussi gênées que dans l'Orient. Celles qui étoient dans un état au-dessus du commun, demeuroient toujours enfermées dans leurs maisons; excepté dans certaines occasions très rares, elles ne se laissoient point voir aux hommes. (...) Quant a celles qui étoient nées parmi le peuple, quoique moins resserées, elle l'étoient cependant beaucoup plus qu'elles ne le sont aujourd'hui. (97-98)

Argens often considered women as a major force in promoting civilized manners and cultural progress all over Europe. For him Russia was not an exception to the rule. The notion of this cultural feminine internationale à la Russe was clearly evident when he referred to Peter's plan to send Russian noble women abroad in order to familiarize them with Western values. According to Argens, the Czar's intention was to reeducate his future politicians and statesmen through the influence of their polished wives, daughters and mistresses. The author's position was that historically women are more apt than men to assimilate culture and that they are the genuine, although so often neglected, force of progress. For Argens, natural feminine tenderness and beauty, combined with good education, always produce major changes in any given society and lead to a general refinement of old, barbaric customs. That is precisely why the author of the Lettres chinoises praised so highly Peter's plan to send his noble female subjects abroad:

Le Czar avoit fort à coeur de terminer l'esclavage du beau sexe, dont il espéroit se servir utilement pour adoucir les moeurs et le génie de ses sujets: il forma le dessein de faire voyager les jeunes filles des nobles dans les principales villes de l'Allemagne, afin qu'elles prissent des manières polies, qu'elle ne manqueroient pas de communiquer ensuite à leurs amans et à leurs maris. Ce prince avoit vu dans ses voyages combien la beauté, ornée des agréments d'esprit, a de puissance sur les coeurs. (99)

The strong opposition of Russian men, jealous of their wives and daughters, who by virtue of the Imperial decree were to be sent alone to dissolute Western countries and thus suddenly liberated from their custody, obstructed the Czar's plan to shape the new Russia through feminine influence. According to Argens, Peter finally decided to send only men abroad. But ironically this did not deter cultural progress, for women, in the author's view, are more talented and more intelligent than men, so they are always able to adapt more successfully to new conditions. Their natural flexibility predisposes them to promote change in spite of the limitations established by the ruling Patriarchy. Such was certainly the case of the Russian women, as the Lettres chinoises indicated. The strong emphasis on feminine issues is one of the major differences between Argens and Locatelli, whose Russia was almost exclusively a male domain. This difference is the mark of Argens's unquestionable originality and of his sensitivity toward neglected, or rather overlooked aspects of Western civilization:

Quoi qu'il en soit, le Czar n'exécuta point ce projet, et se contenta de faire voyager les hommes. Cela produisit le même effet qu'il souhaitoit, et de tous ses sujets les femmes furent toujours les plus dociles

à prendre les manières étrangères, elles égalèrent même bientôt leurs maîtres, et aujourd'hui elles sont aussi civilisées que leurs maris. (99)

Another major difference between Locatelli and Argens is their respective attitude toward Peter the Great. The position of the former is clear. Peter's reforms were destined from the very beginning to fail, because the Czar operated against the nature of his subjects and misjudged the spirit of his own people. His socio-political changes were thus a dangerous illusion. They were only a fictional endeavor, which should never have been initiated. Peter's misinterpretation of the national character of the Russians was, according to Locatelli, the first step that set in motion the never ending Russian vicious circle. The Czar produced more chaos and desintegration than Russia had ever experienced before. Argens is less critical in this matter. Although he realized that after Peter's death some of the reforms were slowed down, or even reversed, his image of the Czar is that of a hero, comparable to the other outstanding figures of history. For Argens, Peter was a supra-human, semi-divine being, whose political vision and reforms guaranteed him a place in the Pantheon:

Je doute (...) qu'il soit né depuis des siècles un homme aussi extraordinaire que l'étoit ce Prince. Tout étoit grand en lui-même jusqu'aux défauts qu'il avoit pris dans son enfance, et dont il n'avoit jamais pu se défaire entièrement lorsqu'il parvint à l'Empire. (34)

The gradual reversal of the historical reforms to modernize Russia that occurred after 1725 was a very unfortunate development for Argens. He strongly believed

in the necessity of continuing Peter's revolutionary policies, because the only alternative for Russia was the undesirable return of its previous barbarism and cultural chaos. Argens claimed that further reversal of the Petrine heritage would prove detrimental and dangerous not only to the Muscovy, but to entire Europe as well. Argens is a true disciple of the Enlightenment with his firm belief in progress. Locatelli, on the other hand, was more indifferent to those issues. He had no illusions. The fate of the inveterately unreformable Russia, as he envisaged it, and the partial failure of Peter's projects, did not concern him as much as they concerned Argens, who wrote:

Il est mort trop tôt pour le bonheur de ses peuples, et quoiqu'ils respectent et qu'ils chérissent sa mémoire, ils se sont dispensés depuis quelque temps de biens des règles qu'il avoit établies, aussi peut on dire que les Moscovites ont plutôt reculé qu'ils n'ont avancé. Il est dangereux qu'ils ne continuent à perdre; ils ont déjà repris plusieurs de leurs anciens usages, et ils ne peuvent reprendre aucun, qu'ils ne fassent un pas vers la barbarie. (207-208)

The Russian part of the Lettres chinoises is, as we already stressed, a very heterogenous text. Its lack of unity indicates that the author, who did not experience Russia personally, consulted several different literary sources and drew many mutually exclusive conclusions about the subject discussed. One of the best examples of these internal contradictions is the analysis of the Russian court in comparison with the other major European courts, that of England and France. Argens considered the court of Versailles the most sophisticated and the most joyous one,

which, given the dominant role of French culture during the eighteenth century, certainly should not surprise us. What is unusual in his analysis, however, is the fact that after highly praising the cultural progress of Russia and the political genius of Peter the Great, after stressing the difference between Moscow and the newly founded capital, the same Argens ridiculed the court of St. Petersburg and depicted it as the most depressing spectacle of Europe. This lack of continuity indicates that his intention was not to write a well documented socio-political treatise, uniform in its representation of Russia, but rather to create a light and multifarious image of that country. His objective, after all, was not to present Russia to an elite group of French intellectuals, whose knowledge of this land was similar to that of Argens, but to the broadest public possible. The author's principal goal was to make money and the only way to succeed in this domain was to make abstract ideas comprehensible for an average eighteenth-century reader. Many consecutive editions of the Lettres chinoises show that both the popularizing and financial objective of Argens had certainly been achieved, for his work enjoyed a true European success. The complex image of Russia, its constant shifting between civilization and obsolete tradition, between Western culture and native barbarism, is very effectively depicted in the text. With the Lettres chinoises not only the French, but also the European

public received a very complex, even if somewhat contradictory picture of the Muscovy. This image, due to the wide popularity of Argens's works, was to remain unaltered for many generations:

La cour de l'Impératrice des Russies a l'air aussi riche (...) que celles des plus puissants rois européens, quoiqu'elle le soit en effet beaucoup moins. (...) Quant aux plaisirs, ils se ressentent ici du climat du pays: tout y est sérieux, pour ne pas dire triste; (...) Ce n'est pas à St. Petersbourg (...) qu'il faut chercher cette politesse libre et enjouée qui regne (...) dans presque toutes les cours de l'Europe. Un Anglais me disait l'autre jour que la cour à Londres étoit plus agréable dans le temps de deuil, que celle de Moscovie ne l'est dans ceux de réjouissance. Un Français (...) auroit bien voulu renchérir sur les expressions de l'Anglais, (...) mais ne pouvant venir à bout, la cour de France, m'a-t-il dit, est encore plus gaie que celle de Londres. Voyez donc combien elle diffère de celle de Pétersbourg. (215-16)

This rather depressing vision of the Russian court should not deceive anyone. St. Petersburg was not exactly Paris and never will be, even if on many occasions the author suggested the analogy between both capitals. But Argens, unlike the highly prejudiced Locatelli, was in spite of his frequent criticism very sympathetic toward Russia. His major concern was the continuation of the Petrine reforms. He considered their gradual reversal after the Czar's death only a temporary, although potentially dangerous, development. Like his friend Voltaire, he was an optimist, cautious, yet uncompromising in his strong belief in progress. He was convinced that Russia would eventually succeed. Her dramatic civilizing record, filled with contradictions and serious set-backs

instigated by the opponents to reform, would continue to grow. This is precisely how Argens presented Russia to the French public in his best-selling epistolary account.

The new image of Russia, more civilized and European, was also depicted in French theatrical works. One of the examples of this trend is Louis de Boissy who, although completely forgotten today, was quite popular in his own time. His first play Le Babillard, a light and amusing comedy written in 1725, remained for many years in the repertory of the Comédie Française and gave its author a literary fame. Le Babillard was followed by many other comedies and tragedies, some of which, such as L'Homme du jour, written in 1740, were considered by the contemporary critics as masterpieces.⁸

Although Russian topics were never a dominant theme of his work and constitute a rather exceptional element in his plays, Boissy was nevertheless one of the first French playwrights to deal with them. These Russian topics were always marginal and were incorporated into a wider European cultural context. In a comedy entitled La Frivolité, a delightful short play staged for the first time in January 1753, the author depicted the influence of French culture in various countries and analyzed the progress of French Enlightenment ideas across Europe.

⁸ Pierre Larousse, Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle, vol. 2, part 2 (Genève-Paris: Slatkine, 1982) 889.

Boissy mentioned Russia in conjunction with general trends of the period. Portraying in his play the new, transformed Europe à la française, he emphasized the fact that Russia was no longer a barbaric place but rather a civilized cultural center, where arts and crafts were flourishing:

M. Fauster:

Nous sommes les témoins d'un prodige si beau.
L'Europe maintenant, et, qui plus est, l'Asie
Présentent à nos yeux un différent tableau.
Le beau sexe n'est plus esclave en Italie;
Et l'on boit du vin en Turquie.
En France, l'on s'est mis à l'eau;
Et l'on fait des vers en Russie.

La Frivolité:

Des vers russes, je crois, doivent être jolis!⁹

La Frivolité ends with a cosmopolitan spectacle of singing and dancing. In this delightful short play, representing both the contemporary artistic heritage of France and the multicultural image of eighteenth-century Europe, the public was shown a performance of Italian bel canto, a German choir, a French vaudeville and last, but not least, a Russian dancer. La Frivolité, an optimistic and joyful comedy depicting Europe of 1753, is a living testimony to the triumphal march of French Enlightenment across the entire continent. Russia, as Boissy envisaged her, was already in 1753 an equal member, not just a junior partner, of the family of civilized nations. Its place in Europe was well established.

⁹ Louis de Boissy, La frivolité in Oeuvres de théâtre de M. de Boissy, vol. 9 (Paris: Chez la veuve Duchesne, 1766) 299.

Another eighteenth-century French playwright to discuss Russia was Claude-Joseph Dorat. Dorat was most appreciated during his life for his tragedies: Adélaïde de Hongrie, Régulus and Zoramis, and for his comedies: La Feinte par amour, Le Malheureux imaginaire, Le Chevalier français à Londres and Les Prôneurs. But he was also known for his innumerable letters and Épîtres, one of which, entitled L'Épître à l'impératrice de Russie, was written to celebrate Catherine's generous act of buying Diderot's library. In highly respectful, although slightly inflated terms Dorat claimed that now, since Diderot's library had found a powerful protector, the philosopher's fame would never diminish and that his immortality was thus guaranteed. Catherine the Great, the unparalleled sponsor of arts and lover of truth is represented in this poem as a new light, a beacon of enlightened Europe. In Dorat's imagination the Russian Empress is regarded as an aurora:

Par tes soins, il va donc renaître,
 Ce philosophe respecté,
 Et qui fut malheureux peut-être
 Pour trop aimer la vérité!
 Désormais vainqueur de l'envie,
 Dans son heureuse obscurité,
 Il peut sans redouter sa vie,
 Aller à l'immortalité. (...)
 Il aura du plaisir encore
 A voir, dans son humble séjour,
 Peindre la clarté de l'aurore
 Et les premiers feux d'un beau jour.
 Alors, si tu viens à paraître,
 Toi, sa fille, objet de ses vœux,
 Des pleurs coulerons de ses yeux;
 Orgueilleux de t'avoir fait naître,
 Il osera se croire heureux
 Dans l'espoir que tu pourras l'être.¹⁰

But this respectful letter of Dorat does not exhaust entirely his Russian repertory. In contrast to Boissy, who used the Russian themes only to construct a broad picture of a cosmopolitan Europe, Dorat's intellectual love affair with the Muscovy was not an isolated experience, but lasted for many years. The major evidence for this is the tragedy Pierre-le-Grand, staged for the first time in Paris on December 1st, 1779. This play has a long and interesting history. Its original version, entitled Zulica, was written as early as 1760. Zulica was the first dramatic work ever produced by Dorat and was certainly not his greatest achievement. Almost twenty years after the fiasco of the original version, Dorat decided to rewrite the old Zulica entirely, and thus, in 1779, he created a new play, entitled Pierre-le-Grand. The subject of this tragedy is a conspiracy staged against Peter the Great by a fictional Russian prince named Amilka and Alexander Menzicoff, a historical figure, who was Peter's closest assistant from the earliest years of his career. This regicidal plot, although purely fictional and of rather limited interest to us, is used by Dorat mostly to construct a grandiose picture of the Czar and to highly praise his revolutionary reforms. Dorat attempted to demonstrate that the assassination of Peter, father of modern Russia and the first ruler to introduce European

¹⁰ Claude-Joseph Dorat, L'Épître à l'imératrice de Russie in Chef-d'oeuvres de Dorat, vol. 1 (Paris: Chez Belin, 1798) 7-8.

culture to his native land, would be a terrible crime. Menzicoff, aware of Peter's historical importance, is hesitant to kill him. He realizes that the Czar's premature death would be detrimental for the future of Russia. Peter's quasi-divine image is too strong to leave Menzicoff indifferent. His reasons to withdraw from the plot recapitulate all major apologetic lines dedicated to Peter the Great since Fontenelle's famous Éloge:

Jetez un seul instant les yeux sur cet empire:
 Partout de l'empereur la grande âme y respire.
 Dans ces superbes lieux, incultes autrefois,
 Voyez fleurir les mœurs, les vertus et les lois.
 Ne pensant que par lui, c'est par lui que nous sommes:
 Des monstres indomptés le Czar a fait des hommes;
 Sa voix a ranimé le Russe annéanti;
 Des fanges d'un marais Pétersbourg est sorti.
 De ces sommets glacés qui bornent notre vue,
 L'abondance tardive est vers nous descendue.
 Un seul mortel, un seul a produit ces changements;
 Il parle, et sur ses pas naissent les monuments!
 Occupé de son peuple, et s'oubliant lui-même,
 Sans cesse il se dévoue à des sujets qu'il aime;
 Et deux mortels ingrats, altérés de son sang,
 S'arment de ses bienfaits pour lui percer le flanc.¹¹

Various contemporary and historical Russian themes were also used by another eighteenth-century French playwright, Jean-François de La Harpe. La Harpe is the author of the poem entitled Les talents des femmes, in which he discusses the contribution to civilization of several feminine figures and where a very special place is assigned to Catherine the Great. Like Dorat, he highly praises the Russian Empress and treats her with unreserved

¹¹ Claude-Joseph Dorat, Pierre-le-Grand in Chef-d'oeuvres de Dorat, vol. 1 (Paris: Chez Belin) 60.

admiration. La Harpe repeats the old myth of Peter as the creator of modern Russia and of Catherine as the ingenious keeper and magnifier of the Petrine reforms:

Pierre, à sa voix puissante, éveilla la Russie:
Sa gloire est égalée, et, loin d'être obscurcie,
S'accroît de tout l'éclat dont brille auprès de lui
Celle qui sur son trône est assise aujourd'hui,
Qui dans les grands desseins que l'héroïsme inspire,
De son vaste génie anime un vaste empire.¹²

What distinguishes Dorat's Épître à Catherine from La Harpe's poem Les talents des femmes is the latter's more acute sensitivity given to the feminine issues. Catherine the Great, as depicted by Dorat, is a protector of arts and sciences. Although her famous acquisition of Diderot's library is considered by the poet a truly remarkable act, Dorat failed to represent her complex image or analyze with more depth her outstanding character. His Catherine is an abstract embodiment of the new Russia of learning and cosmopolitan culture. She symbolizes allegorically a light of truth, but the poet stops short of any additional elaboration of the subject. In comparison with Dorat's one-dimensional image of the Russian Empress that of La Harpe is truly complex. Indeed, his Catherine is no longer just a protector of philosophers or another stereotypical figure of the Enlightenment. She is a true heroine, a feminist avant la lettre, who by conquering the Turks is taking revenge for women's oppression by the male

¹² Jean-François de La Harpe, Les talents des femmes in Oeuvres de La Harpe, vol. 3 (Paris: Chez Verdière, 1820) 224-225.

Muslim culture. She incarnates all male and female virtues:

Vois ses sujets heureux, par ses lois protégés,
 Le commerce agrandi, les arts encouragés.
 L'aigle des Rovelans plantant sur la Crimée
 Fait redouter son vol dans Byzance alarmée.
 La Baltique jamais n'avait vu sur ses eaux
 Ces nombreux armements, ces superbes vaisseaux.
 Quelques instants encor, une femme, une reine,
 Conduisant sur l'Euxin sa flotte souveraine,
 Ira chercher ces Turcs, tyrans dégénérés,
 Ira, foudre en main, sur ces murs abhorrés,
 Antiques monuments d'un honteux esclavages,
 De son sexe avili venger le long outrage.
 Contemple Catherine, et jusqu'à ses exploits,
 S'il est vrai qu'une femme ait les talents des
 rois. (225)

In 1775 La Harpe wrote his Russian tragedy Menzicoff, ou les exilés, using the same character as Dorat, but placing the emphasis on different issues in his hero's life. In contrast to Pierre-le-Grand, where the young Menzicoff departed from the historical prototype, La Harpe represented more accurately his political demise and exile to Siberia after 1727. Prince Alexander Danilovitch Menzicoff was Peter the Great's principal assistant in creating the new Russia. Although of very modest origins, he befriended the Czar long before his ascent to power and accompanied him during his famous European trip of 1697. In 1699 Menzicoff replaced Lefort as Peter's advisor and thus consolidated his influence even further. In 1702 he became Governor of the Russian Eastern Provinces and in 1707 he was given the title of prince. In 1709, after the victory of Pultava, Menzicoff became marshal. His career, unobstructed by innumerable financial frauds and strong

opposition from the old noble families, hostile to the newly rich, lasted until 1727, when two years after Peter's death it ended in an unexpected demise and exile to Siberia.¹³ From the top of Russian political scene and splendors of his private residence in St. Petersburg, Menzicoff fell into sudden misery and humiliation. It is precisely this moment of his life that La Harpe decided to respresent. Indeed, Menzicoff, ou les exilés is a very interesting study of political disgrace and reversibility of human fortune, but its major originality might be attributed to the fact that it is the first French play focusing on Siberia. The scene of this tragedy is set during arctic winter amidst the ininviting snowy expanses of the Russian East. Everything is extreme in this setting. Severe natural conditions, so exotic for the French reader, only magnify human misery and violence. There is no place for kindness or magnanimity in Siberia. Rather, it is an interminable white desert, where cruel vengeance and darwinian survival of the fittest reign. In Menzicoff, ou les exilés La Harpe shows the relationship between extremities of Siberian climate, a notorious punishment for Russian political outcasts, and extremities of human behavior. The following scenery was certainly a big novelty for a Parisian spectator, whose familiar image of la douce France differed from that of arctic Siberia:

¹³ "Menchicov," Grand Larousse encyclopédique, vol. 7 (Paris, Librairie Larousse, 1963) 249.

Que n'a point inventé l'affreux pouvoir de nuire!
 Des bords inhabités où la nature expire,
 Endurcis de glaçons, de roches hérissés,
 Vainement son courroux nous avait repoussés.
 Ici la tyrannie, en cruautés féconde,
 Attache notre chaîne aux limites du monde;
 Elle arme contre nous la fureur des hivers,
 L'inclémence des cieux, et l'horreur des déserts.¹⁴

Siberia, as depicted by La Harpe, is a symbol of our human condition and misery. It is a place, where men have to learn modesty and abandon their excessive pride or ambition. It is a strange land that shows us how fragile we are and how overwhelming nature is. When observed from the Siberian perspective, all of Menzicoff's historical accomplishments were only vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas. Greatness, glory, splendors of mundane life, hate or love are reduced in Siberia to one common denominator: nothingness. One can only imagine the reaction of the French public to such a revelatory discourse, filled with Siberian local color, extreme, cold and uninviting:

Sans vouloir cependant à vos yeux l'excuser,
 Dans quel lieu, devant qui venez-vous l'accuser?
 Quel temps pour le reproche, hélas! et pour les haines,
 Dans ce séjour affreux des misères humaines,
 Dans ce désert funeste, où la voix des malheurs
 Instruit si bien l'orgueil du néant des grandeurs;
 De tant d'infortunés qu'un même sort accable,
 Celui qui hait le plus est le plus misérable.(326)

Menzicoff, ou les exilés is a very peculiar play, in which the story of Menzicoff's political demise is set in an exotic context of the hostile Siberian deserts. It has

¹⁴ Jean-François de La Harpe, Menzicoff ou les exilés in Oeuvres de La Harpe, vol. 1 (Paris: Chez Verdière, 1820) 326.

a more complex structure than Dorat's Pierre-le-Grand, where the evolution of dramatic events served the purpose of illustrating an old myth of the Czar-creator, developed in Fontenelle's Éloge and in the works of other French writers. In addition to a cleverly constructed plot, based on historical events, La Harpe's tragedy has more local color than that of Dorat. The exoticism of Siberian landscapes and Russian arctic winter were, to our knowledge, never represented in French poetry and drama before. The only exception was Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's earlier treatment of this topic in prose, but we shall give more attention to it later.

Chapter 2

Interest in Russia on the part of eighteenth-century French writers not only manifested itself in the best-selling political accounts, denigrating the oppressiveness of the old Muscovy, as was the case of Locatelli's work, or in the philosophical correspondence published by Argens under the title of Lettres chinoises. Russia was not only depicted in drama, as was shown in our analysis of Dorat and La Harpe, but it was discussed in different poetic genres as well, mainly in the épîtres, written by almost every French poet of the period. Many Russian historical figures became subject of versified lettres, addressed by the authors to contemporary French and foreign statesmen, to other poets or simply to close friends as a sort of intellectual divertissement. These accidental lettres and épîtres often circulated as critical commentaries on other works of poetry and theatre about Russia. In the second half of the eighteenth century Russian themes were also treated by one of the most traditional and the most serious genres of the classical literature, mainly epic poetry.

Most of the French poets of the seventeen sixties and seventies writing about Russia dedicated their talents to Peter the Great and Catherine II. In a vast majority of cases both Russian rulers, particularly Peter, were portrayed in a very positive light. His reforms were discussed in the same laudatory manner as they had been

previously by most of the writers of the early Enlightenment. One of the exemplars of this general tendency to idealize Russia's recent modernization is Delille, who in his Epîtres sur les voyages recapitulated the lines of an old myth about the new beginning of Russia around 1700. Imitating the rhetorical devices and style of the author of the famous Éloge, Delille divided Russian history into two separate entities, the barbaric old Muscovy and its antithesis, the enlightened, more European Russia. The historical turning point was obviously Peter the Great, who symbolized for Delille a movement, an heroic, supra-human energy capable of changing the stagnant life of Russia into a new reality. Delille's image of Peter was another familiar version of the old myth of the Czar-creator, of the divine monarch, whose revolutionary projects surpassed human measure and ordinary human experience. The classical "enfin" of Boileau's "enfin Malherbe vint", previously used by Fontenelle, was no less effective in the case of Delille:

Enfin Pierre paraît! Il voit ce coin du monde
 Dormir enseveli dans une nuit profonde.
 De dix siècles de honte il prétend le venger...
 Tout change. Dans ces lieux embellis à sa voix,
 La nature a souri pour la première fois;
 Il subjugue les champs, les ondes, les rivages,
 Et ses propres sujets, mille fois plus sauvages.
 Je vois creuser des ports, bâtir des arsenaux;
 Les fleuves étonnés sont joints par des canaux;
 Les marais sont couverts de moissons jaunissantes,
 Les déserts sont peuplés de villes florissantes,
 Des talents cultivés la fleur s'épanouit,
 Et des vieilles erreurs l'amas s'évanouit.¹

¹ This particular fragment of Delille's Epître sur les voyages comes from Lortholary's Le mirage russe en France au XVIIIe siècle 72. We also quoted from the same

Delille was certainly not the only French poet to present a superlative image of Peter the Great and to construe an exaggerated picture of the flourishing Russian economy and culture during his reign. We find exactly the same theme of Peter as a maker of the new Russia in a long epic poem in ten songs by Mainvillers, published in Amsterdam in 1762 under the grandiose title La Pétréade ou Pierre le Créateur.

In spite of the greater objectivity found in the literature of the seventeen sixties and seventies as a result of the more intense contacts between France and Russia, the picture of Catherine II did not differ from the idealized image of her predecessor. She was usually represented as a continuator of Russian reforms, a wise ruler, who not only preserved Peter's heritage, but who was able to magnify it and give it even more splendor. When discussing Catherine's ambitious plan to destroy the Turkish military presence in Europe and to rescue the old Constantinople from the Muslim hands, so that it might regain its ancient Christian character, Voltaire did not hesitate to call the Russian Empress Minerva of the North and Sister of Apollo. The Patriarch of Ferney considered Catherine a liberator of Greece, a truly superb monarch whose major goal, a potential milestone of modern history,

source several fragments of other minor French poets, whose works could not be found in American libraries.

was to save the Byzantine Empire, one of the cradles of Western culture, from the devastating influence of Islam:

Fuyez, vizir, bachas, spahis et janissaires:
 Si le nonce du pape, allié du mufti,
 Se damnait en armant vos troupes sanguinaires,
 Catherine a vaincu, le nonce est converti...
 O Minerve du Nord! ô toi, soeur d'Apollon!
 Tu vengeras la Grèce en chassant ces infâmes,
 Ces ennemis des arts et ces geôliers des femmes.
 Je pars, je vais t'attendre aux champs de Marathon...
 Que, sortant des débris qui couvrent sa ruine,
 Athènes ressuscite à ta puissante voix. (166)

Voltaire's image of Catherine the Great as Minerva and the legislator of the North quickly became a cliché. It was perpetuated by many minor French poets to such an extent that Melchior Grimm gave a special name for this incurable obsession with the Russian Empress. He considered it a mild form of mental sickness, called in German NordsMinervenkrankheit. (167) Cerutti, a second-rate poet of the second half of the eighteenth century, was not free from this contagious disease, when in his L'Aigle et le hibou he described Catherine in the following terms:

Minerve de son siècle, elle anime, elle éclaire,
 Elle suit tous les pas que fait l'esprit humain:
 L'édifice des lois fut orné de sa main,
 Sa main a couronné l'ombre de Bélisaire,
 Sa main prépare un temple aux mânes de Voltaire,
 Sa main des Grecs un jour peut changer le destin. (167)

Among many late eighteenth-century French writers who treated Russia marginally and dedicated to it only a limited amount of attention, there is a surprising exception, a poet named Antoine-Léonard Thomas, almost forgotten today, whose unfinished epic poem La Pétréide was one of the most ambitious literary endeavors of the

century to represent the image of Peter the Great. In the broad context of various literary representations of Russia, La Pétréide was indeed an exceptional case. Although this work was not acknowledged by contemporary critics as a masterpiece, which it hardly was, it became a continuous, if not dangerous idée fixe of its author. This lengthy poem was a life-long obsession of Thomas and, although never completed, was regarded by him as his true opus magnum. No other literary figure of the period prior to Thomas ever attempted to write such a voluminous work dedicated exclusively to Russia. Nobody else, with the exception of Thomas, would even dare to dream of producing such a poem and to regard it as a modern version of the ancient Iliad. Yet Antoine-Léonard Thomas was a special, truly exceptional case and nothing seemed impossible to this interesting character.

According to classical esthetics, still very much in vogue during the seventeen sixties and seventies, the epic poem was the most noble and most prestigious of all poetic genres. Indeed, it was still regarded as the highest attainment by most eighteenth-century French writers. Voltaire's Henriade is the best example of the value placed on epic poetry by the enlightened litterati and signals the cultivated public's expectations as to literary hierarchies. So it should be no surprise that in the middle of the classical period an ambitious poet like Thomas treated his La Pétréide with such zeal and spent

most of his life dreaming about its completion. Étienne Micard, a historian and literary critic who in 1924 published Un écrivain académique au XVIIIe siècle, Antoine-Léonard Thomas, the only work dedicated to this poet in our century, notes the following about the author of La Pétréide:

Il se donnait tout entier à la grande entreprise de sa vie qui ne fut jamais achevée: la composition d'un vaste poème épique, qui fut aux temps modernes ce qu'avait été l'Iliade aux temps anciens. Le sujet en était: la Pétréide, c'est-à-dire le geste de Pierre-le-Grand, créateur d'un monde nouveau. (...) Il dut à cette tentative, qui ne nous paraît aujourd'hui que monstrueuse et chimérique, sans doute bien des joies et des illusions, mais aussi des doutes cruels et la souffrance de ne pas réussir à embrasser un sujet dont la grandeur vous échappe.²

Before we begin a more detailed analysis of La Pétréide, a general introduction to Thomas and to his vast literary heritage might be helpful. Fallen into oblivion and unknown to most modern readers, he certainly deserves more attention than any other minor eighteenth-century writer. Thomas was not only the author of La Pétréide; he was also admired during his lifetime for his other literary productions. He wrote several outstanding Éloges; his interests in feminine issues produced a very controversial Essai sur le caractère, les moeurs et l'esprit des femmes dans les siècles différents, often mentioned by contemporaries; his scientific curiosity lead

² Étienne Micard, Un écrivain académique au XVIIIe siècle, Antoine-Léonard Thomas (1732-1785) (Paris: Edouard Champion, 1924) 38-39.

him to publish the Mémoire sur les causes des tremblements de terre, and he left a truly captivating correspondence with a few intimate friends. Thomas was indeed a very prolific and complex writer of the late classical period. Yet his classicism, manifested most completely in La Pétréide, did not exclude other influences and esthetic fascinations, which slowly began to penetrate eighteenth-century French poetry. The diverse literary tastes of Thomas, his exposure to a variety of human experiences, and very unusual traits of his personality place him in the avant-garde of French letters. Along with Rousseau and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Thomas can be regarded as one of the first eighteenth-century writers to cross the threshold of Romanticism.³

³ To illustrate this preromantic state of mind of Thomas one should consider the following fragment of his letter addressed to Ducis. We can find in it all major themes developed later by the romantics: freedom of soul, solitude, nocturnal promenades, need for tranquillity and recollection and idealization of intimate friendship:

Il nous faut la liberté de l'âme et la belle indépendance de la solitude; c'est là que nous nous retrouvons nous-mêmes, et que nous sommes quelque chose; c'est là que le génie se fait entendre s'il daigne quelquefois nous visiter. Les inspirations heureuses sont dans les profondeurs de l'âme, et dans le calme du silence, nous retrouverons, je l'espère, nos promenades, nos arbres pittoresques, nos bois déserts, nos soleils couchants, et ces scènes magnifiques de la nuit qui étend sur l'univers ses grandes ombres et dont la tranquillité auguste inspire une sorte de respect religieux. (Micard, 43-44)

This letter, as well as other letters written by or sent to Thomas are quoted from Micard's Un écrivain académique au XVIIIe siècle, Antoine-Léonard Thomas (1732-1785).

Thomas was preoccupied with a constant need for self-analysis. He attached great importance to human individuality and genius, so admired in many outstanding historical figures. This obsession with great heroes of the past can be easily found in most of the Éloges and particularly in La Pétréide. In chapter X of the Éloge au temps du Cicéron Thomas regretted the old times of Roman antiquity, during which a man of truly remarkable qualities would not hesitate to take pride in his personal merit and the exceptional value of his deeds. Thomas had a nostalgia for those distant centuries when people were not inhibited by the Christian notion of modesty and cultivated unreservedly their talents. This admiration for glory and human grandeur might seem very unusual when compared with the poet's misanthropy and his rather uneventful life of a solitary thinker and lover of nature and nocturnal promenades. Yet the strong passion for individuality and heroism was one of the major components of Thomas's personality. Is it then surprising that the fictional representation of Peter the Great should become the most ambitious project of his literary career? The Russian Czar was considered by many people a contemporary version of an ancient hero. The glorious memory of Peter, the creator of the new Russia, was still vivid in Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century and became an obsession with Thomas. Thus La Pétréide, regardless of its classical form and inner structure, is to a large extent

the product of the poet's pre-romantic dreams of power and idolatry of genius and his preoccupation with human grandeur and individuality. The image of Peter the Great, presented by Thomas, can be compared with the romantic image of Napoleon developed by Stendhal. Unable to impress people with his own ordinary deeds, Thomas attempted to compensate his repressed romantic dreams of greatness and glory with the composition of La Pétréide.

Thomas was interested in Russia and particularly in the person of Peter the Great very early in his literary career. In 1759 he awaited with extreme enthusiasm the publication of the first volume of Voltaire's Histoire du Czar Pierre Ier and recommended it to many friends and acquaintances. In 1761 he received an offer from Breteuil, the new French envoy to Russia, to become his secretary and to join him in St. Petersburg. Although the poet declined this tempting proposition on account of health problems and the inclement Russian climate, his fascination with Russia did not diminish. In a letter to his best friend Barthe, dated January 31, 1760, Thomas wrote the following regarding Breteuil's offer and his wish to travel to Russia. He wanted to learn more about the land of Peter the Great, the hero of La Pétréide, the composition of which was already in process at that time:

Je vous écris de Paris, et peu s'en est fallu que je ne vous aie écrit de Pétersbourg: oui, de cette même ville dont je chante la fondation. (...) Le baron de Breteuil, qui est envoyé ministre plénipotentiaire à la cour de Russie, est venu chez moi m'offrir la place de son premier secrétaire. J'ai balancé longtemps, le désir naturel de voir des choses nouvelles, l'idée de

parcourir la moitié de l'Europe, de connaître un monde différent du nôtre, de voir le tombeau du czar Pierre et de recueillir autour de ses cendres quelques étincelles de son génie, (...) mais une santé faible et chancelante, un tempérament épuisé m'ont étourné de faire un voyage de deux cents lieues. (Micard, 97)

To proceed with the composition of La Pétréide Thomas needed support from the outside, financial to a certain extent, but also intellectual, which included documents from the Russian archives, letters, commentaries on Peter's life and various anecdotes portraying the Russian ruler in a less official manner. For specific documentation he addressed himself to Count Schouvalov, who, fascinated by Thomas's unique task, sent him on September 23, 1761, a portrait of the Czar with the following encouraging compliments:

Recevez-le comme une marque de mon estime pour vos talents, de ma reconnaissance pour l'objet auquel vous les employez à présent en célébrant ce grand homme. Vous rendez justice à la vérité, et vous obligez des peuples qui lui doivent ces lumières. La France vient de vous voir peindre les vertus de Sully, le génie de Descartes, les exploits du maréchal de Saxe. Pierre le Grand a réuni ces rares qualités, il vous offre un champ vaste pour faire de nouveau briller cette mâle éloquence qui vous attire l'admiration universelle. (97)

The admiration mentioned by Schouvalov was not, however, universal in France. The general tendency found in French epic poetry of the period was to glorify the national past and national historical heroes rather than foreign ones. This is illustrated by Voltaire's Henriade and even by an earlier epic poem written by Thomas himself, entitled Jumonville. Foreign subjects, especially such an exotic one as Peter the Great, were considered in

France an exception to the rule and accepted with caution. Thomas's situation was indeed very specific. One of the most valuable pieces of encouragement received by him was a cordial letter from Voltaire, who not only sent his article from the Encyclopédie regarding the Epopée, but also congratulated his friend on his choice of this exotic Russian theme and reiterated his opinion about the epic greatness of the Czar. The rhetoric of this letter might strike the modern reader as somewhat inflated; yet it indicates a genuine interest on Voltaire's part in Thomas's ambitious opus magnum:

Je vous aime, Monsieur, de tout mon coeur, non seulement parce que vous faites de très beaux vers, mais parce que vous soutenez la liberté des lettres. (...) Vous avez très bien fait de choisir un héros arrivé de la mer glaciale. Nous n'en avons guère sur les bateaux de la Seine et de la Loire. Il est vrai, que votre héros avait deux natures, il était moitié loup-cervier et moitié homme, mais c'est l'homme que vous chantez. (...) Soyez sûr, Monsieur, que personne ne rend plus de justice que moi à votre génie et à vos sentiments, et que j'aime votre façon de penser autant que je hais la bassesse et la charlatanerie⁴

In spite of Voltaire's initial encouragement the author of La Pétrelle had more detractors than admirers in France. One of his major opponents was Grimm. His criticism of Thomas's poem focused mainly on the fact that the author's image of the Muscovy was very vague and that most of his attention was given to the voyages of the Czar to the West. Grimm's preference was for a more detailed

⁴ Voltaire, Correspondance, ed. Theodore Besterman, vol. 10 (Paris: Gallimard, 1986) 749-750.

picture of Russia and he recommended a stronger emphasis on local color in its representation. According to Grimm, La Pétréide was a curious and rather mediocre poem. Grimm, who familiarized himself with and then discussed only one chant of La Pétréide, deplored the fact that Thomas depicted Western Europe instead of concentrating on the exotic image of fairly unknown Muscovy. A focus on France during the last years of the reign of Louis XIV was surely not needed. Every educated person knew enough about the French national tradition, Grimm exclaimed, and thus additional information did not belong in the poem. His critical evaluation (February 1, 1767), which followed a reading of La Pétréide's fourth chant during a plenary meeting of the Académie Française in January of 1767, was shared by many other French literary critics and writers of the period:

Dans le chant que M. Thomas a lu, Pierre ne joue que le second rôle. Il écoute ou quand il parle, il ne dit que des lieux communs qui n'ont rien de ce caractère énergique et sauvage que le poète ne pouvait conserver trop précieusement au réformateur de la Russie. Ce chant ne renferme qu'une esquisse assez languissante du siècle de Louis XIV. (...) Ce chant que les censeurs rigides ont appelé une gazette rimée, était donc le plus facile et le moins intéressant pour nous qui savons le siècle de Louis XIV par coeur. C'est le siècle de Russie qu'il fallait montrer: c'est là que le poète peut cueillir des lauriers: tout y est neuf, rien n'a encore occupé le pinceau de rivaux.⁵

⁵ Melchior Grimm, Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique, ed. Tourneux, vol. 7 (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1877-1882) 218-219.

The ambitious project of Thomas was also criticized by Marmontel. The French writer found La Pétréide to be a curious work encompassing too vast a subject, requiring far too many details impeding the classical unity of action. Marmontel claimed that Thomas's plan to include in his work the story of St. Petersburg's foundation, the introduction of arts and sciences into Russia, Peter's voyages abroad and his military victories was too complex an endeavor and that such an intricate blend of events was detrimental to the poem's structure. He also criticized Thomas's use of too broad a canvas, which was the major reason for the innumerable difficulties he had with writing La Pétréide and his inability to finish it:

(...) les voyages du Czar, sa guerre contre Charles XII, la discipline militaire établie dans ses armées, les arts et les sciences transplantés dans son empire, la ville de Pétersbourg fondée au bord de la Baltique: et ce sont là les matériaux d'un poème historique, d'un éloge oratoire; mais je n'y vois point le sujet unique d'un poème épique. (...) Ce magnifique vestibule renfermait de grandes beautés, il (Thomas) espéra trouver les moyens d'achever l'édifice, il reconnut enfin qu'il tentait l'impossible, et au bout de neuf ans, il me témoigna le regret de n'avoir pas suivi le conseil que je lui avais donné d'abandonner son entreprise.⁶

La Pétréide, although known and commented upon during the poet's life, was published after his death in 1802.⁷ At that time, the body of the text consisted only of six

⁶ Jean-François de Marmontel, Mémoires in Oeuvres complètes, vol. 2 (Paris: Verdière, 1819) 178.

⁷ Étienne Micard, Un écrivain académique au XVIIIe siècle, Antoine-Léonard Thomas (1732-1785) 104.

finished chants as well as fragments and variations of additional chants, which Thomas was unable to complete. All of them represent in a highly conventional manner the history of the Czar's educational voyages to Western Europe and depict Peter's reactions to different phenomena he observed. There is hardly any action or succession of events of heroic nature, a sine qua non of an epic poem, in the six existing chants of La Pétréide. Thomas's Peter the Great is not a warrior-like hero; he is rather a tacit observer, who travels abroad to countries more advanced than Russia and witnesses various artifacts formerly unknown to him. He does not act; he reacts. He observes; he reflects upon new experiences; he admires the cities through which he passes in a never ending voyage; he is astonished by the technological devices to which he is introduced by his mentors; he appreciates the works of arts and sometimes he asks questions. He is certainly portrayed as a hero, but of a particular nature, a culturally open and receptive hero in statu nascendi, whose complex character is to be developed in the future by his thorough education in Europe. Among these six existing chants, the first concerns the Czar's stay in Holland, the second deals with England, the following three chants are dedicated to France, and the last completed one, to the mines, which the Russian ruler visited during his voyage in Germany.

Each of these chants serves a specific purpose and portrays a particular aspect of the Czar's European education. Holland, for example, is a place where the Russian ruler learns about commerce. He is exposed to the complexities of Dutch bourgeois society and to its flourishing economic life, resulting from the free exchange of goods imported and exported by busy merchants from various regions of Europe. Holland is a country, which Peter admires for the achievements of hard human labor and industry. The opening lines of this chant show a picture of Amsterdam as a vibrant commercial center of the world. They portray the Dutch maritime capital as an opulent city, a crossroad of civilization. Amsterdam is an obvious symbol of the new Russian capital, yet to be founded by the Czar, the city of St. Petersburg. Like Amsterdam, it is also located on the sea:

Sur les bords de l'Amstel s'élève une cité,
Le temple du commerce et de la liberté,
Où d'un peuple opulent l'économie austère,
De l'or du monde entier semble dépositaire;
Pour d'utiles travaux dédaigne les grandeurs,
Et parmi les trésors a conservé des mœurs.
Pierre y porte ses pas; partout sur son passage,
De l'heureuse abondance il aperçoit l'image.⁸

Lefort, Peter's guide, shows him both the city of Amsterdam and the countryside of Holland. He elaborates on the industriousness and hard labor of the Dutch. The entire chant is thus a glorification of human power and

⁸ Antoine-Léonard Thomas, Le Czar Pierre Ier in Oeuvres complètes, vol. 5 (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1822) 57.

intelligence. Thomas uses again the image of Amsterdam, as well as that of other Dutch cities, shown in the background of a man-made landscape composed of a tiny network of islands and fields, as a model for the future creation of St. Petersburg. Holland, an impossible spectacle, an almost dream-like country of industry and perseverance, makes a highly dramatic impression on Peter. The Russian Czar cannot believe his own eyes. He questions the validity of the reality he is witnessing; he seems to be incredulous, but there is no doubt that he will attempt to emulate what he has seen here:

Quelle est, dit le héros, en contemplant ces lieux,
 Quelle est cette nature étrangère à mes yeux?
 Ces champs entrecoupés par des fleuves dociles,
 Et ces fleuves errant dans l'enceinte des villes,
 Ce mélange inconnu de la terre et des eaux,
 A l'humide élément creusant des lits nouveaux?
 Ici, l'homme à ses lois a-t-il asservi l'onde?
 Ou dans ses plans divers la nature féconde,
 De l'art industrieux prevenant tous les soins,
 Fit-elle un nouveau sol pour de nouveaux besoins?(58)

The stay in Holland gave Peter a possibility to reflect on the depressed state of his own empire. Russia, economically neglected for centuries and saddled by previous generations with an antiquated socio-political structure, certainly had to learn a great deal from the West. Peter's admiration for Holland and its flourishing industrial culture gave an impetus to his perennial dream of modernizing Russia and introducing new ideas there. The concept of culture transforming nature, the notion of hard human labor subjugating the natural forces of destruction is a leitmotiv of Peter's trip to Holland. In his mind

there exist two distinct Russias, the one of the future, perhaps analogous to what he has seen in Holland, and the real one, the malheureux Empire of his inept predecessors. This following eulogy of the Dutch nation is actually Peter's vision of the new Russians:

Trop heureux Hollandais, s'écria le héros,
 Les éléments vaincus cèdent à tes travaux.
 Tes mains ont façonné ton informe héritage,
 T'ont fait une patrie; et les lieux où l'orage
 Roulait le noir limon et les flots écumants,
 De tes nobles cités portent les fondements.
 Ici l'homme a créé jusqu'à l'air qu'il respire.
 Il dit, et médita sur son sauvage empire. (59)

England, the Western European country where the hero of La Pétréide travels next and which serves as a subject of the second chant, is also represented as an industrious society involved, just like the Dutch, in world commerce and manufacturing. England observed through Peter's eyes is a place where learning and sophisticated technology, so lacking in Russia, have produced wealth greater than anywhere else. Yet England of La Pétréide is a country possessing something infinitely more precious to all human beings than opulence and economic power, something that was only briefly mentioned in Holland, but that in the British Isles had assumed its fullest form and found its more complete expression, namely liberty. Freedom, in every possible meaning of the word, is thus the major issue that will be discussed in England and presented as the core of the distinctiveness of the country. The second chant opens with lines dedicated to liberty:

Lorsque à la voix d'un Dieu l'univers se forma,
 Sous le feu créateur quand l'homme s'anima,

Et du globe naissant, monarque solitaire,
 S'échappa du limon pour régner sur la terre,
 Ce Dieu, jetant sur l'homme un regard de bonté,
 Auprès de son berceau plaça la Liberté.(90)

England depicted by Thomas is a place where Freedom resides. It is a country of sound legal system. Centuries of religious wars, so devastating to the British Isles, are finally over and now Albion can enjoy its biggest prosperity ever. But prosperity and welfare always depend on liberty and laws. Without laws no progress is possible. Only they can guarantee peace and tranquility so necessary for the economic growth. England is for Peter a lesson in law-making. Its constitutional monarchy, the envy of the entire continent, is the epitome of the European spirit of democracy. Although the hero of La Pétréide observes England with the purpose of emulation and to implement analogous laws in the Muscovy, the poem's message applies not only to Russia. It reflects the contemporary situation in France as well, for France had also a lot to learn from England in the domain of civil and political liberties:

Mais, de tous les pays qu'habita la déesse, (...)
 Celui qu'elle préfère est l'heureuse Angleterre.
 Là, son règne affermi par deux cents ans de guerre,
 Du sein de la discorde a fait sortir ces lois
 Protectrices du peuple et maîtresses des rois.
 C'est là qu'avec respect l'Europe la contemple.
 Là, l'Anglais, de sa main, lui construisit un temple
 Où la reconnaissance, entourant ses autels,
 Vient offrir pour encens le bonheur des mortels.(93)

Peter's stay in England is very problematic. The Russian Czar, who presides over a vast empire, traditionally regarded by most Western Europeans as a place of cruelty and Asiatic tyranny, comes to the Albion

as a rather undesirable intruder and unwelcomed guest. The spirit of despotism, instilled in Peter by his heritage, clashes with the British love of freedom and civil rights. The personified Liberty, Peter's guide in England, is reluctant to entertain such a guest, whose person embodies the most repressive political system in Europe. However, seduced by his genius and talents, Liberty agrees to be his companion. She understands that laws are relative, and what is suitable for England, will not necessarily work everywhere else. She recognizes that in some countries, due to particular geographic conditions and local tradition, a moderate form of despotism might be the best model to follow. What Thomas clearly proposes for Russia is a system of enlightened absolutism, often discussed by many eighteenth-century political theoreticians. It is certainly more civilized than the Asiatic despotism practiced in Russia:

Je suis la Liberté; je règne dans ces lieux,
 Et l'aspect d'un despote a dû blesser mes yeux.
 Mais je vois que le ciel préside à ton génie.
 Monarque et tout-puissant, tu hais la tyrannie.
 Je vois le despotisme en tes heureuses mains,
 Étonné de servir au bonheur des humains,
 Soi-même se bornant par d'utiles entraves,
 A la dignité d'homme appeler tes esclaves.
 Ce sont là tes projets, je dois les seconder. (95)

Thomas suggests that the emergence and growth of the English experimental sciences, so admired by the hero of La Pétréide, is also a result of economic freedom. His fictional Peter the Great, the tacit observer and an attentive student, did not overlook this link. Thus not

only England's socio-political institutions will be the major object of the Czar's scrutiny, but also the life and works of its famous scientists. When discussing Peter's insatiable desire to learn from Western sources, Thomas compares it with the curiosity of English philosophers. The Russian monarch, just like Newton or other scientists of the period, wishes to penetrate all the mysteries of the universe. He wants to know, to observe and to learn everything. Peter's thirst for empirical knowledge, manifested during his memorable visit to England, will surely result in the future establishment of scientific academies and universities, which did not exist in Russia before:

Dans Londres pendant sa vigilance active
Portait de toute part une vue attentive.
Pour éclairer son peuple, avide de savoir,
Il veut tout observer, tout connaître, tout voir.
Des mystères cachés perçant la nuit obscure,
Il ose approfondir les lois de la nature.
Son génie inquiet ne peut être borné. (123)

In La Pétréide Thomas presented Holland as an example of how men's hard labor can subjugate nature and how human perseverance can change the entire landscape of the country. Holland, the cradle of maritime commerce, and particularly Amsterdam, are models for the Czar's future creation of St. Petersburg. England, on the other hand, is a lesson in civil liberties, in laws, and in experimental sciences, which can flourish only if socio-political freedoms are guaranteed. Peter, the tacit observer, will never forget this connection. He departs from England not

only with deeper knowledge of human rights, but also with knowledge of the laws of nature, as well as laws governing the entire universe:

Il part en admirant ce peuple roi des mers,
Vainqueur des préjugés, tyran de l'univers;
Qui, dans l'art de penser, indépendant et libre,
Des états et du monde a trouvé l'équilibre,
Et sut également, à d'immuables lois,
Assujettir les cieux, la nature et ses rois. (128)

The next, and perhaps the most important element of Peter's trip, is France, to which Thomas dedicated not only one, but three consecutive chants. With all the imperfections of her political system France completes the glorious picture of Europe and is portrayed by the patriotic Thomas as a jewel in the crown. Holland was the symbol of human labor, England of constitutional freedom and scientific progress, but France is the true embodiment of the arts, of the highest cultural and intellectual refinement, as well as the exemplar of a gracious lifestyle. However, the France represented by Thomas in La Pétréide is not contemporary France. It is rather the country of Racine, Bossuet, Fénelon and many other outstanding figures who lived during the reign of Louis XIV. In the three chants depicting Peter's stay in France Thomas subverts the chronology and sends his hero to Paris not during the Regency, as was the case in real life, but long before the death of Louis XIV. This anachronism enables the poet to present with a slightly nostalgic touch the glory of the old France and to portray the incomparable magnificence of the court of the Sun King.

Thomas, like his intellectual master Voltaire, considered Louis XIV the greatest monarch of France. The author of La Pétréide, although born in 1732, obviously considered the siècle de Louis XIV as his own imaginary paradise:

Enfin, je te salue, ô ma patrie! ô France!
 Climat chéri du ciel, berceau de mon enfance,
 Où des arts enchanteurs je puisais les leçons,
 Où ma tremblante voix forma ses premiers sons,
 Où, d'une ardeur naissante éprouvant le délire,
 Jeune encore, j'essayai les accords de ma lyre! (...)
 O siècle de Louis, des arts et des héros,
 Tu ranimes ma voix, et mon âme attendrie
 Se réveille un moment pour chanter ma patrie. (129-31)

The initiation to French arts and admiration for French material and intellectual culture evoke in Peter sad images of backwardness of his native land. However, in almost every scene of La Pétréide, where the cultural distance separating Russia from the rest of Europe is mentioned, Thomas's final verdict is optimistic. When Peter visits Versailles, for example, the author found it necessary to emphasize that not long ago this magnificent residence was just a deserted, sterile valley with no traces of its future splendors. The analogy between Versailles's modest past and its glorious present and the state of Russia before and after Peter the Great is evident. Thomas is a partisan of the personality cult. As a true disciple of Voltaire, he strongly believes that talented human beings, particularly monarchs, can change the course of history and that no challenge frightens them or proves impossible to be surmounted. Such was the case of Louis XIV, who out of a depressed France left by his

predecessors, a France torn between political factions so disastrous for the image of the state, was able to create a truly powerful Bourbon empire, at least for few decades. Such will also be the case of Peter, whose ambition was to transform the barbaric Muscovy of the previous centuries and to make it one of the most influential nations in Europe. The recent creation of Versailles, the new capital of Louis XIV's highly centralized universe, is not only a French exercise in power, for it also symbolizes the glorious image of the nascent Russia. Versailles's coming to existence ex nihilo proves that in history nothing is impossible. The newly constructed residence of the Sun King is a premonition of a new Russia, which is just about to emerge as soon as Peter's educational voyage to Western Europe is over. The massive foundations of the château of Versailles will become, on a symbolic level, the foundations of the imperial palaces of future St. Petersburg:

Dans Versaile déjà le Czar est parvenu.
De ce fameux Louis, Versaile était l'ouvrage,
Jadis vallon désert, lieu stérile et sauvage.
Là, le vainqueur des rois, vainqueur des éléments,
D'un immense palais posa les fondements;
Et tous les arts en foule, orgueilleux de lui plaire,
Vinrent y déposer leur pompe tributaire. (138-39)

In spite of his admiration for the siècle de Louis XIV and the magnificence of this period of French history, Thomas is very critical about his own country. Paris, where all the luxury and opulence of France had been concentrated during the reign of the Sun King, is regarded

by the poet as a parasite, as an enormous, unnatural growth, which destroys the French provinces like a cancer. Peter the Great, who shortly after his departure from England admires the incomparable beauty of the French countryside, perceives the capital with mixed feelings. However, his initial perplexity is overcome by the illusion of grandeur and imperial power of France under Louis XIV. Perhaps the poet's negative attitude toward Paris, found in this passage, originated in his complexes. Thomas's potent accusation of the capital betrays his repressed inner voice, that of a little man from Auvergne sympathizing wholeheartedly with the provinces ruined and depopulated by Paris:

Il aperçoit, de loin, cette vaste cité,
Dont le contour embrasse un horizon immense,
Colosse de grandeur élevé sur la France,
Que le luxe a formé, que le luxe nourrit
De l'or amoncelé dont l'État s'appauvrit;
Qui, nuisant aux sujets, enorgueillit les princes,
De la sève de l'or affame cent provinces;
Mais dont le noble aspect, l'éclat éblouissant
Offre la majesté d'un empire puissant. (137-38)

Education was the major reason for Peter's journey to France, just as it had been previously in Holland and England. The Czar came to observe and learn. His stay was certainly an unforgettable experience in French luxury, unsurpassed by that of any other nation, in sophisticated arts, aristocratic manners and politeness of the court. But perhaps more important than this cultural side of Peter's French initiation was his direct, although fictional, contact with the Sun King. The Russian Czar, as

imagined by Thomas, is an emulator of Louis XIV. He desires to imitate his style and his royal grandeur. He wants to become a monarch friendly to arts and culture, but also, as was the case of his model, a king of war, whose sponsorship of literature, music, paintings and drama must be complimented by military victories. Louis XIV will thus inspire Peter not only as the creator of Versailles and its incomparable splendors, but also as the conqueror of Europe. Peter's stay in France is above all a priceless lesson in enlightened absolutism. The autocratic rule of Louis XIV attracts him to France more than anything else. It is precisely this aspect of the grand siècle that the Czar shall attempt to imitate in Russia. The French, not English or Dutch socio-political model will be transplanted to the Muscovy. It should surprise that Thomas took a significant liberty and, contrary to historical facts, sent Peter to France not in 1717, during the Regency, but rather at the end of the seventeenth century, when Louis XIV was still alive and powerful. The guidance of the Sun King offered to the Russian Czar and his advice on enlightened absolutism is the pinnacle of the entire poem, so it was necessary for these two extraordinary individuals to have met in person. Otherwise Peter's educational trip to Western Europe would have been meaningless and incomplete. The fictional encounter of two monarchs was a condition sine qua non for the poem's ultimate message. It is Louis XIV, whose memory and ideas

will transform Russia more than the other contacts of the travelling Czar. All European experiences of Peter the Great prior to his visit to Versailles were only a preparation for the main educational event: his direct meeting with the Sun King and an unforgettable lesson in enlightened absolutism:

Dans Versailles, enfin, je viens chercher un roi.
 Ton nom, dans mes déserts, retentit jusqu'à moi.
 Ton nom m'importunait, j'ai voulu te connaître.
 Peins-moi ces jours brillants que ton astre a fait naître;
 De ton règne fameux retrace-moi le cours.
 Pour remplir mes projets, tu me dois tes secours;
 J'ai droit à tes leçons. Tu fus grand; je veux l'être.
 Instruit par soixante ans, sois mon guide et mon maître.
 Apprends-moi par quel art tu sus vaincre et régner.
 L'art de vaincre n'est rien sans l'art de gouverner. (159)

La Pétréide, the unfinished poem of Thomas, is an homage to Peter the Great, but at the same time it is also an outstanding testimony to the past glory of France. Thomas's fascination with the Sun King and the Russian Czar, as well as his patriotism and romantic worship of great individuals, produced an interesting blend of fiction and reality, where imaginary encounters of historical giants, placed in a concrete cultural context, predict future events and set the pace for an ambitious plan of institutional reforms in the Muscovy. La Pétréide, an astounding Russian fantasy construed by Thomas to compensate for his dreams of a triumphant France under Louis XIV, a paradise lost during the reign of his inept followers, was written by a very and sensitive poet, whose

literary heritage, almost forgotten today, still awaits rediscovery and deserves far more attention than it has been given.

Part III

Russia and French Eye-Witnesses

Chapter 1

In the seventeen fifties and sixties the contacts between France and Russia became more frequent and direct than ever before. In the first half of the century, when the Muscovy was still considered an exotic and dangerous place to which to travel, very few Frenchmen and other European writers ventured there. But with the passage of time and the successful implementation of reforms, Russia became, in the eyes of the West, a more civilized state. Its elite, now just as sophisticated and cosmopolitan as that of any other country, was integrated completely into the mainstream of the European life and was regarded by the French as a valuable partner of the cultural dialogue. In the second half of the eighteenth century Russian upper classes were almost as French in spirit as native Parisians. French language and manners became prevalent and replaced previous German influences, spearheaded by the entourage of Peter the Great and his immediate followers. The assimilation of French culture in Russia was accelerated by a massive wave of French travellers, numerous maitres de français, merchants, traders, or simple aventuriers who settled down in St. Petersburg and Moscow during that time and attempted to make their fortune in the promising East. More intense French influence in Russia of the late fifties, sixties and

seventies was also prompted by much closer diplomatic contacts and political alliances between both countries, which in the past had been very limited.

This large influx of French emissaries brought forth an unprecedented propagation of both sophisticated and popular French culture in Russia. The new French pioneers, undeterred by the inclement Russian climate and political instability, familiarized their hosts with the Western way of thinking and the pleasures of gracious living. However, the French travellers who went to Russia were not always of the highest quality. Many of them, as has been pointed out by Louis Alexandre Frotier de la Messelière in his Voyage à Pétersbourg, a book describing Eastern Europe in the late seventeen fifties, were simple outlaws and refugees escaping French justice:

Nous fûmes assaillis par une nuée de Français de toutes couleurs, dont la plupart, après avoir eu des démêlés avec la police de Paris, sont venus infester les régions septentrionales. Nous fûmes étonnés et affligés de trouver chez beaucoup de grands seigneurs des déserteurs, des banqueroutiers, des libertins et beaucoup de femmes du même genre, qui, par la prévention que l'on a en faveur des Français, étaient chargés de l'éducation des enfants de la plus grande importance; il faut que cette écume de notre patrie se soit étendue, dit-on, jusqu'à la Chine, j'en ai trouvé partout.¹

With every passing decade Franco-Russian contacts, regardless of the quality of French travellers and their intentions, were expanding. Russia in the second half of the eighteenth century was regarded by the French as a

¹ Louis Alexandre Frotier de la Messelière, Voyage à Pétersbourg (Poitiers: A. Dupré, 1857) 139.

much more inviting place to visit than in the past. The ominous warnings of Locatelli were no longer given serious attention, as had been the case a generation before. The civilized ambiance of St. Petersburg, generally more sophisticated manners, newly established artistic circles and literary salons, imitating those of Paris, seemed very attractive in spite of their somewhat provincial character. Indeed, the new wave of Western European visitors experienced Russia differently than their predecessors. This trend is reflected in literary testimonials. Accounts of French authors, written in the seventeen sixties and seventies, indicate that their attitude toward Russia was far more relaxed than that found in Locatelli's devastating Lettres Moscovites, or in the early best-selling works of Argens. In this part of our dissertation, we are going to consider the literary image of Russia construed by various Frenchmen who travelled to the East in the second half of the century and witnessed native life, experienced the vicissitudes of inclement climate and contemplated the melancholy of the vast expanses of Russia. We shall discuss the evolution in their perception of the Muscovy and its inhabitants, which underwent significant changes as the century drew to a close, particularly in the case of the Comte de Ségur, French diplomat and close friend of Catherine the Great.

One of the first Frenchmen to see this new and more civilized Russia was Jacques-Henri-Bernardin de Saint-

Pierre, a very well known French writer, author of Paul et Virginie, whose direct contacts with Russia are perhaps less familiar to the modern reader than his other works. Yet this adventurous traveller, whose voyages to different parts of the world, writings on fauna and flora of exotic islands and interests in non-European cultures make him a true disciple of the philosophes, was the initiator of one of the most curious exploratory missions to Russia ever planned in the eighteenth-century. Although Saint-Pierre's project failed to produce any tangible effects and his plan to improve the Russian economy never materialized, his trip to the Muscovy remains nonetheless a testimonial to his great vision and optimism about the future not only of Russia, but of civilization as a whole. In spite of many pre-romantic elements of his later works, in his Russian experience Bernardin de Saint-Pierre proved to be a creature of Enlightenment.

In 1762, at the age of 25, the young and adventurous Saint-Pierre was considering the foundation of a new society, another Pennsylvania, modeled on the political and economic system of this American colony. The future author of Paul et Virginie had several possible locations in mind, but after experiencing disappointments in Holland, Germany and Malta, his eyes turned toward Russia. It was precisely there, in the southern part of that country, on the shores of the Aral Sea, that he planned to create a new utopian republic. It is for this purpose that

he decided to visit St. Petersburg and negotiate the execution of his ideas directly with Catherine II, the new Russian ruler.²

This ambitious project was never implemented, since Saint-Pierre failed to convince the Empress to offer him sufficient financial and military support. Catherine's lack of response can be ascribed to the chimerical nature of Saint Pierre's vision. His idea was to create a new European republic, situated somewhere between Russia and India, with an autonomous and semi-democratic government. Its main purpose, in addition to forcible settlement of the restless and unproductive aventuriers endangering Europe's stability, was to enhance trade and commerce between Russia and Asia. Saint-Pierre thought that the Russians would be very interested in his proposal, for the new colony would enable them to control more effectively the trade with India and thus to gain enormous profits. It

² Oscar Kuhns, Professor at Wesleyan University, writes in his introduction to Paul et Virginie, (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1931) VII., the following about Saint-Pierre's unusual plan:

The most remarkable (as well as the most romantic) of all the episodes of St. Pierre's life is undoubtedly his journey to Russia, whither he went in order to obtain the aid and approval of Catherine II for his chimerical plan of establishing an ideal republic on the shores of the Aral Sea. When he arrived in St. Petersburg he was almost penniless, but by means of the friends, whom he always seemed to succeed in making, he was admitted to the presence of the Empress, and fortune seemed to smile upon him at last. Once again he was doomed to disappointment. His plans were treated with cold neglect, and disgusted with life at court, he left Russia for Poland.

would also help to reestablish the old commercial routes running across continental Eurasia, the importance of which was diminished by the development of maritime transport in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Yet Saint-Pierre's idea never materialized. Its total failure had several reasons. One of them was undoubtedly the abstract nature of this plan. Another was the political system proposed for the new republic, which was considered far too democratic. Saint-Pierre did not understand that it was impossible for the Empress to tolerate such a revolutionary entity within the borders of her empire. Russia was not mature enough for the most recent libertarian currents. The democratic system of this new commercial colony, described by L. Aimé-Martin in the Essai sur la vie et les ouvrages de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, was certainly unacceptable to Catherine, as well as the members of Russian ruling circles. Although more civilized and reform-oriented than in previous centuries, the Muscovite government had a rather different concept of how to treat Russia's socio-political outcasts. The Czars preferred to send their opponents to more severe climatic zones than to the mild eastern shores of the Caspian Sea. Nor did it seem desirable for them to see a crowd of uncontrollable European aventuriers settling down in the distant, yet strategically very important provinces of the Russian South. The experimentation with democracy, even if limited to a small part of the national territory, was

regarded as a serious threat to the political system of the entire country. Is it surprising that Catherine, an enlightened monarch in certain aspects, yet a true despot, reacted cautiously to the enchanting entreaties of Saint-Pierre? We can imagine her negative attitude toward the following precepts:

(...) Cette république sera ouverte aux malheureux de toutes les nations; il suffira d'être pauvre ou persécuté pour y trouver un asile. (...) La bonne foi, la liberté, la justice, seront, avec la loi, les seules puissances régnautes. Enfin le code de cette nouvelle Atlantide s'exprimera en termes clairs et précis. Comme celui de Guillaume Penn, il dira à tous ceux qui gémissent sur la terre: Venez dans votre fertile contrée; celui qui y plantera un arbre en recueillera le fruit. (...) tels étaient les nobles projets dont le jeune voyageur venait, avec la foi la plus vive, faire l'hommage à la grande Catherine; et c'est riche de ces brillantes illusions, qu'il était arrivé aux portes de Moscou ayant dépensé son dernier écu.³

We can also picture the astonishment, if not true bewilderment of the Russian Empress when, after reading the flattering remarks addressed to her in the initial paragraphs of Saint Pierre's petition, she was confronted with more specific details regarding the political system of the new republic. Saint-Pierre's vision of a perfect colony would certainly have been a serious cause of irritation to Louis XV, let alone to the ruler of the repressive Muscovy. Recognition of an entirely free republic within the borders of Russia, with democratically

³ L. Aimé-Martin, "Essai sur la vie et les ouvrages de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre," Oeuvres complètes de Jacques-Henri-Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, vol. 1 (Paris: Méquignon-Marvis, 1818) 66.

elected representatives, a political unit governed by laws, with unrestricted movement of its citizens was certainly not music to Catherine's ears:

La colonie des aventuriers serait reconnue par la cour de Russie comme une république entièrement libre, se gouvernant par ses propres lois, ayant ces magistrats et tous ses officiers élus de son propre choix. Il serait permis à chaque citoyen de sortir de l'empire de Russie, et de se retirer où bon lui semblerait, sans être gêné, inquiété, ou obligé de payer aucun droit pour des biens acquis par ses services, et au prix de son sang.⁴

Very little attention was paid to the ideas of our French writer in St. Petersburg and the subsequent failure of his utopian dream should not be surprising.

Although Saint-Pierre's exploratory mission to Russia was unsuccessful, it had an important side-effect. His prolonged stay in St. Peterburg and negotiations with Catherine resulted in an interesting literary testimony entitled Observations sur la Russie. This work is divided into five different parts: De la Russie, Des Russes, Du Gouvernement, Révolution sous Pierre III, and finally Projet d'une Compagnie pour la découverte d'un passage aux Indes par la Russie. One of the most important aspects of this book is that its author was the first French writer of exceptional talent to represent Russia in a very vivid, highly artistic style, so different from the rigid

⁴ Jacques-Henri-Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Projet d'une Compagnie pour la découverte d'un passage aux Indes par la Russie in Oeuvres complètes de Jacques-Henri-Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, vol. 2 (Paris: Méquignon-Marvis, 1818) 357.

descriptions left by previous travellers, who in most cases were only second, if not third-rate stylists. Saint-Pierre's text enables us to experience Russia not only as a country of tyranny and astounding surprises à la Locatelli, but also as a picturesque land of breathtaking natural beauty, captured by the eye of a very sensitive artist. Modern readers often tend to consider the author of Paul et Virginie the unrivaled master of tropical landscapes. Very few of us even realize that his great literary talent was already fully developed in an extraordinary description of the Nordic climate. As we shall see, Saint-Pierre treats the Russian snows, frozen rivers and deserted arctic areas with the same stylistic ease and mastery as he would later when attempting to depict the effervescence and the natural richness of tropical islands. With the author of the Observations sur la Russie we discover the poetic image of winter in Russia and its deep mysteries, never presented in the same fashion before.

Saint-Pierre opens the first part of his Observations sur la Russie with the following verses of Crébillon:

La nature marâtre en ces affreux climats
Ne produit pour trésor que du fer, des soldats.⁵

⁵ Jacques-Henri-Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Observations sur la Russie in Oeuvres complètes de Jacques-Henri-Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, vol. 2 (Paris: Méquignon-Marvis, 1818) 271.

But this quotation is very deceiving, for it does not reflect what the reader will encounter in Saint-Pierre's text. The message of the Observations sur la Russie, although corresponding to the general, relatively critical opinion of the French about eighteenth-century Russia, is more complex than Crébillon's statement. Saint-Pierre, an eye-witness who spent a considerable amount of time in Russia, is far from such simplistic conclusions. For him, the vast Russian territory is an enigma, which still remains to be solved; it has to be explored. Indeed, the Muscovy is a terra incognita, the last European frontier worthy of investigation and scientific analysis. Crébillon's verses were as misleading as the general knowledge of Russia's geography in the West, which Saint-Pierre attempted to rectify:

Il serait impossible de donner une description exacte de la Russie; la géographie y est encore trop négligée. Il n'y a pas deux ans que le fleuve qui se décharge à Riga est navigable pour les petites barques, et ne forme point un marais impraticable près de sa source, comme on l'avait pensé. J'ai vu en Finlande des îles, marquées sur les cartes comme des portions de continent; on imprime tous les jours que le chemin de Moscou à Pétersbourg est une allée droite: il en est ainsi d'une infinité d'autres erreurs, qui s'accréditent même dans les lieux où l'on cultive les arts. (271-72)

The Observations sur la Russie is an objective work written by a disciple of the Enlightenment, in which the subject treated undergoes a detailed scrutiny and where the conclusions, original, yet always supported by a variety of evidence rectifying common errors, are an important contribution to the existing body of knowledge

about Russia. But in spite of the seriousness of tone and the author's ambition to write a sound dissertation on contemporary Muscovy, numerous fragments of the Observations sur la Russie reveal a highly lyrical nature. Indeed, it is truly surprising to observe the richness of vocabulary and stylistic virtuosity of Saint-Pierre, when he speaks about the arctic climate and the natural beauty of the North. His discourse is different from that of La Harpe. The author of Menzicoff was very frugal and rather restrained in his descriptions of Russia. His imagination was limited to a few clichés. One of the most commonly used metaphors in Menzicoff was the image of Siberia as an interminable, sterile desert of snow and ice, where human beings linger miserably for years, or perish. La Harpe's poor imagery did not differ from that of many other writers, such as Crébillon, who portrayed Russia using similar stereotypes. Saint-Pierre was thus the first French author to elevate a description of the Russian arctic landscapes to a truly poetic level. His picture of that barren land is of surprising precision and richness. Browsing through the text the reader experiences a strange illusion, for Saint-Pierre's talent transformed uninhabited Russian deserts into vivid places, filled with dramatic movements, noises, visual effects and colors. His inquisitive eye was able to capture a variety of fascinating forms, which no other French writer had seen and appreciated before him. Empty and sterile for many

Western Europeans, these arctic regions constituted a magnificent, eery landscape for Saint-Pierre:

C'est là que le Nord commence véritablement. Les chênes ne viennent point au-dessus de Riga; on ne trouve plus au delà aucune espèce d'arbres fruitiers, excepté des cerisiers, et une sorte de pomme transparente, vers Moscou. La rigueur du climat y est telle, qu'il ne croit dans les champs ni épines, ni ronces, ni haies, ni buissons. Les forêts ne sont remplies que des sapins et de bouleaux d'une grosseur prodigieuse. La nature est encore plus sauvage en Finlande; c'est une suite continuelle de rochers. Il ne sont point disposés par couches, escarpés, ou amoncelés; ce sont des collines d'un roc vif et noirâtre, dont les sommets arrondis sont dépouillés de terre. Elles forment des chaînes irrégulières qui interrompent par-tout le cours des eaux; on y voit des cataractes surprenantes. (275-76)

This extraordinary imagery and lyricism of Saint-Pierre is manifested in many other fragments of the Observations sur la Russie. The stylistic virtuosity and richness, as well as precision of vocabulary, enabled the author to portray Russia as a magical place, a fairy tale domain of uncontrollable forces of darkness, where melancholy, fear of destruction and savagery constituted the major element of the depicted landscape. Regardless of its perhaps uninviting character, which in comparison with warmer places of the Mediterranean South seemed somewhat repulsive for the average Westerner, northern Russia of Saint-Pierre is filled with a wild, even romantic beauty. It is a country of mysterious vapors, clouds of different shapes, strange animals and plants. In spite of low temperatures and frozen surfaces, it is far from being static. Arctic nature moves rapidly; it lives its own vehement existence; it produces astounding sounds and

violent noises. One of the most dramatic descriptions of nature found not only in the Observations sur la Russie, but probably in the entire work of Saint-Pierre, is his magnificent representation of the Russian foggy forest with a picturesque waterfall and bears engaging in mortal battle with wolves in the background. This short passage, full of motion and effervescence, is a miniature masterpiece. Saint-Pierre, like no one else before him, captured the spirit of the North and represented with incomparable talent its majestic, dangerous character, as well as its scenic beauty. Northern Russia is not only a domain of death and desolation, as represented later by La Harpe, it is rather a vivid, ferocious land, a theatrical stage, on which the primeval forces of nature compete with each other in a baroque-like battle of giants. It is certainly not serene and peaceful; it is dangerous and terrifying:

La vue de ces eaux noires qui bondissent et écument en roulant, leur bruit épouvantable, semblable aux hurlements confus des bêtes féroces; les sapins noirs qui croissent en amphithéâtre le long de ces bords, ce ciel toujours couvert de vapeurs, cette terre semblable au fer, tout inspire dans ces déserts l'horreur et la mélancholie. Quelquefois un ours, poursuivi par des loups affamés, tombe avec eux dans ce torrent, dont les rives en pente sont toujours humides; alors ils sont emportés comme une flèche, ils roulent en tout sens au gré de ces vagues furieuses, ils sont heurtés, meurtris, et leurs os brisés à travers leur peau couverte de longs poils: les cailloux même qui tombent dans ces abîmes pirouettent, s'écornent, et prennent mille formes bizarres. (276)

Saint-Pierre, the future author of incomparable descriptions of tropical islands and one of the first

writers to introduce pre-romantic sensitivity in French letters, began his literary apprenticeship in Russia. Russia, with its severe climate, was the first great inspiration for the young man. In the first part of the Observations sur la Russie, following the representation of the forest scene with dramatic waterfalls and savage animals, Saint-Pierre gives a more detailed picture of the Russian winter. A principal element was a certain pre-romantic melancholy, a sadness and spirit of resignation, which the author regarded as forever inscribed in the arctic landscape. Russia, during the interminable months of winter, became in his poetic imagination a fairy-tale land, enveloped in grey clouds and vapors. Although pale and somber, it is not motionless. Russia is agitated by ferocious storms, ravaging vast expanses of its territory. The windy cold air and snow produce a true atmospheric turmoil. Nature undergoes a process of strange transformation: animals change their colors and become indistinguishable from the surrounding landscape of immaculate whiteness:

Vers le milieu d'octobre, l'air se charge de vapeurs, le soleil n'y paraît qu'à travers des nuages sombres; même dans les plus beaux jours, son lever et son coucher n'offrent jamais de couleurs brillantes, les nuages sont toujours gris et plombés. (...) Des tempêtes furieuses agitent les forêts; une neige épaisse couvre les villes, les champs et les lacs; (...) Bientôt la rigueur du froid produit partout des effets surprenants. Les lièvres, les loups et les renards deviennent blancs, les écureuils petit-gris, et la belette hermine; le poil des chevaux se change en une espèce de laine frisée. (281)

Most of the travellers to Russia complained about the harshness of its climate and compared it, with a feeling of nostalgia, to the mild winters of Western or Southern Europe. Saint-Pierre did not follow that pattern. His vision of the North is very distant in style and atmosphere from the depressing accounts of his predecessors. He was the poet of snow. His description of the multiple colors produced by the reflection of the sun on the white snowy fields are almost impressionistic. These images, like the dramatic, baroque-like representation of the forest, are filled with a continuous movement. The depicted scenery is constantly undergoing a process of magical transfiguration. Saint-Pierre's metaphor of snow, which he compares to sand made of diamonds, equals in potency any of his future metaphors depicting the natural beauty of tropical islands. The richness of the style and the exuberance of the vocabulary produce a very animated, lively picture of arctic Russia, a place, where no other writer saw any beauty and magic before. The following passage brings to mind, if not in subject-matter, at least in its lyrical tone, the much later descriptions by Chateaubriand of his native land in fall and winter:

Bientôt le ciel, dégagé de vapeurs, devient serein. La neige brille comme un sable de diamants; l'air est rempli d'une poussière étincelante que le soleil tient dans un mouvement continu; c'est peut-être la cause des aurores boréales: ce sont des rayons lumineux qui s'élancent du nord après le soleil couché, et qui vacillent dans les aires comme des traînées de poudre qui s'enflammeraient par intervalles. (282)

The Russian winter landscapes are not only a domain of violent movements, where savage creatures struggle for survival with ferocity and determination. They are more than just highly dramatized picture of utmost animalistic cruelty, represented with baroque-like density of emotions. Russia is above all a source of magical, pre-romantic inspiration for Saint-Pierre. The natural phenomena found in the North, the innumerable colors produced by the reflection of the sun on the snowy fields and the vacillating lights of the aurora borealis, evoke a sense of mystery in him. Nocturnal Russia during the winter months is not only a domain of cold winds and human misery. It is a fairy-tale spectacle, a place in which every object reveals its hidden poetic quality and becomes inspirational. The constantly transforming Nordic landscapes produce in Saint-Pierre's imagination a scenery of strange, fantastic shapes and forms, where the sense of reality is temporarily suspended:

L'éclat de ces feux, joint à la lumière tremblante de la lune, rends le nuits d'une magnificence singulière; le paysage est éclairé d'un jour sombre et doux. Les sapins en pyramides à différents étages, les bouleaux en masse plus étendue, les villages semblables à des terrasses, sont couverts de neige qui réfléchit la lumière, et présentent aux yeux mille objets fantastiques. (282-83)

The mobility and violence of Russian winter constitute in Saint-Pierre's mind an embodiment of the old mythologies of the Germanic, Slavic and Mediterranean past. The nocturnal lights of the aurora borealis resurrect in him the long forgotten, obscure monsters of

repressed childhood tales. In his deepest thoughts, the arctic landscapes of Russia are suddenly animated by a variety of fantastic images filled with different architectural elements. The snowy plains and forests are transformed in an agitated vision of the writer into majestic palaces, medieval fortresses, avenues of columns and obelisks. The boundary between reality and poetic fiction becomes blurred and confused. The illusion of this never-ending magical metamorphosis is augmented as soon as the observer starts to move and walks across the winter fields. In a typically pre-romantic manner, Saint-Pierre claims that a human being experiencing such an extraordinary spectacle is no longer master of his own mental powers. The reader's imagination undergoes the same strange transformation as that of the observer. They are victims of the same illusion. Accompanied by the author, we enter the enchanted realm of poetry and creativity:

On croirait voir des forêts, des colonnes, de vastes portiques, des sphinx, des avenues entières d'obélisques, et de majestueux palais d'albâtre. Si l'on marche, la scène s'anime: ce sont des centaures, des harpies, des monstres hideux; puis des tours crénelées, une forteresse inexpugnable, le dieu Thor et sa massue; enfin toute la mythologie du nord et du midi. On n'est point le maître de son imagination; et ces jeux de la vision sont quelquefois aussi frappants que si ces objets étaient véritables. (283)

Saint-Pierre's stay in Russia enabled him not only to admire its natural beauty, but also to observe and to comment on various socio-political issues. Although he considered most of his experience a poetic initiation into the exoticism of arctic regions, he also showed himself as

an enlightened historian and sociologist. In addition to the purely artistic parts of the Observations sur la Russie, there are many others that constitute a detailed treatise on the recent history of the Muscovy and the national character of the Russian people. Saint-Pierre was undoubtedly a true poet in his visionary description of Russia's natural wonders and its geography, but he was also a very acute observer in his reflections on specific aspects of the Russian soul. During his stay in Russia he frequented various circles and came into contact with individuals from different social classes; hence his image of that country is comprehensive and relatively detailed. Saint-Pierre was truly interested in the people he encountered and for the most part viewed the Russian national character very positively; yet he was often greatly irritated by attitudes that he considered typically Russian. What astounded him the most, however, was the passivity of the Russians and their unconditional obedience to their despotic rulers. Saint-Pierre deplored the lack of individuality of these people and their fatalistic perception of the world, so different from the Western spirit of freedom:

Les Russes ne vont point à la guerre pour acquérir des richesses ou de la gloire; ils n'ont pas dans leur langue un mot qui signifie honneur. Ils marchent avec ordre et silence, comme des victimes qui vont à la mort et qui s'attendent à la recevoir; ils pensent qu'une félicité éternelle est le partage de ceux qui meurent pour leur prince. (297)

Saint-Pierre often criticized the tendency of the Russians to show an excessive respect for power, regardless of that power's abusive nature. He considered them a treacherous and inconstant people, who hate foreigners and are suspicious of them. He deplored the heavy drinking of the Russians, their barbarity and propensity for violent, uncontrollable behavior, which often lead to criminal acts, already depicted in Avril's grotesque account of the Muscovite carnival:

Les Russes sont inconstants, jaloux, fourbes, grossiers, ne respectent que ce qu'ils craignent. Il ne faut jamais se familiariser avec eux; car ils vous mépriseraient bientôt. Ils s'enivrent fréquemment, et boivent avec excès nos vins, que leur marchands n'oseraient mélanger sans impiété, parce qu'on s'en sert aux autels. Ils sont sujets à des vapeurs mélancoliques qui font souvent sur les étrangers des effets terribles; plusieurs deviennent fous, d'autres s'ôtent eux-mêmes la vie.(300)

Writing extensively about Russia, Saint-Pierre did not overlook feminine issues. He considered Russian women the most beautiful in the world. He certainly showed them more respect than Russian men, who still lived in a distant past and were somewhat uncivilized:

Les femmes russes sont très belles. Un de leurs poètes a eu raison de dire: "La nature a mis les pierreries et les richesses à l'Orient, les fruits délicieux au Midi, l'industries et les arts à l'Occident; mais elle a fait davantage pour le Nord; puisque'elle nous a donné les plus belles femmes du monde.(298)

Saint-Pierre's conclusions regarding feminine issues are analogous to those made by many other eighteenth-century French writers. Like Argens, he considered women the principal source of Russia's gradual spread of

culture. Russian women were in his opinion the most crucial agents moving the empire on its tortuous road toward westernization and propagation of more civilized manners. Saint-Pierre understood the potential impact of Russian women on transforming the barbaric image of their land; thus he deplored their difficult situation in face of the survival of the old patriarchal customs. Like his literary predecessor, the Marquis d'Argens, Saint-Pierre repeated the famous anecdote about Russian women being physically abused by their husbands. He criticized their subservience to men and their voluntary acceptance of this incomprehensible, archaic dependence:

Il y a à Moscou des femmes qui portent des listes de filles à marier; on y lit leur âge, leur fortune, leur caractère, leur tempérament; ces listes ne sont pas toujours fidèles. Les femmes sont fort soumises à leurs maris. Chez le peuple, il est d'usage le jour des noces de mettre dans l'une des bottes du mari une pièce d'argent, et un fouet dans l'autre; celle que la mariée tire d'abord est un présage du traitement qu'elle doit éprouver un jour. (299)

Saint-Pierre realized that no eighteenth-century literary work on Russia would be deemed complete without special attention to Peter the Great. However, his image of that Czar did not differ from the highly apologetic comments of Fontenelle, Voltaire, and Thomas. He stressed the strong emotional attachment of the Russians to their former monarch and his omnipresence in the socio-political life of the country. He claimed that the memory of Peter the Great was a very potent force, which still animated the whole Russian Empire long after his death in 1725:

La mémoire de Pierre-le-Grand est en Russie dans la plus grande vénération. Lorsqu'on veut dire qu'une chose est impossible, on dit qu'une loi de ce prince la défend: on fait l'éloge d'un vieux officier, en disant que c'est un élève de Pierre Ier. Son portrait est dans tous les tribuneaux et dans la plupart des maisons: on conserve à l'Académie le chapeau et l'habit percé de plusieurs coups qu'il portait à la bataille de Pultava.(305)

Saint-Pierre was also highly deferential in his comments about the new Empress, Catherine II. This ambitious ruler, who by virtue of a palace revolution removed from the throne her inefficient husband shortly before Saint-Pierre's arrival in St. Petersburg, had begun as soon as she consolidated her power the implementation of new reforms. Catherine's projects were intended to reach even further than those of Peter the Great and affected profoundly all classes of Russian society. The author of the Observations sur la Russie praised her political moderation, her diverse intellectual interests and her love for literature and arts, by means of which she attempted to civilize the Russians. Saint-Pierre was another French writer who contributed to the development of Catherine's image as the Sémiramis du Nord, a campaign initiated by Voltaire and his friends, who protected the Empress against vocal detractors in the West who claimed that she killed Peter III. Saint-Pierre belongs to a large group of European intellectuals suffering from the mild sickness, called by Grimm NordsMinervenkrankheit:

Elle a mis dans son gouvernement une modération inconnue avant elle. Elle fait voyager les mécontents, qu'auparavant on exilait en Sibérie. Elle a introduit le goût des spectacles, de la littérature et des arts, pour adoucir ces esprits farouches. (...) Depuis

Pierre-le-Grand, aucun souverain n'a entrepris un si grand nombre de projets utiles à la Russie. La postériorité décidera de sa gloire; mais celle de Sémiramis, si célèbre en Orient, ne fut ni plus pure, ni plus méritée. (326-328)

Saint-Pierre's highly apologetic image of Catherine the Great was not shared by Jean Chappe d'Autroche, another French writer who travelled to Russia at the beginning of seventeen sixties. Autroche, an unknown figure nowadays, was born in Mauriac in Auvergne in 1722. Although in his early youth he planned to embrace an ecclesiastic career, he dedicated himself almost exclusively to the sciences. In 1761, the French Académie des Sciences sent him to Russia, to the Siberian town of Tobolsk, in order to observe a rare astronomical phenomenon, a passage of Venus under the sun's disk. Seven years later, in 1768, appeared a magnificently illustrated book entitled Voyage en Sibérie, in which Autroche not only described the astronomical event, but also included extensive comments on Russia, its government, the nature of its political system and the character of its inhabitants. The author based his political commentaries on what he had seen in the Muscovy shortly before Catherine's ascent to the throne. Most of his opinions were not favorable. As the Voyage en Sibérie was published several years after the French writer's stay in Russia, it was already outdated when it reached St. Petersburg, where it made a very negative impression. Although on a few occasions Chappe d'Autroche praised Catherine, the new

Empress did not hesitate to express her indignation in the most virulent fashion imaginable. This Russian monarch, who during seven years of her reign dedicated with the utmost zeal all her energies to modernize the socio-political system of her adopted fatherland and implemented important reforms, strongly criticized the author's opinions and accused him of misrepresenting the contemporary image of her empire. There is no doubt that the delay in publication resulted in a narrative that no longer reflected the current state of affairs in Russia and that the author's conclusions were too often generalizations. It is also true that Autroche's comments did not differ significantly from other critical accounts already mentioned, especially those of Locatelli and Argens. In Catherine's opinion, the author did not sufficiently emphasize the changes effected during her reign.⁶ It is precisely Autroche's tendency to generalize and his rather anachronistic image of Russia, reminiscent of earlier literary works, that prompted Catherine to write and then to publish anonymously in 1770, one year after her French detractor's death, a book entitled Antidote, ou Examen d'un mauvais livre superbement imprimé, intitulé Voyage en Sibérie.⁷

⁶ John T. Alexander, Catherine the Great. Life and Legend (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) 133.

⁷ Albert Lortholary, Le mirage russe en France au XVIIIe siècle (Paris: Boivin, 1951) 192-193.

Catherine's book was part of a long and carefully planned strategy to refute the attacks of various incredulous Western intellectuals who criticized contemporary Russia and questioned the validity of the Russian reforms. Her Antidote was also an attempt to undermine the position of the Duc de Choiseul, whose strong anti-Russian and pro-Polish sentiments greatly influenced the major lines of the foreign policy of Louis XV. Catherine II considered Autroche to be a paid partisan of Choiseul, sharing his hostility toward Russia.

One of the reasons for Catherine's violent criticism of the Voyage en Sibérie was, as she claimed, the innumerable astronomical errors of the book. In the letter to Falconet, she expressed the following opinion about its scientific value:

Je méprise l'abbé Chappe et son livre et ne le crois point digne d'être réfuté, parce que les bêtises qu'il dit tomberont d'elles-mêmes.⁸

But Catherine's indignation about the astronomical errors of the Voyage en Sibérie is only a prelude to a more violent refutation of the book, for the principal target of her criticism was not the scientific negligence of Autroche, which, as she claimed, did not even need to be discussed, but his highly negative image of Russia. The Antidote contains among many others the following comments on the Voyage en Sibérie. These comments are only few

⁸ Catherine's letter to Falconet is quoted from Lortholary's Le mirage russe 193.

random examples taken from a much lengthier and more accusatory text. The reference to Autroche's stupidity, as well as his alleged venality to Choiseul and his anti-Russian acolytes are the mildest arguments in the limitless arsenal of the infuriated Catherine. Her hysterical defense of Russia testifies both to her great patriotism and to the complexes of her offended ego. On the other hand, Catherine's Antidote proved that the Voyage en Sibérie had become a very influential publication in France; her reaction would not have been so strong if the book had not aroused a great deal of attention. It is interesting to note that the following critical remarks were written after the astronomer's death, which occurred during his exploratory trip to California in 1769:

(...) Est-ce de l'orviétan que vous venez, M. l'abbé? (...) Apprenez, ignorant, qu'il y a peut être peu de gouvernements où la loi soit plus en respect que chez nous. (...) Allez vous promener, M. Chappe: qui sera le benêt à qui vous en ferez accroire, si ce n'est à quelqu'un qui vous ressemble! (...) Vous osez dire que ces âmes étaient avilies? Avili vous-même. (...) Notre pays est moins rempli d'ours que le vôtre d'animaux bâtés.(sic) (...) Êtes-vous payé...? Combien vous donne-t-on? (...) Vous méritez plus qu'une correction. (...) C'est un malheur pour la vérité et le public que l'auteur ne soit pas noyé. (...) Puisque, M. le défunt, vous nous traitez tout net d'animaux, je me crois en droit de vous dire que pendant votre vivant vous étiez en vérité une bête.⁹

But what are precisely Autroche's critical comments, which infuriated Catherine to such an extent that she

⁹ Comments on Autroche found in Catherine's Antidote are quoted from Lortholary's Le mirage russe 193.

decided to publish two volumes of her Antidote and then to circulate this work all over Europe with the sole purpose of counterbalancing the image of Russia presented in the Voyage en Sibérie? What was so devastating about this magnificently illustrated book that Catherine's sensitive ego could not tolerate? To answer this question we should imagine Catherine's reaction after she read the following lines, in which she undoubtedly found reference to her palace revolution and her alleged murder of Peter III. A writer, who ridiculed Catherine's sudden rise to the Russian throne and undermined the validity of her success by placing her coup d'état in the context of an endless series of bloody revolutions, both past and future, could certainly not be expecting a positive response from Her Imperial Highness:

Les différentes révolutions que la Russie avoit éprouvée en prépareroient de nouvelles, et en facilitoient les moyens. Ce peuple, toujours esclave, n'étoit lié à son souverain ni par les loix ni par l'amour: l'intrigue et le droit du plus fort offroient le trône à quiconque oseroit s'en emparer.¹⁰

Autroche's detailed analysis of the Russian political system targeted not only the court and the highest ruling classes of the empire, but included all layers of Russian society. The passages of the Voyage en Sibérie dedicated to Catherine's coup d'état and the intricate relationships within her aristocratic entourage are only a prelude to a more complex and highly negative picture of Russia. This

¹⁰ Jean Chappe d'Autroche, Voyage en Sibérie, vol. 1 (Paris: Chez Debure, 1768) 114.

picture encompasses the court, the nobility, the clergy and the peasantry. No social group escaped Autroche's scrutiny and no layer of Russian society was free from his uncompromised criticism. His picture of the Russian nobility, for example, is that of a subservient class, frightened by the despotic power of the Czars to the extent that it was unable to express its own vital interests. Autroche deplored the enslavement of the Russian nobles to the throne and their obedience to the monarch's arbitrary will. He stressed the miserable fate of the boyars, a people deprived of political voice, silenced by fear of retributions, exile to Siberia and frequent confiscations of property. He brought into sharp focus the secrecy of Russian public life, the byzantine intrigues of the court and the atmosphere of reticence and danger, which governed the conduct of the entire Russian nobility. Highest caution was the only constant element guiding the behavior of these enslaved people. The obligatory idolatry of power and lack of critical spirit seemed rather shocking for this Western observer:

La noblesse n'ose approcher le trône qu'en tremblant. La plus petite intrigue suffit pour l'envoyer en exil en Sibérie, et ses biens confisqués rendent toute une famille victime de l'adresse du courtisan. Étant à Saint-Petersbourg, je me trouvais chez un étranger, homme en place. Curieux de m'instruire, je demandai si le prince Iwan étoit mort ou en vie: on me répondit tout doucement à l'oreille, qu'on ne parloit point de ce prince en Russie. Nous n'étions cependant que trois François dans l'appartement, et il avoit plus de trente pieds en quarré. La veille de la mort de l'Impératrice Elisabeth, on n'osoit s'informer de sa santé. Elle étoit morte; chacun le savoit, et l'on craignoit de s'en entretenir. (122-23)

This institutionalized enslavement of the nobility to the absolute power of the Czars was only the first element in an endless chain of slavery and subservience so characteristic of the political structure of Russia. All social interactions of the nobles, who constituted the principal foundation of the empire, were based on fear, caution, conspiracy and rewarded accusations. Tyranny was the most accurate word to describe this inhuman system. But the boyars, subject to the most atrocious slavery that existed in European history, were perpetuating their own misery by oppressing and exploiting an even more vulnerable social class than theirs, the peasantry. Thus the vicious circle of Russian serfdom was finally closed. There was no hope for any improvement in this ossified structure governed by mistrust and suspicion:

(...) la tyrannie ne s'est proposé que de jouir de la liberté de sacrifier au despote tous ceux qui lui sont suspects. Il étoit alors nécessaire que le crime du délateur ne fût point puni de mort, et que le supplice de knout fût toujours adouci à son égard. La noblesse ainsi asservie sous le joug de l'esclavage le plus affreux, en fait sentir le contre-coup à tout le peuple: il est son esclave, ou celui du souverain et des voivodes qui le représentent.(125)

Autroche remarked with astounding insight that the Russian nobles, reduced by their national tradition to the role of voiceless subjects of the Czars, attempted in turn to reduce their peasants to an animalistic state. They were merciless, cruel and often abused their power. Their control over the serfs, although in theory somewhat curtailed by unspecified and vague laws, was in practice

not restricted at all. The boyars enjoyed unlimited right of life and death:

Les seigneurs vendent leurs esclaves comme on vend ailleurs les bestiaux. Ils choisissent parmi eux le nombre de domestiques dont ils ont besoin: ils les traitent très durement. Ils n'ont point civilement droit de vie ni de mort sur leur domestiques ni sur leurs autres esclaves, mais ayant le droit de les punir des batoques, ils les font châtier de façon que par le fait ils acquièrent moralement le droit de les punir de mort. (126)

Autroche claimed that the Russian peasants, who had no notion of freedom, were less miserable than the nobles. Their desires seemed to be of a limited nature, so they could be very easily satisfied. They lived in a state of blissful ignorance, owed no property and knew no commerce, no industry and no luxury. And yet, however wretched, their state of slavery was more tolerable to them than that of the aristocrats, who, by virtue of their education and contacts with foreigners, could fully realize their misery resulting from the total subservience to the throne. Aware of the contingent nature of their fortunes, threatened by lack of social stability, constant retributions and arbitrary confiscation of ancestral property, the Russian nobles had no incentive to develop the national economy, to augment their possessions and to engage in financial operations. They lived for instant gratification and wasted national resources. No economy could possibly grow under such conditions. Autroche, a true disciple of Enlightenment, made a direct connection between freedom and the economic welfare of the society:

Le peuple russe n'ayant aucune idée de la liberté, est beaucoup moins malheureux que la noblesse. Il a d'ailleurs peu de désirs, et par conséquent moins de besoins: il ne connoît, principalement au-delà de Moscou, ni industrie, ni commerce. Le Russe, n'ayant rien en propre, est communément indifférent sur tout ce qui peut augmenter les richesses. La noblesse même ayant toujours à craindre l'exil, et la confiscation de ses biens, s'occupe moins de les améliorer, que des moyens de se procurer promptement des fonds pour satisfaire ses goûts du moment.(193)

Religious fanaticism is another very important aspect of Russian social life that Autroche criticized. He ridiculed the external nature of the religious practice of the Muscovites and their predilection for the superficial, purely ritual expression of faith, rather than for internalized spirituality, so typical of many advanced societies in the West. This lack of deep religious experience of the vast majority of the population was the principal reason for the notorious immorality of the Russians who, contrary to what would be expected from their fanatical attachment to religion, paid no attention to the ethical precepts of their Orthodox creed. Autroche claimed facetiously that the simplistic interpretation of Christianity rendered the Russians less moral and more vicious than their pagan neighbors in Asia:

Le peuple est attaché à la religion grecque jusqu'au fanatisme. Ce fanatisme augmente à mesure qu'on s'éloigne de la capitale: mais ce peuple est si peu éclairé sur la religion, qu'il croit en général remplir les devoirs, en s'acquittant de quelques pratiques extérieures, et sur-tout en observant avec la plus grande rigueur, les jeûnes du carême. Il se livre d'ailleurs à la débauche et à tous les penchants vicieux. Les bonnes moeurs sont plus rares parmi les Russes que chez les païens leurs voisins. La façon de penser des Russes sur le christianisme est si extraordinaire, qu'on croirait que cette religion, si

conforme au bonheur et à l'ordre de la société, a servi à rendre le peuple russe plus méchant. (136-37)

The extensive criticism of Autroche did not overlook feminine issues. Like many other French writers discussed previously, he also made a direct connection between elegance of social life, sophistication of culture and the position of women. Autroche deplored the enslavement of Russian women and their dependence on the patriarchal system. The general atmosphere of tyranny, the only constant element of Russian social life, was reflected in the way in which Russian men treated their wives. Autroche depicted this aspect of the Muscovite tradition with the same arguments used already by his predecessors. What he said about the social standing of Russian women clearly indicates that the notion of courtly love, one of the elements of Western civilization, was completely unknown in Russia:

On n'y connoît point cet amour délicat, appanages des âmes sensibles, dont la vertu la plus sévère ne peut pas toujours se défendre. (...) Dans ces contrées barbares, les hommes tyrannisent leurs femmes, qu'ils regardent et traitent comme leurs premières esclaves et en exigent les services les plus vils: ils les obligent dans leurs fiançailles, de leur présenter une poignée de verges en grande cérémonie, et de tirer leurs bottes, pour preuve de la supériorité de mari, et de la servitude de la femme. (...)

Ce pays ne sera jamais policé tant que les femmes y vivront dans l'esclavage, et qu'elles ne serviront point à l'agrément de la société. (162-63)

Autroche did not fail to criticize the incomplete implementation of Russian reforms and the superficial imitation of the West. He asserted that reforms could only succeed in an atmosphere of freedom, entirely lacking in

the Muscovy. The introduction of luxury and massive transplantation of Western values into Russia had no meaning as long as the most essential achievement of the West, the notion of personal liberty, was not assimilated there as well. Voyages and contacts with Europeans by the highest strata of the Russian nobility only rendered these individuals more miserable, for now they could see how antiquated their civilization, based on fear and slavery, was when compared to the rest of Europe. Autroche argued that the growth of culture, just like the expansion of economic life, required freedom. Liberty was the sine qua non not only for the financial welfare, but for the development of the arts and social sophistication as well. Hasty imitation of the West and disregard of freedom was only a source of frustration for the Russians:

Les mœurs européennes ont cependant fait peu de progrès en Russie, parce qu'elles n'ont aucun rapport avec ce gouvernement despotique: elles y ont introduit le luxe, et la communication du Russe avec l'étranger; ses voyages sur-tout l'ont rendu plus malheureux, parce qu'il a eu dès-lors un terme de comparaison de son état avec celui de l'homme libre. (187)

Critical comments on the lack of elementary liberties and public trust in Russia, elements judged indispensable for the creation of a thriving social life, can be found in another passage of Autroche's book. Readers might indeed ask themselves the same rhetorical question as the author: how can any sophisticated culture develop in a society where women are oppressed and friendships, uniting people of similar interests, tastes and qualities, were

made impossible by a despotic system? An intimate link between culture and freedom, so typical of the general attitude of the Enlightenment, is emphasized again:

La société en général est peu connue en Russie, surtout au-delà de Moscou. Eh! comment pourroit-elle se former dans un gouvernement où personne ne jouit de cette liberté politique qui établit par-tout ailleurs la sureté de chaque citoyen? Tout le monde se craint mutuellement: delà la méfiance, la fausseté, la fourberie. L'amitié, ce sentiment qui fait le charme de la vie, n'a jamais été connu en Russie: elle suppose une sensibilité d'âme qui identifie des amis, et des épanchements de coeur qui mettent en commun leurs plaisirs et leur peines. Les hommes ayant peu de considération pour les femmes au-delà de Moscou, elles ne sont pour rien dans la société; et sans elles comment en former?(187)

Perhaps the most devastating comment on Russia, which so infuriated Catherine, can be found in the following two very succinct, yet powerful sentences, in which Autroche offered an incisive analysis of the nature of Russian despotism. His admirable assertion that despotism destroys the spirit, talent and human feelings can be regarded as one of the most vocal expressions of a liberal attitude ever pronounced in eighteenth-century French letters. Autroche argued that lack of freedom, fear and oppression paralyzed the most essential of all human faculties, the faculty of thought. The Russians did not think, the French writer claimed, for their souls were brutalized and humiliated by an inhuman system. His conclusion was not only that the Russian peasants were reduced to an animalistic state, but that their miserable condition characterized the entire society, the whole nation without exception. Even the Czars, theoretically powerful and

unlimited in their privileges, were in reality nothing more than vulnerable puppets, subject to sudden revolutions, which undermined their power and reduced them to the same common level shared with the enslaved nobles and peasants:

L'amour de la gloire et de la patrie sont inconnus en Russie, le despotisme y détruit l'esprit, le talent, et toute espèce de sentiment. Personne n'ose penser en Russie; l'ame, avilie et abrutie, en perd jusqu'à la faculté. La crainte est, pour ainsi dire, le seul ressort qui anime toute la nation.(221)

Catherine the Great found the Voyage en Sibérie one of the most dangerous accounts of Russia written in the eighteenth century. Is it surprising that her anger forced her to publish the Antidote, a curious book, where she desperately attempted to refute the devastating comments on the unreformable nature of Russian society, which she wished to transform in spite of its cultural backwardness? Considering the complexities of Russian history from our twentieth-century perspective, however, we must give Catherine more credit than she was given by Autroche. Perhaps we should envisage her reforms as Voltaire and other figures of the Enlightenment did, without paying too much of attention to contemporary criticism. The ultimate truth is always hidden somewhere between the extremes. We might regard Voltaire, Fontenelle and Grimm either as very knowledgeable observers or simply as naive enthusiasts. We might claim with the same validity that the accounts of Locatelli and Autroche were exaggerated or that they showed the true image of Russian despotism. But regardless

of what our opinion on this issue may be, the variety of literary works, often contradictory in their conclusions, demonstrates how multiform the image of Russia in eighteenth-century French letters was and testifies to the diversity of public opinion. This clearly proves the genuine interest of the French in Russian themes.

Chapter 2

One of the most curious literary accounts of Russia written in French in the eighteenth century was a short book, entitled Anecdotes sur la révolution de Russie, en l'année 1762. This book circulated initially as a manuscript and was read to a selected public in various Parisian salons, including those of Madame du Deffand, the Duc de Choiseul, and even Madame Geoffrin. It was finally published in 1797, more than ten years after the author's death.¹ Anecdotes sur la révolution de Russie, en l'année 1762, written by Claude Carloman de Rulhière, portrays in a very peculiar way the successful coup d'état staged by Catherine II to eliminate her mentally incapacitated husband, Peter III, and to replace him on the throne of Russia. This controversial event, called by historians the Russian Revolution of 1762, was followed by the European public with an utmost attention and produced vivid discussions in political and philosophical circles of the West. In France, as in other European countries, public opinion was very much divided on that matter. On the one hand, there was a group of enthusiastic intellectuals, such as Voltaire, Diderot and their acolytes, who supported Catherine's palace revolution and defended unconditionally her usurpation of power; on the other hand, however, there was a group led by Choiseul, whose

¹ "Notice historique sur la vie et les écrits de Rulhière," Oeuvres posthumes de Rulhière, vol. 1 (Paris: Ménard et Desenne fils, 1819) V.

foreign policy, characterized by strong anti-Russian sentiments, attracted to him many distinguished detractors of the new Empress. One of them was Claude Carloman de Rulhière, half writer, half diplomat, whose famous book on Russia produced a genuine turmoil in Parisian circles and divided the intellectual scene into two opposing camps. This curious situation of mistrust, literary rivalry among outstanding writers and political factionalism, provoked by Rulhière's account, might be considered one of the first examples of how literature can be used for political reasons and how letters, combined with aggressive philosophical propaganda, can influence both foreign relations and cultural exchanges between different nations.

Claude Carloman de Rulhière, born in 1735 in Bondy near Paris as a son of the inspecteur de la gendarmerie de l'Ile-de-France, was educated by the Jesuits. As soon as he graduated from college, he entered Parisian society, where he made himself famous as a poet of considerable talent writing in the style of Horace and a propagator of Latin verses. His major literary accomplishment was the Épître sur les disputes, discussed by Voltaire in his Dictionnaire philosophique. (Notice historique sur la vie et les écrits de Rulhière, II) Rulhière's intelligence and wit were appreciated by the Jesuits, who wanted him to join their order and to pursue an ecclesiastic career. Although Rulhière expressed no interest in such a

possibility, he was recommended by Père Latour to Monsieur de Breteuil, whose close friendship and important rank in the French foreign ministry changed the course of the young writer's life.

In 1760 Breteuil was nominated French ambassador to St. Petersburg and asked Rulhière to accompany him there as his secretary. (Notice historique, II) Breteuil's proposition was accepted without hesitation and was considered by the young man as a long awaited possibility for adventure and excitement. However, the extraordinary events, which occurred in Russia at that time, surpassed anything Rulhière could ever have expected before arriving in St. Petersburg. During his stay at the court, he had a chance to witness the last months of Peter III's reign, characterized by his grotesque behavior and his obvious insanity, and then to follow the development of Catherine's coup d'état. Rulhière's Russian experience and his view of Russian political life as an insider, combined with his literary talent and wit, resulted in one of the most facetious, yet accurate accounts written about the Muscovy during the entire eighteenth century. Anecdotes sur la Révolution de Russie, en l'année 1762 is a very peculiar text indeed. It is a strange mixture of different styles and genres. Its composition defies the rigid laws of classicism, still prevalent in the seventeen sixties and seventies. Grotesque stylistic elements of the book, depicting the volatility of the Russian political scene,

are placed side by side with serious ones, the oratorical tone alternates with persiflage and virulent irony. The mocking attitude of the author and his feeling of the absurd constantly mix with the tragic, ominous voice of a concerned observer. Rulhière regarded Russia as a very bizarre place. He claimed that its literary representation should not follow rigid classical patterns, entirely inadequate to analyze such an odd entity, but rather that it should develop its own original structure. In a dedicatory letter to the Countess d'Egmont he mentioned the necessity to invent a new style for his work, since no existing model could depict Russia with the desired precision:

Cet ouvrage vous appartient: j'avais, il est vrai, employé tous mes soins à démêler les plus secrètes intrigues de l'événement que j'y raconte; mais je ne songeais point à en écrire l'histoire: votre seule volonté m'y a déterminé; et dans le style même dont j'ai fait choix, n'ayant point eu de modèle, c'est votre goût que j'ai suivi.²

Rulhière claimed that the Russian revolution of 1762 and the sequence of extraordinary events, which took place during Catherine's coup d'état, required a special narrative technique, different from the conventional norms of French classicism. His work, as he emphasized in the continuation of the dedicatory letter, would be a mixture of genres and styles, a hybrid encompassing the elements

² Claude Carloman de Rulhière, "Lettre dédicatoire à Madame la Comtesse d'Egmont, Oeuvres posthumes de Rulhière, vol. 4 (Paris: Ménard et Desenne fils, 1819) 257.

of the whole literary tradition, for only such a complex entity could represent Russia most accurately:

Peut-être, en effet, qu'un événement si étrange exigeait un genre singulier de narration. L'importance des différents intérêts, puisqu'il s'agit d'un Empire, la singularité de l'action, l'horreur de la catastrophe, le nom de Catherine IIe donnent, il est vrai, à cette révolution, de la grandeur et de la célébrité, mais la frivolité des intrigues qui en ont été les ressorts, la licence des mœurs russes, et les puérilités qui ont perdu le malheureux empereur Pierre III, ne pouvait être racontées d'un style sérieux et soutenu(...) (258-59)

The necessity of using anti-classical rhetoric and of alternating different modes of expression in order to represent Russia with more precision is mentioned in another fragment of the dedicatory letter:

Ce ne sont point les sentiments d'admiration, d'intérêt ou de pitié, qu'il faut consulter pour juger toutes les actions humaines; une certaine grandeur se trouve quelquefois mêlée à des actions vicieuses. On peut porter du génie dans le crime, de l'agrément dans les faiblesses, de l'héroïsme dans les fatales imprudences. (260)

Rulhière's style, which undermines the traditional divisions between literary genres, perfectly corresponds to the subject matter discussed. The fluidity of his narrative, its sudden changes of tone and the author's constant shifting between seriousness and the grotesque, represent faithfully the enigmatic nature of the Muscovy and its proverbial formlessness. Russia is a place where nothing is impossible, where the unthinkable becomes reality and where the most absurd turns into the most serious without an interim stage. Rulhière's Russia is a self-deconstructing entity, where the epistemological

certitude of the experienced phenomena hardly exists and where the signified and the signifier are in constant flux. To exemplify our argument we should consider for a moment what Rulhière said about Russian absolutism and tyranny. He claimed that in Russia this most repressive form of government changed quickly into its own parody. The border separating the dangerous and the terrifying from the purely grotesque is never clearly delineated. The Czars, holding the most absolute power in Europe, are in reality puppets enslaved by the unpredictability of the political scene. The self-deconstructing nature of Russian absolutism is epitomized by Peter III, whose autocratic rule over Russia was suddenly ended by Catherine's revolution, and his imperial prerogatives, theoretically unlimited, were reduced to nothingness in the course of just several hours. Such a spectacular descent from glory to complete political demise can only happen in Russia. Is it then surprising that in order to represent this unusual country and its dumbfounding customs Rulhière had to suspend conventional literary models and to invent his own original style?

On ne connaît sur la terre aucune puissance plus absolue que celle des souverains de Russie: dans tout leur empire, leur volonté est l'unique loi; l'obéissance est la seule morale. On verra cependant ici leur misérable condition, et comment leur puissance, en dépassant toutes les bornes prescrites aux hommes, s'est ruinée elle-même, et se trouve bien plus malheureusement bornée de toutes parts, puisqu'elle est obligée d'obéir aux instruments qu'elle emploie, aux milices, à la superstition, aux préjugés publiques. C'est donc par un véritable aveuglement que la plupart des princes s'occupent à se forger de pareilles chaînes: ils oublient qu'en

cessant de respecter les volontés d'un peuple libre, il leur faudra tôt ou tard obéir aux caprices d'un vulgaire imbécille. (262-63)

One of the major reasons for Russia's social peculiarities and its obsolete customs was, according to Rulhière, the absence of women from public life. The French author considered the oppression of women and their subservience to male-dominated society a principal cause of the volatility of Russian politics and lack of civilized manners. Rulhière repeatedly emphasized women's marginal role in Russian culture and deplored their status as mere instruments in men's hands. The lack of female participation in Russia's social fabric and its governmental institutions was regarded by him as a main factor contributing to the wide-spread immorality of the Muscovites, a condition which led to arbitrariness in the political arena and provoked an endless succession of bloody revolutions. In an atmosphere of total absence of rules and moral precepts, every cruelty seemed possible and no barbaric development was excluded. The most spectacular ascent of the simplest subjects to the highest ranks of the Russian establishment was not considered a rarity; it was indeed a very common phenomenon:

En effet, quoique les dames russes soient nouvellement admises dans la société, à la fin du dernier siècle elles vécussent encore enfermées, et ne fussent même comptées pour rien dans l'autorité domestiques, (...) il était résulté de cette captivité des femmes, au milieu d'une foule d'esclaves, le dérèglement total des mœurs, et quand Pierre Ier y fit naître la société, il n'eut à réformer qu'une austérité de mœurs déjà très dissolues. On ne croyait point que les dernières impératrices eussent flétri la gloire de leur règne, pour avoir choisi une foule d'amants dans

tous les rangs de leurs sujets, et jusque parmi les esclaves. Sous le règne présent, un jeune favori gouvernait l'empire, tandis qu'un simple Cosaque, dont la première fortune avait été de jouer du serpent dans la chapelle du palais, était parvenu jusqu'à épouser secrètement l'impératrice.³

Rulhière's image of Catherine's late husband, Peter III, reflects the highly subversive, anti-classical style invented by the author. Rulhière portrayed the fallen Czar as a grotesquely irresponsible individual of conflicting emotions. Peter III combined both greatness and pettiness, the heroism of his ancestors and absurd claims to glory, endless ambition and political ineptitude. In a word, the French writer portrayed him as a childish clown driven by contradictory impulses of the moment, an idiot dreaming of illusory power, which in reality he never exercised. Peter III was a true embodiment of the Muscovy and symbolized the unstable character of its political system. His education, received first from the closest members of his own family and then from corrupt political advisors, only magnified his complexes and his odd behavior. To the modern reader Peter's image brings to mind the French literary figure of Alfred Jarry, the infamous "Ubu roi":

(...) on l'ôta de leurs mains pour le confier à de vils corrupteurs; mais les premiers principes qu'il avait reçus étant restés gravés dans son esprit, de là vint un mélange bizarre de bonnes intentions dégénérées en ridicules manières, et des vues ineptes dirigées vers de grands objets. Élevé dans l'horreur de l'esclavage, dans la passion pour l'héroïsme, il

³ Claude Carloman de Rulhière, Anecdotes sur la révolution de Russie, en l'année 1762 in Oeuvres posthumes de Rulhière, vol. 4 (Paris: Ménard et Desenne fils, 1819) 277-78.

s'attacha fortement à ces nobles idées; mais il aimait le grand avec petitesse, et, se proposant d'imiter les héros dont il descendait, son génie le retenait dans des puerilités. (281-82)

The Russian revolution of 1762 and Catherine's usurpation of power were presented by Rulhière in the same facetious manner as the personality of Peter III. The events, which took place during this regicidal coup d'état were chaotic and had no solid structure. They were unpredictable and the observer did not know what to expect. In the atmosphere of this grotesque masquerade à la Russe both the most cruel carnage and the most inoffensive skirmishes, reminiscent of the game of tin soldiers, were possible. Here is, for example, how Rulhière described the "grandiose" entrance of the future Empress, escorted not by great noble heroes and warriors, but by a cortège composed of servants, peasants, her lover and hair-stylist. The scenery of that revolution was hardly heroic. It was rather truly absurd:

Ainsi, pour régner despotiquement sur le plus vaste empire du monde, arriva Catherine, entre sept ou huit heures du matin, partie sur la foi d'un soldat, menée par des paysans, conduite par son amant, accompagnée de sa femme de chambre et de son coiffeur. (327-28)

The burlesque character of Catherine's coup d'état is best exemplified by the description of Peter III fleeing his enemies. This imperial flight has nothing epic in its nature. It is depicted as a highly disorganized movement into the unknown of a large number of ridiculous Russian courtesans, a truly chaotic escapade. Peter's cortège chased by Catherine's partisans is watched by an eye-

witness with utmost indifference and pity. The evasive answer given by him to an inquisitive Russian questioning his allegiance to the Czar, epitomizes the lack of seriousness of the revolutionary events. It also reflects the heterogeneous structure of Rulhière's text and contributes in its turn to this anti-classical stylistic mélange:

A cette nouvelle, l'empereur, suivi de toute sa cour, se précipita vers le rivage; on se jeta dans les deux yachts, tout s'embarqua à la hâte; et le redoutable parti, que Munich avait conseillé, ne fut suivi que par épouvante. Peut-être ne doit-on pas omettre un trait, qui ne serait rien en lui-même, s'il ne démontrait pas avec quelle profonde indifférence on peut être témoin de ces terribles événements. Un témoin oculaire de cette fuite, qui resta tranquillement au rivage, l'ayant racontée le lendemain, on lui demanda comment son maître, s'embarquant pour disputer sa couronne et sa vie, il avait pu ne pas le suivre? Il répondit: "En effet, je fus prêt de m'embarquer, mais il était tard; le vent était au nord, et je n'avais point de manteau." (350-51)

From purely facetious, Rulhière's account changes occasionally to very serious, portraying the complexities of Russian politics in a less frivolous and a more objective way. This stylistic shift from the grotesque to the almost tragic is evident when the author discusses the display of Peter's mutilated body to the Russian public. The precise description of the late Czar's cadaver and the details of its physical state leave no doubt as to the true nature of his death. It is not surprising that Catherine II, so sensitive about her favorable image in the West and the growing legend of her alleged regicide, found Rulhière's account very dangerous for her

reputation. The image of an idle crowd of Peter's partisans, contemplating his remains with a feeling of abandonment, was perhaps just as offensive to her as were the legions of Western detractors, to whom Rulhière's work was mainly addressed:

Le corps fut rapporté à Pétersbourg, afin d'y être exposé. Le visage était noir, et le cou déchiré. Malgré ces horribles marques, pour assoupir les mouvements qui commençaient à se faire craindre, et prévenir que des imposteurs n'agitassent un jour l'empire sous son nom, on le laissa trois jours exposé à tout le peuple, sous le seul ornement d'un officier holsteinais. Ses soldats, devenus libres, mais toujours désarmés, se mêlèrent parmi la foule, et en regardant leur souverain, leur air se remplissait de pitié, de mépris, et d'une sorte de regret mêlé de honte. (369)

In a letter addressed to the Countess d'Egmont on August 25, 1773, Rulhière discusses Catherine's hostile reaction to the Anecdotes sur la révolution de Russie, en l'année 1762. He mentions a great turmoil, which his account provoked in Paris, referring specifically to Catherine's correspondents, Voltaire, Diderot and other less important figures of the French literary scene. Rulhière examines their endeavors to bribe him and to convince him not to publish his devastating account. The principal concern of Catherine's partisans was to preserve the positive image of the Empress, regarded by them as a great hope not only for Russia, but for all of enlightened Europe as well. Rulhière resolved not to succumb to monetary temptation, but to offer to the French public the true picture of the most recent events in Russia. The outcry of the philosophes and their firm concern to

protect Catherine's reputation in the face of evidence testifying to her indirect regicide, were considered by Rulhière a validation of his account and the ultimate proof of its truth. In spite of its heterogeneous composition and stylistic incongruity, the Anecdotes sur la révolution de Russie, en l'année 1762 was written with the purpose of presenting Russian reality in a most faithful fashion, as Rulhière claimed:

Permettez-moi, Madame, de vous rappeler quelques faits. Au premier bruit que cette histoire existait, plusieurs personnes, en correspondance avec l'impératrice de Russie, en furent alarmées pour sa gloire. Vous avez su leurs démarches; et dans l'impossibilité de me faire accepter leurs offres, devenues de jour en jour plus considérables, l'une d'elles imagina qu'elle devait employer votre autorité pour m'y résoudre; (...) Qu'est-il résulté de toutes leurs tentatives? La certitude où vous êtes d'avoir entre les mains la déposition d'un témoin incorruptible.⁴

The negative attitude of the French foreign ministry and of the French public toward Russia in the seventeenth sixties, as shown by the great popularity of Rulhière's work, changed somewhat after the demise of Choiseul in 1770. The Duc d'Aguillon, his successor in charge of French foreign relations, was less hostile than his predecessor and more open to the political reconciliation of the two biggest continental powers, Russia and France. Typical of this new trend was one of Aguillon's protégés,

⁴ Claude Carloman de Rulhière, "Seconde lettre à Madame la comtesse d'Egmont," Oeuvres posthumes de Rulhière, vol. 4 (Paris: Ménard et Desenne fils, 1819) 374-75.

the Chevalier Marie-Daniel Bourrée de Corberon, who was sent to Russia in 1775 as a secretary to the French ambassador, the Marquis de Juigné, and wrote a different, less critical account of the Muscovy than Rulhière. Times had changed; the uncompromised opinion of the French on Catherine's usurpation of power had diminished and a new rhetoric had finally been developed. The shift in the French perception of Russia was facilitated by the fact that by 1770 it was already a far more European state than before, and that most of the socio-political reforms, implemented by Peter the Great and Catherine II, had brought visible results. The cultivated circles of Parisian society ceased to consider the Muscovy a barbaric country. On the contrary, Catherine's Russia became a very important political, as well as a cultural ally and partner of France.

The Chevalier Marie-Daniel Bourrée de Corberon is a classic example of this change of French attitude. He was born in Paris on July 15, 1748 into an old Burgundian family.⁵ Along with his elder brother, he was destined for a military career, in which he was initially quite successful, but as time passed he became less interested in it and turned his attention to foreign affairs. This gradual shift, which later resulted in Corberon's

⁵ L.H. Labande, "Introduction," Un diplomate français à la cour de Catherine II, by Marie-Daniel Bourrée de Corberon, vol. 1 (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1901) II.

appointment as Juigné's secretary, can be ascribed to his preference for the exuberant life of Paris and its salons rather than for military service. In accordance with the literary tastes of his generation, Bourrée de Corberon was a spiritual disciple of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the writings of the Swiss author strongly influenced his Weltanschauung. (L.H. Labande VI-VII) Many Rousseauistic traits are easily recognizable in Un diplomate français à la cour de Catherine II 1775-1780, and Corberon's vision of Russia, although not always very positive or the most flattering, has often an idyllic character. Corberon, the Rousseauistic idealist and a great lover of nature and simple people, freed from the snares of civilization, envisaged the Muscovy differently than anyone else before him. His Russian journal intime, in addition to innumerable comments on the court and the intricacies of St. Petersburg's social life, presented his travels to other regions, his familiarity with the Russian peasantry, and also his attempts to grasp the Russian character.

The Rousseauistic perspective of Corberon's account is visible from the beginning. The very first pages of his journal intime reveal a new tone, a new dimension for the analysis of Russia. Un diplomate français à la cour de Catherine II can be regarded as a great homage to Rousseau and testifies to his strong influence on Corberon's generation. The famous Rousseauistic dichotomy of l'être and le paraître was Corberon's principal model for

literary representation of his Muscovite experience, for the development of his vision of Russia's socio-political structure, and for his search for the natural man, the Russian symbolic l'homme nu. Corberon's journal opens with a description of his preparations for the long trip and the activities preceding his departure. Anxious and highly insecure about the unknown East, he collected information from other travellers to Russia, particularly from Diderot, who had just come back from his visit to Catherine. Corberon tried to learn as much as possible about the Muscovy and made a real effort to read whatever was available. But above all he deplored his imminent separation from his beloved woman. During one of the last suppers he shared with this enchanting creature Corberon let his emotions flow freely. In a tone reminiscent of La Nouvelle Héloïse, the sorrowful Corberon tells us that his grief had no limits, and his regrets, emphasized by the sadness of the situation and the reading of Rousseau's book, produced in him a strange desire to retire to an illusory place of peace and tranquillity, where he would encounter no sorrow and pain. It remained to be discovered if St. Petersburg would indeed be this ideal place. Corberon's preromantic state of mind, which did not change during his entire stay in Russia, was present long before his departure from France:

Le souper a été d'une tristesse à périr, c'étoit la nuance de mon âme. J'étois à côté de ce que j'aime, et je me disois: "Je n'occuperai bientôt plus cette place chérie! Un autre... quelle idée?" On a lu quelques pages de Rousseau après le souper et j'ai parlé à la

marquise de cette lettre charmante de Pope, d'Héloïse à Abailard. La maman n'a pas été contente, et la jeune personne est devenue plus triste... Je me suis retiré.⁶

This Rousseauistic spirit of solitude and resignation was surely not an isolated phenomenon, but Corberon's continuous attitude toward life. On March 21, 1775, one day before departure, he described his depression, his sad feelings and emotions. The constant repetition of words such as "larmes", "pleurs", "âme", "tristesse", or of their variants, is almost obsessive. The reader can easily foresee what will happen once Corberon finally arrives in Russia, where, given the rather unfavorable commentaries of his predecessors, his pessimistic mood would surely be aggravated. The anxiety of anticipating the unknown reached its height during Corberon's last day in France:

La tristesse commençoit à s'emparer de mon âme. Mon père est parti pour la campagne; en l'embrassant, je n'ai pu retenir mes larmes. (...) Le soir, nous avons été, mon frère et moi, nous promener au jardin de l'Arsenal. Nous étions bien triste tous deux. (...) Le souper s'est passé bien tristement, j'avois la migraine et le coeur bien malade; mon frère m'a conseillé de me retirer sans rien dire: ce que j'ai fait. Il est venu me trouver dans ma chambre, nous nous sommes embrassés, en nous promettant de nous revoir; mais je quittois pour longtemp le meilleur de mes amis, le plus excellent coeur et l'âme la plus honnête. Je lui ai écrit une lettre que je baigné de pleurs; je lui mandai que je partiroyis avant l'heure que je lui avois dite, pour nous épargner à tous deux un moment trop douloureux. (36-37)

Upon his arrival in Russia, Corberon was shocked by the poverty, by the desolate state of the Russian economy,

⁶ Marie-Daniel Bourré de Corberon, Un diplomate français à la cour de Catherine II, vol. 1 (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1901) 17-18.

by the vermine, filth, negligence, bad food and the coldness of the climate. Nothing here resembled Western Europe. Corberon called Smolensk, a relatively big city by Russian standards, a "village", or, to be more precise "un amas de maisons de bois et de jardins, entouré d'un grand fossé à sec." (68) His trip from Smolensk toward Moscow was like a voyage through a desert. There was no need to stop along the road, for there was nothing to see:

Pendant les trois derniers jours que nous roulâmes sans nous arrêter, même les nuits, il ne se passa rien d'extraordinaire ni de remarquable. Le pays que nous parcourûmes me parut moins beau; on voit des parties de terres en friche et très peu de maisons. Le froid se fit sentir aussi, et nous nous aperçûmes que notre direction tendoit vers le Nord. (69)

Corberon's initial criticism of Russia did not result from its shocking poverty and economic stagnation, as was the case of many other Western travellers unaccustomed to such low standards of living, but rather from his Rousseauistic notion of l'être et le paraître. One of the most frequently repeated statements in the journal intime, at least during the first several months of his stay in the Muscovy, was the astounding propensity of the Russians to copy without reflexion the customs of other nations. This hasty imitation provoked a true disgust in Corberon. He considered the Russian elite "monkeys" stealing ideas from the foreigners and attempting to assimilate in their immature minds the cultural heritage of the West. The unpardonable fault of the Russians was to have abandoned their true inner nature by replacing it with superficial

foreign influences. Nowhere else in Europe were the être and the paraître, the essence and appearance, in such opposition as in the Muscovy. Corberon criticized the obsession of the Russians with imitating the West far more often than the desolate state of their national economy. He was quite explicit in that matter. In one of the most direct passages he did not hesitate to insult them. To produce a better effect, he juxtaposed the natural manners of a German family, residing in Russia for many years, with the ridiculous conduct of the native population:

Je trouve beaucoup de ressources dans la maison de Behmer. Le père et la mère sont de bonnes gens, qui rappellent assez l'ancienne manière franche de vivre autrefois. Il y a trois filles qui rendent cet intérieur plus piquant. La cadette est fort jolie, a une tournure naturelle qui me fait ressouvenir de l'Allemagne; car cette tournure appartient au pays. Les Russes ont le défaut contraire, d'autant plus désagréables en cela que leurs politesses, leurs manières, ce prétendu bon ton, tout cela n'est que singeries, rien ne leur en appartient. (144)

Corberon also ridiculed the obsession of the Russians with the theater and French plays, the presentation of which left much to be desired. He mocked their eagerness to counterfeit the civilized pleasures of other European societies. This imitation usually commenced at the court in St. Petersburg and then gradually spread throughout all the layers of Russian aristocracy. Theater, non-existent in the Muscovy two generations before, suddenly became the most desirable leisure activity, to the extent that it quickly degenerated into its own parody. To follow closely the theatrical interests of the ambitious Russian nobles

was a favorite pastime for Corberon. It was a source of much laughter and truly comic situations. But above all, it was a perfect reason to write another critical comment on the imitative nature of Russian high society:

Tu imagines, sans doute, mon cher, qu'après s'être bien tourmenté pour avoir du plaisir, on va se reposer, ou du moins en goûter de plus tranquilles: c'est ce qui te trompe. La vanité, qui domine ici dans tous les projets, a fait concevoir l'idée de jouer des comédies particulières. D'ailleurs, on en joue chez le grand-duc, donc il en faut jouer chez soi. Je ne connais pas de nation plus singe que celle-ci, et de plus grands courtisans qu'à la cour de Russie. Le comte Ivan, qui renchérit sur cette qualité, nous a fait part du dessein qu'il a de lever troupe chez lui, et l'on m'a proposé de l'emploi. Je te rendrai compte de l'exécution de ces nouveaux projets. Adieu, mon ami, voilà de quoi se dissiper, s'étourdir!...(172)

Corberon's acute criticism of the fake etiquette and politeness of the Russian nobles and their vain attempt to imitate the manners of Western aristocracy is exemplified in another passage of the journal intime. The author argued cogently that what had required many centuries to mature in the West, could never be so easily reproduced in Russia in just one or two generations. According to him, the Russians would never come to understand the true politeness and natural sophistication of the West. Their arrivisme, their fondness for the exterior, the paraître, rather than the être, was once again the major target of criticism:

J'y ai reconnu que la politesse des Russes ne consiste qu'en révérences, compliments d'usage, repas, etc.; mais point de ces petites attentions particulières, qui ne sont point fatigantes dans la société, qui en font le charme, en montrent la délicatesse et sont les vraies manières polies.(187)

Several of Corberon's comments resemble Locatelli's Lettres moscovites. Like the Italian aventurier, he also emphasized the impossibility of grasping the true essence of Russia and deplored its proverbial formlessness. The sharp contrast between reality and illusion, so typical of all social interactions and public institutions of the Muscovy, is exemplified in his negative attitude toward other Frenchmen, whose obsession with that country he failed to understand. What strikes the modern reader as truly amazing about his criticism is that today, two hundred years after Corberon described the spectacular fortunes of the French aventurier in Russia, the Russian situation has not changed significantly. The crowd of modern investors and fortune seekers exploring the limitless space of the Russian territory seems to be just as multiform as it was two centuries ago. The new Russian opening to the West is reminiscent of what occurred under Catherine the Great. The new post-communist Russia, as we know it from our daily press reports, is like a déjà vu phenomenon, so well depicted long ago by Corberon:

Rien n'est moins étonnant, mon cher ami, que l'engouement des Français et des Françaises sans ressource pour ce pays-cy; les fortunes subites et les friponneries en sont des raisons fortes pour bien des gens. Ces fortunes brillantes sont ordinaires dans les pays où il n'y a aucun système fixe et suivi, comme dans cet Empire; aussi subissent-elles le sort d'une vicissitude contraire pour les Russes, qui tombent du sein de l'opulence dans l'état de misère et d'ignorance où l'on voit ici plusieurs familles. Les étrangers, eux, retirent plus d'avantages; dès qu'ils ont fait leur main, ils se retirent. Ils n'aiment de la Russie que les richesses qu'ils peuvent y acquérir. (198-99)

Corberon's Russia was a country of astounding contrasts. It was a place so vast that the sun did not rise there and did not set. Everything exceeded the ordinary; nothing was surprising. Among the numerous natural phenomena Corberon described were extreme conditions in weather patterns. White nights and dark winter days, warm winds on the southern confines of Russia and icy plains of the North are just two of many examples that Corberon cited in his lengthy account. But the great contrasts, which he observed with such scrutiny, concerned not only Russian geography, but also Russian culture and social structure. Corberon claimed that nowhere else in Europe did he witness such a discrepancy between the educated elite and the ordinary people as in the Muscovy. In his opinion, the Russian Empire was inhabited by two separate nations living on the same territory. The luxury of a Parisian life style co-existed there with the most dumbfounding barbarity of the simple folk, the cultural refinement of Russian aristocrats rubbed against the pure savagery of the populace, conditions inconceivable in any other European country:

Je me suis promené avec Combes à Catherinhof en voiture. Il y avait beaucoup de monde, des carrosses en quantité, et du peuple en foule. Ces esclaves, ces moujiks, qui représentent ici le peuple des autres nations, forment un contraste étonnant avec la partie policée de la nation. On voit, d'un côté, le luxe à peu près de Paris, la tournure facile des gens qui vivent dans cette capitale, leurs richesses; de l'autre, des troupes des paysans grossiers dansent et chantent tout à la fois la même chanson que les cochers vous font entendre sur tous les chemins de l'Empire. Ce coup d'oeil de civilisation d'un côté, et de barbarie de l'autre, étonne toujours un étranger;

il semble que ce soient deux peuples, deux nations différentes sur le même sol; vous êtes à la fois au quatorzième et au dix-huitième siècle. (273-74)

Corberon noticed a profound abyss separating not only the highest and the lowest layers of the Russian population, with no middle class in between, but also a peculiar inconsistency within the Russian ruling class itself. The immense contrast between the barbarity of the Russian peasantry and the refinement of the Russian aristocracy was certainly striking for a Western traveller visiting the East in eighteenth century. What was even more striking, however, was the inner differentiation and incongruity of the nobles, who, according to Corberon, openly claimed to have been civilized by the influence of Western culture, but whose refinement was really very superficial. Once again the notion of essence and illusion is used to depict the split identity of the Russian elite. Its members had a strong pretense to sophistication, but were not fully cultured because of their incomplete, too hasty imitation of the West. Corberon considered the sarcastic nature of the Russians and their sense of excessive criticism to be a proof of their inner duality. This cultural schizophrenia originated, according to him, in the survival of primeval barbaric instincts, the impact of which was still very strong on the collective psyche of the boyars. It was also caused by the enslavement of the nobles to the throne, preserved almost intact as a

heritage of centuries of political tyranny, impeding the true cultural progress:

Voilà les Russes, mon ami; enclins à l'épigramme, ils lâchent à son défaut des grossièretés contre tout le monde, dès qu'ils en trouvent l'occasion. Amis, parens, gens en place, leur souverain même n'est pas à l'abri de leurs sarcasmes, et c'est à la table du marquis, qui les comble d'honnêtetés, qu'ils se permettent les propos les plus indiscrets, les plus sots même, s'ils en trouvent l'occasion. C'est une preuve de foiblesse sans doute, et c'est là, où ce fier Russe, au milieu de son faste et de sa grandeur, laisse voir l'empreinte de l'esclavage qui partout et dans tout le suit et le décèle.⁷

In his search for the true essence of the Russian soul, recently corrupted by hasty modernization, Corberon found his ideal, his quintessential Russian l'homme nu, free and untouched by the influence of the West, in a public bath. Let us point out, however, that his experience of the famous Russian banya was rather ambiguous. The French diplomat was appalled by the lack of elementary dignity in the conduct of the naked Russians. One of the reasons for this cultural shock was that his entrance to the bath did not produce any effect on the gathered crowd of men and women. Nudity and obscenity were the normal manner of behaving there. The involuntary, rather submissive and disinterested laughs of the Russians who welcomed this sophisticated Westerner to the bath, epitomized for Corberon the entire Russian culture, its formlessness and its laissez-faire character. The Russian

⁷ Marie-Daniel Bourré de Corberon, Un diplomate français à la cour de Catherine II, vol. 2 (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1901) 378.

l'homme nu, free of all Western pretense and pure in his primeval essence, was a person who did not care, who expressed no curiosity and who was unproductively stupid. Corberon did not fail to allude with exasperation to the psychological enslavement of the Muscovites. The sadness of Russian culture and the failure of the Czars to reform the unreformable Russian soul are best exemplified by the following lines:

Les femmes n'ont pas été plus étonnées de nous voir que les hommes: au port Saint-Paul de Paris, nous aurions été hués; ici, on s'est mis à rire en nous voyant, et surtout une jeune femme jolie, que nous regardions avec complaisance, Aribert et moi, lorsque notre spectacle fut abrégé par l'invitation peu civile de l'inspecteur qui nous pria de sortir. En général, mon ami, de cet étalage de nudités qui ne sont pas belles à voir, ce coup d'oeil est triste, en ce qu'il vous offre les effets de l'esclavage et de l'incivilisation, c'est-à-dire le morne et la stupidité qui règnent sur les visages, et le peu d'expression, soit de plaisir, soit de peine, qu'ils montrent. (362)

One of the most remarkable images of Russia in French eighteenth-century literature can be found in Corberon's letter regarding the national character of the Russians and his criticism of their spiritual immaturity. To elaborate on his favorite subject, the writer used once again the ideas of his master, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He attacked the Russian nobles on account of their propensity for luxury and vice, resulting from superficial imitation of the West and incomplete civilizing progress. According to Corberon, the Russians resembled a green fruit without juice or taste, rotten before it reached maturity. The sophisticated heritage of France or England, which the

Russians were avidly assimilating, but without deeper reflexion, and attempted to reach by imprudent shortcuts, did not raise their standards. On the contrary, their imitation of the foreigners was destroying their soul and rendering them more savage than they already were. After the accelerated implementation of the socio-political reforms the Russians found themselves somewhere between total barbarity and unattainable culture, preserving the worst of their national past, and assimilating the worst of the imitated model. Such a situation in the middle of the road, without any chance to reach the desired goal, was certainly not to be envied:

Quelque envie qu'on ait de bien penser d'eux, il faut malgré soi en revenir à la triste vérité qu'ils nous font voir sur leur compte: ce sont de vrais sauvages, qui n'ont pas ce nerf appartenant aux peuples qui ne sont pas encore policés; ils n'en ont que la rusticité. Ils joignent à ce défaut l'abrutissement des esclaves et la mollesse des peuples corrompus par la trop grande civilisation. Enclins à tous les vices qu'amène le luxe, corrompus sans avoir passé par les différentes gradations de la maturité, ils ressemblent à des fruits verts et pourris, qui n'ont ni sève ni douceur et qui ne pourront jamais parvenir à la perfection.(75)

The remedy that Corberon prescribed to cure Russia's problems and to transform its unedifying socio-political structure also stemmed from his reading of Rousseau. He proposed for the Russian people a radical separation from the influence of the ruling aristocrats, deeply corrupted by their uncritical imitation of all the vices of the West, and urged them to return to more natural conditions and rustic simplicity, reminiscent of the old customs of

their past. Only then, aided by a series of wise, prudent monarchs with philosophical inclinations, would Russia develop the dormant germs of its native greatness and splendor. Corberon's proposal might sound like a utopian vision of a dreamer, or another variation on Rousseau's famous discourse on the arts and sciences, yet his good intentions and hope for the better future of Russia cannot be denied. In spite of his critical attitude toward the present state of the Muscovy, Corberon proved to be a true optimist about the new Russian generation. This optimism was certainly typical of the recent wave of French diplomats, whose image of Russia, although not always the most flattering, differed significantly from that of Locatelli or Rulhière:

Il n'y auroit peut-être qu'un moyen idéal de rendre à cette nation le germe de grandeur qu'elle couvoit dans son sein: ce seroit de séparer la génération future de celle qui existe, pour la préserver de la gangrène qui la ronge maintenant. Quand on auroit fait cette séparation salutaire et rendu la nation à sa propre origine, à sa simplicité naturelle, deux ou trois souverains philosophes de suite pourroient l'élever graduellement à la perfection, mais avec le temps et sans crises, sans mouvements forcés et contre nature. (75-76)

Louis Philippe de Ségur, born in 1753, was one of the last important Frenchmen of the eighteenth century to visit Russia and to write a truly fascinating account regarding both his prolonged stay at the court of Catherine the Great and his travels across the Russian Empire. It was published under the title of Mémoires, souvenirs et anecdotes. In addition to his Russian

experience of the seventeen eighties, Ségur also described his political and literary career prior to departure to Russia as a French diplomat. Ségur's Mémoires end in 1789, upon the author's return to revolutionary France, which was shortly followed by his exile.⁸ In this interesting book, relating with the utmost attention to detail the political and social events of the Imperial Court, the author painted several impressive portraits of the highest members of the Russian ruling class. Ségur presented a very elaborate picture of the daily activities of diplomatic, literary and aristocratic circles. He discussed the new trends in philosophy arriving in St. Petersburg from the West, the changing artistic tastes of the Russians and their gradual, but successful assimilation of European values. Ségur penetrated with great insight the complexities of Russia's governmental machine as well. But what is perhaps the single most important aspect of his account is that he left us one of the most exquisite analyses of Catherine's personality. Nobody else before him had depicted the Russian Empress with such precision. No other French writer captured with the same understanding of historical significance the mature years of her glorious reign and her greatest political and military successes.

⁸ M. F. Barrière, "Avant-Propos," Mémoires, souvenirs et anecdotes by Louis Philippe de Ségur, vol. 1 (Paris: Librairie De Firmin Didot Frères, 1859) VI.

During the time of Ségur's residence in St. Petersburg, Catherine transformed Russia to the point of non-recognition. In 1764 she confiscated the property of the Orthodox Church thus limiting its power far more than any of her predecessors. In 1767 she initiated the process of reshaping entirely the political system of her adopted country, which culminated in the unprecedented administrative reform of 1775. That year marked the creation of the local governments, unknown earlier in Russia. The Russian Empire was divided into several medium-size provinces and districts, a condition that facilitated more efficient administration and accelerated the economic development of the country. At the same time it also consolidated the absolute power of the Russian monarch and increased Catherine's personal control over the land's progress. The new reforms brought forth a significant wave of settlers, both Russian and foreign, who colonized the recently incorporated provinces on the Black Sea. In 1785 Catherine established the Charter of the Russian nobility, which exonerated the nobles from obligatory military service, recognized their rural possessions and guaranteed them the right of unlimited inheritance without fear of arbitrary confiscations, so frequent in the past. Finally, in 1783 Catherine recreated the Russian Academy, founded by Peter the Great, and in 1786 she established new schools, providing open education for all classes of Russian society. However, it is not the socio-political importance

of the Russian reforms that is the subject of our analysis of Ségur's work. We shall not be concerned with the personality of Catherine the Great and Russia's changing cultural scene either. Instead, we are going to discuss the author's original and pre-romantic perspective regarding one particular aspect of his stay in Russia, namely his trip across the empire to the Crimean Peninsula in the company of the Empress, and his impressions of that exotic place. It is precisely in the Crimean fragment of the Mémoires that Ségur showed his greatest literary talent. By turning a simple description of local nature and landscapes into a masterpiece, he proved to be a skilfull writer, or even poet. Ségur's fascination with the natural beauty of Crimea, its complex history, exotic character of Muslim architecture, popular customs and art was truly remarkable. In fact, this eighteenth-century French traveller deserves to be placed with the younger romantic writers of the next generation, whose attraction to the non-European civilizations was certainly not stronger or more original. Ségur's impressionistic description of Crimea and its surrounding territories is like a fairy tale. It is built up like a mosaic of vibrating colors, intense fragrances and magic, somnolent voices of the Orient. The stylistic devices and richness of vocabulary, the precision of observation and an almost visionary perspective on experienced natural phenomena are quite surprising for a person whose intellectual up-

bringing and sensitivity belonged to the age of Enlightenment. Here is how the nineteenth-century editor of the Mémoires, souvenirs et anecdotes, M. F. Barrière, introduced the reader to Ségur's extraordinary journey across Russia and how he expressed some of his thoughts about the literary account of our French diplomat:

Il fut (Louis Philippe de Ségur) de ce célèbre voyage entrepris par la czarine et sa cour en Crimée. Huit cent lieues parcourues au milieu des réceptions et des fêtes, cinq cents chevaux commandés à chaque relais pour emporter les voyageurs sur des traîneaux à travers les neiges et la glace, des bûchers de sapins éclairant la route pendant la nuit, le Boristhène étonné de voir ses eaux solitaires couvertes de flotilles pavoisées, des armées exécutant des simulacres de combats dans des déserts, des villes et des populations improvisées, des rencontres de princes et de souverains presque à chaque halte, tout prête à l'histoire, dans ce trajet, les surprises et le merveilleux des contes de fées. (Barrière, IV-V)

Ségur's true fascination with Russia, so exceptional when compared to the indifferent, if not hostile attitude of other French travellers, is evident from the very beginning of the Russian part of his Mémoires. Indeed, his account is very different from that of Locatelli or Rulhière both in style and content. One of the reasons for this change might be attributed to the fact that Ségur visited Russia much later than his predecessors. During that time some of the reforms implemented by the Russian monarchs finally showed tangible results. Ségur is less critical than the other French writers. Russian aristocracy and the court of St. Petersburg are not in his opinion as corrupt and blindly imitative of Western values as they seemed to Corberon. The artistic tastes of the

Russians, both in literature and visual arts, had a certain degree of originality for Ségur and he did not consider them a copy of European heritage. Russian hospitality, so ridiculed fifty years earlier by Locatelli, is valued by Ségur as a true virtue, not just as a tactical device to dupe naive foreigners and cheat on them by stealing as much money as possible:

La Russie a d'ailleurs un droit réel à la bienveillance des étrangers: nulle part ils ne trouvent une plus courtoise hospitalité. Jamais je n'oublierai l'accueil, non seulement obligeant, mais cordial, qu'on me fit dans les brillantes sociétés de Pétersbourg. En peu de temps les liaisons que je formai avec des hommes d'un vrai mérite et les femmes les plus aimables purent me faire oublier que là j'étais un étranger.⁹

Ségur's cordial attitude toward his generous Russian hosts and his feeling of security differ completely from the hostile treatment experienced and described with uncompromised criticism fifty years earlier by Locatelli. This warm feeling explains perhaps why the general atmosphere of Ségur's Mémoires is so friendly and inviting when compared with the negative accounts of previous French travellers. Another factor that distinguishes this French diplomat from earlier writers is that Ségur seems to concentrate on slightly different issues of the Russian reality than his predecessors. Following the spirit of his time and developing the nascent fascination of his

⁹ Louis Philippe de Ségur, Mémoires, souvenirs et anecdotes, vol. 1 (Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot Frères, 1859) 345-46.

generation for distant cultures, he put more emphasis on the exotic experience rather than on familiar European themes. The Russian ruling classes of the late eighteenth century were sufficiently European; thus any discussion concerning the issue of hasty westernization and its devastating consequences on the Russian soul seemed superfluous to Ségur.¹⁰ His attention shifts instead to the Russian Orient with all its visual exuberance and local color, to the Muslim, or rather multi-cultural Crimea, recently incorporated into Russia as a consequence of the military conquest of Catherine II.

¹⁰ Ségur realized that in spite of the socio-political reforms undertaken in Russia in the course of the eighteenth century, particularly during the reign of Catherine the Great, there were many remnants of the old customs not entirely eradicated by the pro-western rulers. Yet he considered the conservative old guard as mere vestiges, constituting a small minority. The surviving residue of the old barbaric Russia was for him a matter of generational conflict rather than a serious cultural problem. But in spite of the surviving traces of the old times, the Russians opposed to new trends and clinging obstinately to the ancient tradition were difficult to recognize, as Ségur claimed:

Au moment où j'arrivai à Pétersbourg, il restait dans cette capitale, sous les formes extérieures d'une civilisation européenne, beaucoup de vestiges des temps antérieurs, et, au milieu d'une élite de seigneurs et des dames qui s'étaient instruits, qui avaient voyagé, et ne se montraient sur aucun point inférieurs aux personnes les plus aimables des cours les plus brillantes, on en voyait encore plusieurs, et c'était les plus âgés, dont l'accent, la physionomie, les habitudes, l'ignorance et l'entretien stérile tenaient plus à l'époque des boiards et des czars qu'à celle de Catherine II. Cependant ce n'était qu'après quelque examen qu'on pouvait faire cette distinction. (332)

Ségur's first discovery of the non-European other occurred when Catherine's cortège, of which he was a member, descended across the Ukraine to the south. Shortly before the final arrival in Crimea, Ségur noticed the scenic beauty of the Ukrainian steppes. He was profoundly impressed by the interminable expanses covered with undulating grass, the melancholy character of which produced in him an almost ecstatic effect. Ségur compared the steppes to the green ocean, agitated by a regular, unsubsidying action of the winds, yet somnolent and intoxicating in its endless monotony. The vast, open fields of the Ukrainian south, where nothing arrests human eyes and where nature evokes in the observer a profound feeling of sadness, were Ségur's first premonition of the fairly-tale land, which he was just about to enter. The Ukrainian steppes were a gate to the exotic Orient:

L'Afrique a ses déserts; ceux de l'Orient sont moins arides, ce sont des déserts de verdure. Des troupeaux immenses de moutons, des haras nombreux de chevaux, animent seuls ces profondes solitudes où on les laisse errer toute l'année.

Au premier coup d'oeil, cet immense et verdoyant horizon, où rien n'arrête la vue, produit sur l'esprit la même impression que l'Océan: il semble donner plus de grandeur aux idées, plus de profondeur aux réflexions; mais, à mesure qu'on s'avance, cette uniformité inspire la tristesse, et bientôt on se fatigue péniblement en ne voyant, au-dessus et autour de soi, que le ciel et des prés qui n'ont point de bornes.¹¹

¹¹ Louis Philippe de Ségur, Mémoires, souvenirs et anecdotes, vol. 2 (Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot Frères, 1859) 46.

Upon arrival in Crimea, Ségur experienced a sudden transformation of decor. The almost deserted, endless steppes of the southern Ukraine changed unexpectedly into the mountainous landscape of cultivated fields, green valleys, picturesque hills, beautiful rural houses and hard-working peasants. In comparison with the monotonous Ukrainian scenery Crimea appeared to Ségur like Arcadia:

Le 31, ayant traversé le Salguire et quittant enfin les plaines désertes, nous nous approchâmes de la chaîne des montagnes, et nous jouîmes délicieusement, dans leurs vallées, du plaisir de revoir des ombrages épais, des coteaux pittoresques, des champs cultivés, de jolies maisons, des paysans actifs, laborieux, enfin tout le mouvement de la vie, dont nous avions presque perdu la trace en traversant les steppes incultes et solitaires. (61)

Ségur's first direct contact with the Muslim inhabitants of Crimea was a source of more astonishment and discovery. He was perplexed by the otherness of these people, by their Oriental somnolence, indifference to the Russians, their profound apathy, so alien to the European spirit of curiosity, and their fatalistic philosophy. Ségur noticed the passive reaction of the local population to Catherine's splendid cortège. This indifference, if not open hostility, can be ascribed to the fact that the Russian Empress entered a recently subjugated Muslim territory, conquered from Turkey by virtue of a massive military intervention. Naturally, the new Christian overlords could not expect a cordial welcome from the humiliated, yet proud locals:

Ce qui m'étonna le plus dans ces premiers moments, ce furent le flegme, l'orgueil et l'indifférence apathique ou affectée des marchands turcs et tartares:

vieux ou jeunes, ces Turcs, ces Tartares, assis tranquillement devant la porte de leurs maisons, ou dans l'intérieur de leur boutiques, loin de montrer aucune surprise, aucune curiosité, aucun mouvement expressif de joie ou de colère à la vue du cortège, si nouveau et si imposant pour eux, qui s'offrait avec tant de pompe à leurs regards, restaient immobiles, sans se lever, sans diriger leurs yeux de notre côté; quelquefois même il nous tournaient le dos.(63)

Regardless of the hostile attitude of the locals and the overwhelming atmosphere of political tension, Ségur was deeply touched by the exotic beauty of Crimea. His favorite activity during the hot summer days was to relax on a sofa and to admire the surrounding scenery. He would gaze with a feeling of utmost delight at the sub-tropical vegetation covering his window, listen to the enchanting water-music of a nearby stream, inhale the intoxicating fragrances of flowers, and, in a word, he would give himself entirely to the pleasures of the "mollesse orientale", enjoying wholeheartedly the state of Oriental dolce far niente:

Un jour faible éclairait l'appartement: les cristaux des fenêtres étaient chargés de peintures; lors même qu'on les ouvrait, le soleil trouvait à peine passage à travers les branches nombreuses de rosiers, de lauriers, de jasmins, de grenadier et d'orangers, qui couvraient ces fenêtres de leurs feuillages et leur servaient, pour ainsi dire, de jalousie. Je me souviens qu'étant couché sur mon divan, accablé par extrême chaleur, et jouissant cependant avec délice du murmure de l'eau, de la fraîcheur de l'ombrage et du parfum des fleurs, je m'abandonnais à la mollesse orientale, rêvant et végétant en vrai pacha.(64)

Ségur was not only an esthete admiring the exotic nature and landscapes of the Orient. He was above all an experienced diplomat, invested with an acute sense of observation and political insight. His account of Crimea

is that of a conscientious sociologist, sensitive to the complex issues regarding the tragedy of a conquered civilization, absorbed into the orbit of a more potent Russian invader. In spite of his negative opinion about many aspects of Muslim culture, Ségur was deeply concerned with the deplorable fate of the Crimean population, ruthlessly exploited by the new masters. But the unprecedented invasion of the Christians carried into the most private sphere of Muslim spiritual life was a perfect occasion for Ségur to familiarize himself with the culture of Islam. Perhaps some of Ségur's comments on Muslim fanaticism and his description of certain mystical practices of the followers of Islam might be regarded by the modern reader as a patronizing attitude of a victorious European. Yet the precision of Ségur's account and the exoticism of the event occurring inside the mosque make the following passage a masterpiece of social journalism:

Les mahométans soumis ne pouvaient rien nous refuser: ainsi nous entrâmes dans la mosquée pendant les prières. Nous y vîmes un de ces spectacles qui attristent la raison humaine: trente ou quarante derviches fanatiques, qu'on appelait en arabe des tourneurs, pirouettaient sur eux-mêmes avec la rapidité d'une toupie, et en criant de toutes leurs forces allah-hou, allah-hou, allah-hou, avec une telle violence, qu'à la fin ils tombaient la poitrine sur la terre, exténués et presque sans respiration. (64-65)

The reason for Ségur's trip to Crimea was a desire to participate in Catherine's ceremonial procession to the South, undertaken to legitimize the newest territorial acquisitions of the growing Russian Empire. Catherine's

goal was to inspect the latest spoils seized from the Turkish hands and to validate the incorporation of Crimea into Russia. Her cortège resembled the ancient warriors marching into subjugated land. Ségur depicted Catherine's great joy. He presented her as a triumphant conqueror, the benefactor of Christendom, saved by her armies from the Muslim barbarians. Although occasionally Ségur expressed some sensitivity to the suffering of the people of Crimea, his true political sympathy is certainly on the Christian side. Catherine's glorious victory, her imperial pride and brilliance were enchanting music to his ear:

L'impératrice ne s'arrêta que cinq jours à Bachtchi-Sarai: la satisfaction de cette princesse brillait sur tous ses traits; elle jouissait, avec l'orgueil d'une souveraine, d'une femme et d'une chrétienne, de se voir assise sur le trône des Tartares, jadis conquérants de la Russie, et qui, peu d'années avant leur défaite, venaient encore ravager ses provinces, troubler son commerce, dévaster ses nouvelles conquêtes et en rendre la possession incertaine. (65)

The exotic character of Ségur's trip is epitomized by his description of the byzantine magnificence and splendor of Catherine's triumphal procession. In one instance, however, the author was carried away by his fantasy and depicted the imperial fire-works as a true fairy-tale spectacle. Ségur regarded this nocturnal display of lights as an imitation of Crimean scenery, its intoxicating fragrances and colors. He emphasized the close correlation between the natural and the artificial. The mastery of his style and his notion of art imitating and complementing nature created a peculiar setting, unforgettable and

inimitable. In Ségur's literary universe, art and nature both paid homage to the victorious Russian Empress:

Lorsque Catherine descendit le soir de son palais pour jouir de la fraîcheur de l'ombre, de la limpidité des eaux et du parfum des fleurs, elle vit tout à coup, au moment où le soleil disparaissait au fond des sombres vallées, toutes les collines, dans un horizon de cinq lieues de diamètre, illuminées par trois cordons de feu de diverses couleurs, et, au milieu de ce brillant horizon, une montagne conique dont le centre étincelant formait en traits lumineux le chiffre de l'impératrice; du sommet de ce mont partit un magnifique feu d'artifice, couronné par un bouquet de trois cent mille fusées.(75)

The homage of art and nature, paid to the victorious Catherine the Great during the fire-works, symbolizes Ségur's own homage to the triumphant new Russia. In contrast to many other French visitors of the past, Ségur is a genuine Russophile who strongly believed in the future of that country. Diderot claimed once that Russia reminded him of a giant standing on feet of clay. We shall see that Ségur's attitude toward this issue differed from that of his predecessor. Although the author of the Mémoires knew that Russia's international position was not yet sufficiently solidified to enable it to compete with France or England, he realized that it would eventually become a major continental power. He was perfectly aware that it would take many more years before the Czars consolidated enough strength to make Russia the most potent nation in Europe. Yet he considered such plans plausible and sided openly with the ambitions of the Russian rulers. Ségur's Russia is not the barbaric, evil empire of Locatelli. Neither is it a grotesque state, as

represented earlier by Rulhière, where everything was possible and where no absurdity was too surprising. The Russia of Ségur is a giant, still vulnerable in many regards and not yet completely self-confident, but with the best prospects for the future. Diderot's Russian feet of clay turned with the passage of time into Ségur's solid feet of bronze. The attitude of the author of the Mémoires was not an isolated case. It exemplified the generational shift of French public opinion toward Russia, occurring at the end of eighteenth century. Napoleon's unedifying experience demonstrated twenty-five years later that Russia was no longer an exotic, marginal country at the end of the civilized world, but a powerful, modern European empire worthy of serious consideration:

Il n'en est pas cependant moins vrai qu'à cette époque, ainsi que le disait Diderot, la Russie n'était encore qu'un colosse aux pieds d'argile, mais on a laissé durcir cette argile, et elle s'est changée en bronze. (85)

Conclusion

On June 21, 1766, Voltaire wrote to Catherine the Great asking the Russian Empress for assistance in his famous campaign to help the Sirven family. The Patriarch of Ferney began with the following laudatory statement, emphasizing the unprecedented historical changes in Russia and that country's new leading role in European affairs:

Madame,

C'est maintenant vers l'étoile du Nord qu'il faut que tous les yeux se tournent. Votre Majesté Impériale a trouvé un chemin vers la gloire inconnue avant elle à tous les autres souverains. Aucun ne s'était avisé de répandre des bienfaits à sept ou huit cents lieues de ses États. Vous êtes devenue réellement la bienfaitrice de l'Europe et vous avez acquis plus de sujets par la grandeur de votre âme, que d'autres n'en peuvent conquérir par les armes.¹

Voltaire asked Catherine for a special kind of assistance, however. He emphasized that he was not requesting financial aid, for he was convinced that moral support would be the most useful help for the oppressed Sirvens. Thus all he asked the Russian Empress was to place her "glorious" name on top of the list of eighteenth-century European intellectuals engaged in the famous Voltairian initiative of écraser l'infâme.

Il y a peut-être de l'indiscrétion à oser implorer la protection de Votre Majesté pour les Sirven, après les bontés dont elle a comblé la famille Calas. (...) Je ne prends la liberté de vous écrire, Madame, que pour vous prier de modérer vos bontés. Le moindre secours nous suffira. Nous ne demandons que l'honneur de placer votre auguste nom à la tête de ceux qui nous

¹ Voltaire, Correspondance, ed. Theodore Besterman, vol. 8 (Paris: Gallimard, 1983) 508.

aident à écraser le fanatisme et à rendre les hommes plus tolérants et plus humains.(508)

The idea of a Russian monarch presiding over an international intellectual community whose primary cause was to fight intolerance and fanaticism would have been hardly imaginable a few decades before. Russia, until the end of the seventeenth century, was considered an Asiatic country. It represented no more than a vast cultural and political desert, chaotic, utterly barbaric and unworthy of serious attention. Very few Frenchmen ventured to that distant country and those who dared to travel there were profoundly shocked by astounding cultural differences. To illustrate the highly negative impressions of the Westerners travelling to the East it suffices to recall Avril's devastating account of the maleureux empire, a term often used by French Jesuit to depict the unedifying state of Russia and to represent the backwardness of that alien country. Avril's description of the cruelties and debaucheries committed by the Russian populace during carnival festivities can certainly be compared with unforgettable passages depicting grotesque adventures of Gargantua et Pantagruel. The only difference was that Rablais's book was a work of fiction and Avril's account represented faithfully the Russian reality. We have seen that most seventeenth-century literary testimonials did not differ significantly from Avril's book. Heavy drinking, a devastated or non-existent economy, police oppressiveness, tyranny, legal arbitrariness and the

secrecy of Russian public affairs were the common denominator of the accounts written by the contemporaries of Philippe Avril. This highly negative opinion of Russia was carried right into the eighteenth century. The critical remarks of Locatelli and Rulhière, reminiscent of earlier sources, were not isolated, nor were they exceptional. Russia in the mid-eighteenth century, although different from what it had been in 1700, was still commonly regarded as a country in dire need of additional reforms. In fact, many French intellectuals and authors, such as the Marquis d'Argens, considered the historical changes undertaken by Peter the Great and Catherine II unsatisfactory. Even Corberon, whose long stay at the court of St. Petersburg in the seventeenth seventies enabled him to write one of the most detailed accounts about Russia, did not praise uncritically the extent of its westernization. And yet, soon after Peter's death in 1725, the French public began to recognize Russia's cultural and political potential and paid greater attention to its evolutionary course. Russia quickly became one of the most popular subjects in many literary genres. Peter the Great and his reforms resulted in the creation of a myth, initiated in France by Fontenelle's famous Éloge and subsequently developed by Voltaire, Thomas and many other French writers of the period. Peter was regarded by the philosophes as the embodiment of the new Europe. His complex personality combined all the

precepts of the Enlightenment. Not only did he become a symbol of the new Russia, but he was generally considered by many French writers a beacon of a more civilized, cosmopolitan Europe à la française. Peter's incomplete reforms of the first part of the eighteenth century were resumed by Catherine II, another heroine of the French Enlightenment. It is during her reign that Russia finally entered the family of civilized European countries. Russia's image, as represented in French literature, became that of an artistically thriving and culturally changing place. The former stereotype of a vast barbaric desert was replaced with the picture of an energetic, upwardly mobile new European power. Russian poetry and the birth of Russian national literature, mentioned by the author of La Frivolité, Catherine's generous acquisition of Diderot's library, praised so highly by Dorat, her support for the Voltairian campaign of écraser l'infâme and her political genius, so admired by La Harpe, testify to the fact that Russia's presence in the French collective psyche and her position as an equal, rather than junior partner, solidified. There is no doubt that Catherine's reforms in the arts and sciences were truly unprecedented.² Peter created the political and military

² Basil Dmytryshyn, a Russian scholar and eighteenth-century specialist, writes the following about Peter's and especially Catherine's role in changing the cultural image of Russia in the West:

Next to diplomacy, the eighteenth-century Russians made the most outstanding breakthrough in culture. Until Peter I's time Russian culture was under the

foundations of the empire, but it was Catherine II who developed Russian artistic life and made Russian culture much more sophisticated. Is it then surprising that she quickly became the subject of many occasional poems, innumerable épîtres and letters? Catherine the Great, the embodiment of a new, sophisticated Russia, was generally considered by the enlightened philosophes a wise legislator, Minerva and Semiramis of the North, protector of culture and to a certain extent a free-thinking idealist. For that reason Voltaire asked her to preside over his international campaign to help the oppressed Sirvens, a petition impossible to imagine just a few decades earlier.

Regardless of its new image and the enthusiasm which generated in the Parisian intellectual salons, Russia of the second half of the eighteenth century still had many detractors in France. Autroche, Rulhière and Corberon represent the voice of many French writers who did not view Russia's historical transformation and its cultural advancement with the same uncritical attitude as Voltaire,

domination of the Orthodox Church. (...) Peter I altered all that. (...) The trend encountered opposition but it became irreversible. Russia began to produce what became a whole galaxy of native literary figures, explorers, publicists, scientists, architects, painters, historians, journalists, and other men of culture and learning. The real blossoming of this achievement came during the reign of Catherine II, who is considered by many to be the most enlightened of all despots and a mistress of many trades.

Basil Dmytryshyn, Modernization of Russia under Peter I and Catherine II (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974) 4-5.

Grimm, Diderot and Thomas. In many respects their criticism calls to mind that of a suspicious Jean-Jacques Rousseau. But their uncompromising campaign to denigrate the Russian Empress and to propagate Catherine's image as a hypocritical tyrant had a very important side-effect. Far from convincing the French public about the unreformable nature of Russia, people like Autroche and Rulhière increased the awareness of French readers about that distant country and popularized it a great deal. Thanks to the lively discussions and literary pamphlets of pro and anti-Russian camps, Russia was no longer considered a marginal subject. Russian themes were present in the salons, in political cabinets, in academic circles and in popular literature. Its westernization, the extent of which was very often questioned by sceptical thinkers, was nonetheless generally accepted as a fact and considered irreversible. The final stage in this long and arduous process of the French accepting Russia as an equal partner, initiated at the beginning of the century by Fontenelle's Éloge, is best exemplified by the Count de Ségur. For this French diplomat, who stayed in St. Petersburg until 1789, the issue of Russia's westernization was irrelevant. Ségur considered Russian ruling classes entirely civilized. In his posthumously published Mémoires he did not even deem it necessary to elaborate on that subject. European Russia was a fait accompli for him. Ségur was thus one of the first French

diplomats to create a solid foundation for the future military and political alliance between Russia and France, which eventually resulted in an Entente cordiale. Ségur, in many respects, represents the treshhold of the nineteenth century, both in his romantic image of the exotic Russian South and his vision of Russia as the major strategic partner of France in continental affairs. But this is another vast subject, which goes beyond the scope of our present work.

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