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The Penitent's Pulpit: Alexander Radishchev and the French Enlightenment

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The Penitent’s Pulpit: Alexander Radischev and the French Enlightenment

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Today historians may question the role of ideas in material change, but in the last decade of the
18th century monarchs held no such reservations. With the fall of Bourbon absolutism in 1789,
Continental Europe saw the extinction of its cultural and political frontrunner and the rise of a
revolutionary menace. In Russia, especially, where Catherine II had decades earlier embraced French
culture and Enlightened philosophy with a fervor that astounded even the Parisians, the Tsarina grew
increasingly wary of the “French madness.” Cutting short her longstanding relationship with the great
philosophes, she restricted freedom of the press and maintained an ever-wary grip on her power, quick
to condemn any publication that stunk of revolution. Her anxieties extended well beyond domestic
borders. When the Poles introduced sweeping liberal reforms to their government in 1791, for example,
Catherine’s response was to eliminate her foundering neighboring in the second and third Partitions. By
her death in 1796, Catherine’s famous comment to Diderot had proven prophetic: “You, a philosopher,
work on paper, which will bear everything; I, a poor empress, work on human skin which is much more
sensitive.”

Into this unfriendly milieu entered Alexander Radischev, the son of a wealthy landowner,
whose 1790 A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow easily qualifies as one of the most radical and
anti-absolutist products of the Russian Enlightenment. The Journey is an unusual work, tracing an
unnamed narrator’s progress from the new Russian capital to the old. While the book does attempt a
global survey of the classes and communities that comprise the Russian nation, Radischev’s work is
most jarring in its critical and unflinching evaluation of serfdom and its sharp condemnation of feudal
landlords. The style is similarly unique: a mix of Enlightenment catch-alls, Slavonic scripture and

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1 Quoted in Walicki, 6
travelogue, it struck an unwelcome chord for those in or near the seat of power. Unsurprisingly, the *Journey* earned Radishchev a long stay in Siberia and the temporary loss of all property and possessions.

But how threatening was the *Journey*? The question is by no means an obvious one and prompts several others in turn: How heavily did the Radishchev’s work draw on French Enlightenment and Revolutionary texts? How did it incorporate those texts into its larger project? What role does religion play in its moralizing? What claim does it make for or against monarchy in the last analysis? To shed light on these issues, we will consider first the structure, then the ideological content of the *Journey*, paying particular attention to the use and misuse of French and other foreign tracts. Ultimately, our investigation will shed light on the mentality of both ruler and dissident in Russia during the era of liberal revolutions.

While Radishchev’s message of clemency and tolerance towards the poor echoes the morality tales and hagiographies of earlier generations, the structure of the *Journey* bears no similarity whatsoever. The work more closely resembles the sentimentalist genre made popular by Goethe in his *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) and later by Rousseau in his *Confessions* (1782). This new school of literature, in which a central protagonist engages in self-pitying introspection and suffers excruciating emotional contortions, had an enormous impact in intellectual circles, reaching an audience far beyond Paris and Berlin. Both the *Confessions* and *Werther* elicited an impassioned outpouring of empathy and interest. Rousseau kept up hundreds of deeply personal correspondences with his readers and received thousands of letters over the course of his life, most addressed only to “Jean-Jacques.”

The response to *Werther* was perhaps more stunning: the moody book set off a wave of suicides across Germany, and soon after its publication Goethe’s home in Weimar became a destination for hundreds of young

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2 For a sense of the scope of Rousseau’s correspondences, see the forty-six volume *Correspondences Complet de Rousseau*, ed. R. A. Leigh, Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1965.
Europeans. By the 1780s, when Radishchev began writing the *Journey*, it would have been extraordinary for any high-born Russian with literary aspirations not to have encountered either work.

We can be certain Radishchev knew of at least one: at one point in the *Journey* Radishchev invokes the Goethe novel, remarking "my tears were as sweet to me as those which had once been called forth by Werther." This is no surprise: Catherine had sent Radishchev to Leipzig for his university education in 1767, the year of the first Russian translation of Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*. In college the young Radishev mastered French and German and read voraciously in both languages. His erudition did not falter over the subsequent decades. Catherine had only to read the first thirty pages of the *Journey* before, thanks to the many references to Montesquieu to Grotius and Montesquieu, she properly guessed its author.

It seems equally likely that Radishchev had been exposed to Rousseau, although he never mentions the famous Swiss author by name. In 1789, one year before the *Journey* appeared in print, Radishchev published his *Life of Fedor Vasilevich Ushakov*. Jesse Clardy has argued in his biography of Radishchev that *Ushakov*, written shortly after the death of Radishchev’s wife and son in 1783, is modeled on the *Confessions*. Indeed, the work is less a biography than an expression of moral anguish. Its opening sentence is particularly revealing: “I seek in this my own consolation and would like to unfold before you, my dear friend, the innermost recesses of my heart.” The opening paragraphs of the *Journey* are more somber, but no less expressive: “Miserable one,” Radishchev says to himself, “Where is everything that used to attract you? Where is the joy that used to make life pleasant?” The work is not always so melancholy, but this plainchant tone returns often enough to merit comparison with Radishchev’s 1789 lamentation.

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3 For more information on the response to *Werther*, see A. Alvarez, *The Savage God*, 207-209
4 Radishchev, 215-216
5 McConnel, 15
6 Clardy, 43
7 Quoted in Lang, 59
8 Radishchev, 42
If the *Journey* is more panoramic and extroverted than *Werther* and the *Confessions*, it nonetheless owes much of its structure to both works. Like Rousseau and Goethe, Radishchev divides his first-person narrative into epistles and journal entries of varying lengthy. These entries, while ostensibly recounting some portion of the larger narrative, are more often than not springboards for heightened and at times narcissistic revelations of inner turmoil. The primary interest of the *Confessions* and *Werther* is the psychological and emotional development of the narrator, and not some external intrigue. Similarly, in the *Journey* plot and setting are secondary to character and conscience. Radishchev offers little physical description of the individual towns and cities that title each chapter. Instead, he typically recounts some episode involving a peasant or landowner, and subsequently details his (often heated) reaction to the encounter. Consider the opening of the chapter *Krettsy*:

> At Krettsy I witnessed the parting of a father from his children. It moved me the more deeply because I myself am a father and may soon be parting from my own children. An unfortunate prejudice of the gentry impels them to go into the service. The very mention of the word makes my blood boil! ... Does it not make your heart ache...? Will you not weep to see that your beloved son with a pleasant smile on his face will rob people of their property and honor?\(^9\)

This jeremiad against the military continues for some time, before Radishchev goes on to describe the father and son in loving detail, down to the “charming” dimples of the former.\(^10\) As usual, Radishchev has not informed his readers how he arrived at this touching scene, nor how he has somehow encroached upon the pair so closely that he can eavesdrop on their conversation—which goes on for thirty five pages in the original Russian edition. That is beside the point: what matters are the opinions Radishchev expresses—whether through his own monologues or through his characters—and the emotional tenor of that expression.

However, while Rousseau and Goethe trace an emotional and sensual trajectory, Radishchev details a moral awakening. Although the narrator of the *Journey* does make reference to the “spiritual sorrow” of Russian folk melodies, there is little doubt that Radishchev’s ethical journey begins in the

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\(^9\) *ibid* 107-108
\(^10\) *ibid* 109
fourth chapter of his travelogue, *Lyubani*. In *Lyubani*, Radischchev describes an episode in which he dismounts from his carriage for a brief stroll, and (to no great surprise) stumbles upon a work-weary and highly articulate peasant. The peasant tells Radishchev of his many woes, most outrageously that he must work nights and Sundays to keep solvent. Upon hearing this sad report, Radishchev remarks “the words of the peasant awakened in me a multitude of thoughts,” and he continues by revealing:

I felt so ashamed of myself that I could scarcely keep from bursting into tears. “In your anger,” I said to myself, “you denounce the proud master who wears his peasants out in the field; but are you not doing the same over even worse yourself? What crime has your poor Petrushka committed that you should deny him sleep, the consolation of our miseries, and nature’s greatest gift to the unfortunate.”

He then bursts into tears.

Starting from an agonized declaration of guilt, the narrator of the *Journey* launches into a scathing critique of feudal privilege and the serf economy. This is the first of many episodes in which Radishchev begins with self-recrimination and despair and concludes with sweeping proclamations on society and government. That is, Radishchev manipulates the sentimental, confessional form until he can extract from it a profoundly moral judgment. In this sense he departs dramatically from Goethe and Rousseau, neither of whom would dare insert such a boldfaced critique of social conditions in their autobiographical outputs. Indeed, both Werther and the citizen of Geneva were too lost in their own emotional fog to assume such a moralizing tone. Nevertheless, in arriving at this ethical revelation, Radishchev borrows heavily from the language and structure of *Werther* and the *Confessions*. The passages of Old Church Slavonic that accompany these highly secular elements only reinforce this tension.

Following this awakening, other insights and condemnations appear with increasing frequency. Near the end of the book, Radishchev abandons any sort of scene-painting whatsoever and begins immediately with expansive proclamations on mankind and society, inevitably striking the emotional chord to drive a point home. Consider, for example, the chapter entitled *Khotilov*, which opens with the

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11 *ibid*, 49
phrase “A project for the future.” What follows is a twenty-eight page vision of Enlightened utopia, lifted largely from Rousseau and Montesquieu, that invokes natural law, the noble savage, civic happiness, and the terms “sons of the fatherland” and “citizen.” This “project” is no dry treatise however. The closing passage proclaims:

Go, my dear ones, go to the dwellings of your brothers and proclaim to them the changes in your lot. Proclaim with deep feeling: “Moved to pity by your fate, sympathizing with fellow men, having come to recognize your equality, and convinced that our interests are mutual, we have come to embrace our brothers. . .”. Such will be your utterance; deep down in your hearts you already hear it.\(^{12}\)

Expressions like “with deep feeling,” “moved to pity” and “deep down in your hearts” indicate that we have yet to escape the sentimental mode. In fact, after this final exhortation, we learn the improbable truth that the preceding pages were in fact the contents of a “mud-stained paper I [Radishchev] picked up in front of the post hut as I left my carriage.”\(^{13}\) The papers turn out to belong to a friend of the narrator, a “citizen of the future. . .deeply disturbed by the inequality of the estates.”\(^{14}\) Radishchev is now reading other people’s confessions, it appears.

Thus, it is not surprising that when Radishchev makes his longest and most fervent case against autocracy, he does so by imagining himself, through a dream sequence, as a despot blinded by his own vanity. “I dreamed that I was a tsar, shah, khan, king, bey, noble, sultan, or some such exalted being” he writes, adding that before him are “countless multitudes. . .all subject to my will.”\(^{15}\) Such majesty turns out to be nothing more than an illusion, however. Soon a pilgrim known as “Truth” removes the scales from his eyes and he discovers that “my glittering garments seemed to be stained with blood and drenched with tears.”\(^{16}\) The king/Radishchev subsequently “[sees] afresh the responsibility of my high office. . .and [understands] whence proceeded my right and my power.”\(^{17}\)

\(^{12}\) *ibid*, 154  
\(^{13}\) *ibid*, 154  
\(^{14}\) *ibid*, 159  
\(^{15}\) *ibid*, 66-67  
\(^{16}\) *ibid*, 73  
\(^{17}\) *ibid*, 77
Lynn Hunt recently argued that the sentimental novel allowed the 18th century reader to understand and ultimately empathize with fictional characters\(^{18}\). Hunt’s theory finds an interesting application in Radishchev’s dream sequence: rather than making a reasoned argument against monarchy, the author of the Journey lets his audience experience from the inside the calamitous delusions and ultimate redemption of a ruler with a superabundance of power. Instead of targeting the mind, he goes for the gut.

Thus, the voicing of deeply felt emotions adds a certain urgency to the essentially political message of the Journey. In other words, Radishchev, both radical liberal and devout Christian, twists a trope of the late-Enlightenment to suit his progressive agenda. I do not mean to suggest that the sentimental elements in the Journey are somehow artificial. The tone of Radishchev’s earlier, apolitical Ushakov and the incredible risk he brought upon himself in writing a liberally-minded text at the height of the French Revolution (with no obvious gain in the project) indicate otherwise. His gruesome suicide in 1802—he ingested acid—is further proof that he was no self-obsessed aesthete. All the same, the vehicle he chooses to express his impassioned opinions is largely the invention of writers like Rousseau and Goethe.

Before moving on to the content of the Journey, we should pause and briefly note the influence of other Enlightenment luminaries. While the mawkish, teary language of the Journey would no doubt have offended Voltaire (who died in 1789), he would nevertheless have recognized as his own some of the techniques Radishchev deploys. In particular, he would have noted in the Journey the sly, indirect social commentary that inevitably arises when an unsuspecting traveler discovers, to shock and amazement, the existence of neighboring peoples or communities. Indeed, we can compare Voltaire’s “discovery” of English government and customs in the Letters on England to Radishchev’s “discovery” of the peasantry’s virtue and suffering. By this logic, we can also link the Journey to Montesquieu’s Persian Letters, a watershed reassessment of French society ingeniously disguised as a series of

\(^{18}\) For more information on Hunt’s claim, see her speech The Novel and the Origins of Human Rights, delivered at Stanford University on April 02, 2002
exchanges between Persian “tourists” in Europe. While Radishchev was neither as inventive nor as subtle as either of these two thinkers, it seems likely that he drew lessons from their oeuvres.

This same manipulation of Enlightenment literature and philosophy figures centrally in the content of Radishchev’s critique. Radishchev routinely draws on the writings of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Blackstone, Diderot, Helvétius and even Pascal and Cato to bolster his arguments. In each case, he adjusts or selectively adopts whatever principle most effectively furthers his liberal agenda. He is typically oblique in his allusions, rarely mentioning authors by name; nevertheless, key themes and images from the major texts of the philosophe movement recur frequently and conspicuously.

While a full listing of the many references to French, German and English authors found in the Journey is beyond the scope of this paper, two in particular demand our attention: 1) the perils and symptoms of despotism, best delineated by Montesquieu in the Persian Letters; 2) the idea of the noble savage free from the crushing weight of civilization, developed by Rousseau in the Discourse on Inequality and Emile. Radishchev borrows heavily (indeed, sometimes too heavily) from these sources. In all cases, however, he balks at the pessimistic, agnostic subtext of Enlightenment letters, tempering his bleak vision with glimmers of hope and spiritual rejuvenation.

Radishchev’s discourse on despotism reflects the influence of specific writers not in its accusations of tyranny but in the symptoms that confirm that prognosis. That is, Radishchev’s cries against oppression and unchecked power in the Journey are rather standard for the late 18th century, but the incidents that inspire those cries reflect particular sources. Among intellectuals and political theorists of Radishchev’s generation, all but the most jaded royalists agreed that a king or emperor should behave benevolently, like a good father, as Lynn Hunt has noted. The expectation that a sovereign should rule with discretion and compassion dates back to medieval conceptions of kingship and patriarchy, and

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19 Lynn Hunt, The Family Romance of the French Revolution. See chapter two for more in this subject.
Radishchev's exhortation that a king must "see afresh" the responsibilities of his post was not much newer.

Radishchev, of course, was not advocating a medieval model of government. Nevertheless, his rejection of autocracy was part of a general and longstanding discussion on authority that we cannot attribute exclusively to Montesquieu or Rousseau. Similarly, his claim that a king must acknowledge the source of his "power and rights," while suggestive of liberal or radical strains of thought, is not in and of itself revolutionary or enlightened. As David Bell has cogently argued, the dwindling credulity of the divine right theory in the early 1700s made the origins of royal authority a central question in political writings for ecclesiastics and philosophes alike.\(^{20}\) The legacy of the English Revolution and the stunning success of the American rebellion intensified these debates. The subsequent outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 put the rhetoric of rights and republics into practice.

Nor was the association of Russia with despotism the invention of one author. Voltaire wrote extensively on the subject, as did Montesquieu, and even Sade. So did a host of less famous writers, journalists, travelers and armchair philosophers, as Larry Wolff brilliantly demonstrates in *Inventing Eastern Europe*. Indeed, Wolff makes the case that Catherine II, herself, propagated this image, departing from her francophone program on occasion for displays of oriental—even Tartaric—pageantry.\(^{21}\) Catherine's sharp break with French intellectual life after revolt of the Third Estate in France only reinforced the link between tsar and autocrat.

All the same, the impact of one early Enlightenment author on Radishchev is hard to dispute. The recurring horror of forced or loveless marriages, rape or attempted rape, and sexual slavery are most likely allusions to the Persian Harems made famous in the *Persian Letters* of Montesquieu. Written in 1721, shortly after the death of Louis XIV, the *Letters* offer a subtle but jarring comparison between the growing tyranny of the French state and the oppressive conditions of caliphate brothels. When the strong and benevolent Usbek leaves Persia in an expedition to Western Europe, the women and servants of his

\(^{20}\) David Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800.*

\(^{21}\) See Wolff, 122-142
seraglio grow restless. He tries to quell the tension by commanding his eunuchs to bring order to the harem, but his unsexed underlings only grow more autocratic with the charge. Ultimately chaos breaks loose, and Usbek’s favorite wife, Roxanne, “subornes” the eunuchs, kills her guards and ingests poison. Her chilling final letter to Usbek closes the novel: “I may have lived in servitude, but I have always been free. I have reformed your laws according to the laws of nature...if you had known me properly you would have found in me all the violence of hate.”22 In short, the Letters demonstrate that, in the absence of a good, observant ruler, social relations grow skewed and corrupt, tensions between classes turn dangerously volatile, and institutions of virtue become empty shells of their former greatness. Foisting an unnatural and oppressive order upon an already subjugated society only leads to the “reform” of that society: a violent and self-destructive upheaval against unnatural laws.

The Journey echoes the story told in the Persian Letters at times. Consider the incident recounted in the chapter on Zaytsovo. The narrator hears of a “good-looking peasant girl” engaged to another peasant of her village. On the eve of the wedding, the groom’s father brings a small gift his landlord. The landlord’s two sons, however, are up to no good:

The young “nobleman” decided to use this last moment for the gratification of his lust. He took his brothers with him and, having summoned the bride off to the courtyard by a strange boy, gagged her and carried her off to a shed.23

The groom sees the impending rape and breaks into the shed, running off with the girl. The landlord chides the groom’s father and the peasant couple: “How did you dare...to raise your hand against your master. Even had he spent the night with your bride on the eve of your wedding, you should have been grateful to him.”24 A conflict breaks out, and in a grim twist the peasants of the village surround the landlord and his sons and “beat them to death on the spot. They hated them so much that not one wanted to miss the chance to take part in murdering them, as they themselves later confessed.”25.

22 Montesquieu, 280-281
23 Radishchev, 96
24 ibid, 97
25 ibid, 98
This terrifying account bears a striking resemblance to the final chapters of the *Persian Letters*. As in Montesquieu’s work, in *Zaytsovo* the noble cronies of a distant and increasingly autocratic sovereign exercise a hideous authority over the sexual lives of their subordinates, using a “strange boy” (perhaps a veiled allusion to Montesquieu’s eunuchs). The result, according to Radishchev, is a bloody rebellion motivated by “hate,” a hate “confessed” readily after the fact. This scenario is played out numerous times: a young woman forced to marry a ten year old, the tearful vows of a couple brought before the altar by their two masters, a gentle servant punished for his refusal to marry a chambermaid impregnated by his Mistress’ nephew. Landlords repeatedly reveal themselves as cunning sexual predators, advancing on peasant girls and marrying off servants for personal gain. Despotism manifests itself again and again in the form of sexual aggression and the perversion of the institution of marriage.

At a certain point, however, Radishchev and Montesquieu part ways. The *Journey* lacks the fatalist pessimism that pervades the *Persian Letters*. The violent rebellions in Radishchev’s text seem only to restore virtue and social order. The judge who recounts the *Zaytsovo* debacle, for example, remarks after the incident that

> I found no sufficient or convincing reason to condemn the offenders. . . Can an act be considered prejudicial to the inviolable human rights of a fellow being if I do it to save myself, if it prevents my destruction, if without it my well being would be forever undone.

As this passage suggests, Radishchev is not willing to forgo optimism and faith in the righteousness of the peasantry. Whereas in the *Letters*, despotism and sexual slavery corrupt virtue, in the *Journey* these offences merely suppress it. Autocracy constrains the moral impulses of the poor and devout; breaking its iron grip will introduce an era of spiritual and political renewal.

This theme of righteous wrath is central to the *Journey*, and in 1790, it was a vision fulfilled—not in Russia, but in France. Radishchev no doubt had the dramatic developments of 1789 in mind when

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26 *ibid.*, 141
27 *ibid.*, 222
28 *ibid.*, 207
29 *ibid.*, 99
invoked the apocalyptic language of revolution in the Zaytsovo episode. Nevertheless, his belief that the poor and oppressed will rise up and smite the tyrant does not derive solely from the radical rhetoric of the Assemblée nationale. As our discussion of the Persian Letters suggests, Radishchev looked also to an older model, steeped in allegory, in his representation of despotism. This model was useful only for diagnosing, and not for correcting, the ills of society. Montesquieu brought Radishchev to the edge of the seraglio, but the Russian balked at the threshold. To avoid its obscene prophecies, he would need another guide, one whose prison was not one of sex and silk but of chains of iron: Rousseau.

We have already discussed Rousseau’s powerful influence on the structure of Radishchev’s work; ideologically, the “citizen of Geneva” had an equal, if not greater, importance. It is not surprising that the author of the most revolutionary work of the French Enlightenment cast a long shadow on the author of the most radical of eighteenth century Russian tracts. Yet, it is not the Social Contract we encounter most often in the Journey, but another work of equal fame: Emile. In Emile Radishchev discovered a program of reform for the landlord and, consequently, a solution to his grim evaluation of Russian society.

Before proceeding to the applications of Emile and the Considerations in the Journey, we ought first to consider their role in the Rousseau’s larger project. In 1755, Rousseau again submitted a discourse to the Academy of Dijon, his Discourse on the Arts and Sciences having won first prize five years earlier. While the Discourse on the Origins of Inequality did not reap the same reward as the earlier document, its importance in the history of ideas is far greater. In the Discourse, Rousseau broke sharply with the other luminaries of the age, notably Voltaire, Diderot and D’Alembert, and argued that the more structured and complex a society becomes, the more its constituents wallow in misery. To prove his point, Rousseau first reconstructed what he believed was the earliest stage of civilization. He imagined a hunter-gather loner, who had no needs beyond the immediate and physical and who could provide for himself all the necessities of primitive life. Rousseau then claimed that, by some unfortunate
accident, these noble savages had joined together for mutual gain. For a brief “golden age” these proto-
citizens had enjoyed both the benefits of community and the carefree spirit of prehistoric man. This
happy moment was short lived, however; quickly _amour de soi_, or self love, had turned to _amour
proper_, or vanity. Civilization had grown more complex; the individual had become increasingly
dependent on his fellow man; a web of “false needs” that bound men in mutual misery had emerged and
had grown increasingly vast. Inertia had taken hold; and at present, Rousseau concludes, man was as
wretched as he had ever been. Most depressing, Rousseau offered no obvious way out of this grim
scenario.

Most of Rousseau’s post- _Discourse_ output attempts to find such a way out. _Emile_, his famous
treatise on education and child-rearing, tries to redress the problem on an individual level. Rather than
fix society (the project of the _Social Contract_), _Emile_ presents, in great detail, the means by which
parents can raise their (male) child without entangling him in the web of false needs. This radically
unorthodox upbringing teaches the young boy to exist “outside” of society even as he is in its midst; he
will not be punished, nor will he be indulged; he will learn to fend for himself, but he will not be
overeducated; he will not suppress his emotions, but he will not let them cripple him. The work had
profound implications: French mothers everywhere began to breastfeed their infants and fathers began
to take an active interest their sons’ educations—at least among the affluent classes.

Indeed, Emile’s education was of a sort available only to well-off families, and that limitation
clearly piqued the interest of Radishchev. The _Krettsy_ chapter of the _Journey_, in which a father gives a
protracted farewell to his sons, is extraordinarily close to _Emile_. Consider these words from the father:

> From the time that I received you from your mother’s body into my embrace, I willed
> that no one else should be concerned for all the things concerned with your care. Never
did a hired nurse touch your bodies, never did a hired tutor touch your hearts and minds.
> . . .

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I did not protect you from the inclemency of the elements and the weather. I preferred
that your bodies be hardened by momentary pain rather than you grow soft and fat in

30 _ibid_, 110
adult life. . . Do not be afraid to tell anyone that you know how to milk a cow, how to cook cabbage soup or porridge, or that you can roast a piece of meat and make it taste good.31

The same program of attentiveness coupled with freedom, the same goal of tenderness coupled with self-reliance: Radishchev owes Rousseau more than he lets on. In Emile, the author of the Journey finally discovered a good nobleman. While everywhere in Russia Radishchev found only greed, slavishness and cruelty, in Rousseau’s book he found generosity, industry and kindness. No one could be more different from the relentless slave driver featured in Lyubani than the gentle, misty-eyed father in Krettsy. Here at last was a benign master.

Yet, just as quickly as the Journey converges with Emile, Radishchev changes course. While Rousseau’s protégé is vaguely spiritual, Radishchev’s is intensely so. The father reflects:

But when I saw that in your judgments you were guided by reason, I presented to you a sequence of concepts that which led to the recognition of God, for I was deeply convinced that the ever-loving father preferred to see two uncorrputed souls. . . Then I also put before you the law of Revelation, without hiding from you all that the many men had said in denying it.32

Here Radishchev is very clever. Rousseau would never have allowed Emile to learn the “law of Revelation”; yet the father in Krettsy educates his sons religiously just as he does secularly: not by rules and axioms, but by gentle prodding, offering little but withholding nothing. Here Radishchev co-opts Rousseau’s great vision and adjusts it to suit his mental perspective. He appreciates the model of tolerance and benignity in Emile, but gently refutes its asocial, agnostic overtones. It is no accident that the Krettsy man’s sons are going off into society; Radishchev’s “reformed” landlord cannot be an introspective drifter. He must install himself squarely in civilization, bringing Rousseau’s individualist vision of inner peace and autonomy to the peasants.

31 ibid, 114
32 ibid, 115
Was Catherine justified in banishing Radishchev to Siberia after the publication of *A Journey From St. Petersburg to Moscow*? By today’s standards, her actions are reprehensible. Present perspectives aside, however, was Catherine right to consider Radishchev a destabilizing influence whose work undermined her authority? In one sense, no. Radishchev’s battle cry was not so much against the monarchy, as in France, as it was for the peasantry. Radishchev repeatedly condemns the “martial hosts” of the French Revolution, and condones peasant violence only as a last resort.\(^{33}\) His diatribe against autocracy is not necessarily a critique of sovereignty per se, although it is clear that he would like power distributed more evenly among the Russian people. The chapter on Krettsy suggests that there can, indeed, be good masters. The revised *Ode to Liberty* articulates the dangers inherent in the transition to a liberal state. In matters of religion, Radishchev insists on respect and reverence for others and for God above all.

Yet, all this does not obviate the simple fact that in the *Journey* Radishchev embraces a culture, a literature, and a worldview that are by nature probing and unsettling. No matter how much sweetness and light he invests in his revised discourse on Enlightenment and progress, Radishchev cannot hide the agency Rousseau, Voltaire and to a lesser extent Montesquieu grant human actors. Even if Radishchev’s awakening is a moral and not an emotional revelation, the act of looking afresh at the world, of suggesting there is a truth that lies beneath a veneer of ignorance or superstition, is itself a threat to absolutist pomp; even if the *Persian Letters* ended with a great spiritual rejuvenation, it would nonetheless be at the expense of despotism; even if Emile were educated to be a stalwart Christian, he would nonetheless be a Christian outside society, blessedly above classification and law.

In this respect, Catherine was right to fear Radishchev. The author of the *Journey* knew well the lessons taught by the *philosophes*: sometimes the most understated message is the most powerful. The culture that birthed Montesquieu, Rousseau and Voltaire would soon give rise to a dangerous new enemy on Catherine’s doorstep; Radishchev, was, in a fundamental sense, also a product of that culture.

\(^{33}\) *Ibid.*, 197
In the last analysis, however, the compassion, respect, and deep humanity voiced in *A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* make the irrefutable point that what Catherine feared most was freedom itself, and all of its accompanying virtues.