Other Voices

Other Voices:
Three Centuries of Cultural Dialogue between Russia and Western Europe

Edited by

Graham H. Roberts

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The present volume brings together essays written by members past and present of the British-French Association for the Study of Russian Culture (known across the Channel as L'Association franco-britannique pour l'Étude de la Culture Russe). I would like to thank previous and current co-presidents of the Association for their support for, and encouragement of, this project. I am especially grateful to Peter Barta for his very helpful comments and suggestions on the penultimate version of the manuscript.

CONVENTIONS

The *Oxford Slavonic Papers* system of transliteration has been followed throughout. Russian names are transliterated throughout, except in the case of tsars, which are translated. Thus “Alexander I” is preferred to “Aleksandr I”.

INTRODUCTION: BEYOND THE HERMITAGE

GRAHAM H. ROBERTS

"I'm French," he says. "My name is Diderot."
"And I am Catherine, Russia," she says, "the Hermit of the Hermitage. May I welcome my dear librarian to the place where one day his books will come to rest for all eternity."
"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty, that was truly my most wonderful piece of fortune. My pension and my Posterity. How happy I felt when you promised me that. I knew I should be happy even when I was dead. I took my lute down from the wall and sang a love-song to you."
"My good fortune too," says the Empress Autocratrix of All the Russias, Tzarina of Kazan and Lady of Pskov. "Never did I think by buying a man's dusty library and letting him continue to use it I'd win so many compliments. Tell me, how do you like it, my Palais d'Hiver?"
"It's exactly as I expected," our man says. "I do believe I dreamt it once."
"But you only dreamt, I built," she says.

(Malcolm Bradbury, *To The Hermitage*)

One of the paradoxes of globalization is that one can forget just how thriving local cultures are today. The corollary is also true, however; it is easy to overlook how much dialogue there has been down the ages between geographically relatively distant societies. Highlighting the quantity—and quality—of this exchange between Russia and Western Europe (primarily, but not exclusively, Britain and France) is the chief objective of the British-French Association for the Study of Russian Culture. The Association, now in its eleventh year, brings together scholars from the English and French-speaking worlds and Russia. It holds two conferences per year, one in the UK and the other usually in France, at which papers of a comparativist nature are presented. The present volume

includes a selection of papers from a number of recent conferences, alongside specially commissioned pieces.

Section one, entitled "Perspectives", contains contributions which focus on how representatives of one culture, either British, French or Russian, have viewed the other. J. Douglas Clayton, for example, looks at the way in which the myth of the great French writer Alexandre Dumas *père* spread in Russia. As he points out, Dumas is without doubt one of the most popular foreign authors in Russia—no mean feat, when one considers how widely read in foreign cultures most Russians tend to be. Yet, while he is revered at least as much today in Russia as in France, it is essentially as a novelist. It is richly ironic that one of his works that is not so well-known in Russia is in fact his *Journey to Russia*, and its companion volume, *Journey to the Caucasus*. Another paradox is that whereas what Clayton refers to as the "cult" of Dumas the novelist has a decidedly Soviet ring to it—owing to his critical attitude towards the Russia of the Romanovs—it can actually be traced back to his plays which dominated the Russian stage in the 1830s. If, as Clayton maintains, Russians are both enthusiastic towards and sceptical of Dumas *père*, this is hardly surprising, given the Frenchman's ambivalent attitude towards Russia itself.

Another nineteenth-century traveller of note—and note-taking traveller—was the Reverend Henry Lansdell, who explored Asiatic Russia between 1880 and 1890. In her chapter, Irina Kantarbaeva-Bill examines how this self-styled "gentleman traveller" became deeply attached to the colossal Russian Empire and its people. Describing the adventures of this remarkable explorer, missionary, philanthropist, zoologist, botanist and geographer, she demonstrates the importance of Lansdell's personal contribution to the opening-up of many hitherto unknown areas of Russia and China, specifically as the land of the Other. Scathingly dismissed as insignificant by many of his contemporaries, Lansdell's spiritual sojourns through Asiatic Russia may, as Kantabaeva-Bill adroitly demonstrates, be reconsidered as a highly successful endeavour into the Empire's Oriental borderland. While his romantic philanthropy may have been motivated by the naïve belief that control of Eurasia would ensure mastery of the globe, his intellectual curiosity and humility can only serve to inspire those of us committed to enhancing dialogue and understanding between different cultures.

Like Lansdell, Konstantin Leont'ev (the subject of Danièle Beaune-Gray's chapter) was an intrepid traveller, spending time as Russian Consul General in the Middle East. Two countries in which he never set foot, however, were France and Great Britain. Nevertheless, he knew a great

deal about both states, not just from his readings in French and English literature, but also from his education as a Russian aristocrat. A dyed-in-the-wool monarchist, Leont'ev believed that France had lost its very soul in 1789, since this was the moment it had embraced the democratic ideals of moderate liberals and socialists. As a result, he maintained, the country had declined inevitably into a hopeless mediocrity, in which the hegemony of the middle class now threatened the very existence of the French state itself as an independent entity.

Leont'ev's deep disdain for much of contemporary France was in sharp contrast with his unbounded admiration for Great Britain. While the Russian nobility had, in his view, been ruined by the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, Britain still had its House of Lords. Victorian Britain was for Leont'ev a land of intelligent conservatism and an exceptional brand of modern liberalism which guaranteed the country both power and dignity. Such might ultimately rested, however, on the very bourgeois activity of commerce and trade, a fact which left the country vulnerable to German military might. Despite his aristocratic leanings, Leont'ev ultimately emerges from Beaune-Gray's depiction as a man for our own time, warning as he did against the loss of national identity in a federated Europe, or predicting the heavy environmental cost of the industrial revolution. He can also be considered, as Beaune-Gray points out, as the father of the Eurasian movement, which has recently re-emerged in post-Soviet Russia.

Leont'ev shared with Vladimir Solov'ev and other Russian Symbolists an admiration for Catholic discipline. In her article, Susanna Soojung Lim demonstrates how Solov'ev's "Pan-Mongolism" dominated the Russian modernist, fin-de-siècle perception of East Asia. Solov'ev's notion of China, as expounded in texts such as "China and Europe" can be seen as the culmination of a Russian line of thinking going back to the 1840s, according to which the mysterious and alien "other" of China and Japan was indistinguishable from a more familiar and contemptible "other", namely the West. Russian fear of the Far East at the dawn of the twentieth century constituted a part of the "yellow peril" discourse widespread in Europe during that period. At the same time, however, it reflected conservative Russian hostility and criticism towards European modernity. At the heart of Solov'ev's "Pan-Mongolism", as Lim astutely observes, lay an idealized vision of a European past, for which the younger Symbolists in particular pined, and against which they set both modern, "decadent" Europe and the Far East. This is most clearly seen in one of the most important Russian novels of the twentieth century, namely Andrey Bely's *Petersburg*, as well as in Bely's Berlin memoirs.

After a first section containing chapters which focus on how these different cultures have viewed each other, the contributions to part two are more explicitly comparativist in nature. In her chapter, Sarah Boudant focuses on the year 1793, one of the bloodiest of the French Revolution. While never reductivist, Boudant's close reading of three canonical nineteenth-century novels clearly shows that there are interesting similarities in the ways in which Dickens, Hugo and Dostoevsky each allude to events of 1793. More important still, however, is the fact that they do so in order to address problems affecting their own particular time and place. In the case of Dickens's "roman noir", it is the injustice of Victorian society, with Hugo it is the dual threat to the Third Republic posed by Prussian military might and the Paris Commune, while for Dostoevsky, it is the wave of political and social unrest that swept through Alexander I's Russia in the 1860s. The French Revolution, and specifically the mythical year of 1793, is thus placed in a broader, European context, without which it cannot be understood.

While Boudant's focus is on three exponents of nineteenth-century realism, Galina Subbotina, on the other hand, looks at two important representatives of early twentieth-century modernism. Her comparative study of Proust and Bunin is illuminating in many respects. As she points out, both authors have suffered at the hands of critics too eager to view their fiction as thinly veiled autobiography. The question of precisely where and when the young Marcel tasted his first madeleine, for example, has been the subject of many heated critical debates. More importantly, as Subbotina demonstrates, both writers attempted to understand the mystery of female beauty, and to recreate such beauty in their fiction. If for both Proust and Bunin, love is the basis of the most important type of relationship with the other, both men consider the description of beauty to be the ultimate challenge for a writer. Like Hugo, Dickens and Dostoevsky before them, Proust and Bunin also look to the past. Their romantic aestheticism stems from a quite different desire, however, one which is reactionary, rather than revolutionary. It is none other than the attempt to resist the decadence and degradation of modern life, to refuse the reality of modernity. In their attempt to achieve such an (impossible) goal, both writers deliberately and systematically blur the distinction between the real and the mythical.

The chapters which make up part three all look at ways in which Russia and Western Europe have influenced each other. As Cécile Pichon-Bonin suggests, cultural dialogue in the sphere of the visual arts in the inter-war period appears to have been especially rich. Pichon-Bonin writes from the perspective of an art historian, and demonstrates the complex

relationship between French artistic movements such as Impressionism, Cubism and Fauvism, and the artists of the early Soviet period who often reinterpreted them in interesting and original ways. In particular, she explores the unique position occupied by Sterenberg, using various techniques of composition, colour and texturing in an attempt to produce painted objects, rather than paintings of objects in the real world. Pichon-Bonin show how the work of this key member of the Society of Easel Painters lay somewhere between the multi-faceted, fragmented objects of French Cubism and the stark white void represented by Malevich's Suprematism. Sterenberg encountered many difficulties at the hands—and the collective pen—of Marxist critics in the late 1920s and 1930s. He nevertheless remained true to his principles, and especially his French references, throughout his career. This is demonstrated both by the presence of Fauvist features alongside neo-primitivist traits in his commissioned work of the 1930s, and in his sustained polemic with former members of The Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia over the necessity of copying the best features of Western art. Comparison with other Soviet artists who changed direction in the 1930s such as Pimenov also helps us to grasp more clearly the nature of artistic debates in this most troubled decade. In the end, Western art was rejected as "bourgeois", but not until ideological and conceptual ambiguity had enabled much of it to survive as a viable aesthetic reference for artists of Soviet Socialist Realism for practically the entire 1930s. Pimenov's canonical "The New Moscow" serves as a case in point here. Only in late 1939, after the signing of the Molotov-Rippentrop Pact and the consequent rapprochement between Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, was French Impressionism finally consigned by the Party to the dustbin of history. Pichon-Bonin convincingly cites this as yet further proof of how inefficiently the Soviet censorship machine functioned. Her other major contribution is to show that in the field of visual arts at least, the 1930s represented both a continuation of, and a departure from, the previous decade.

Such tension between continuity and rupture is also very much present in John McGahern's play *The Power of Darkness*, the Irish novelist's first dramatic work, based on Tolstoy's play of the same name. McGahern's rewriting of Tolstoy's drama is the subject of the chapter by Bertrand Cardin. As Cardin demonstrates, the rewriting involves both translation and adaptation. The question arises, however, as to whether McGahern simply transposes a Russian play to Irish soil, or rather recreates the original text, as he himself claimed. As Cardin points out, McGahern's dialogue with Tolstoy's play involves all manner of transformation. The

result is at once a socio-political melodrama and what Cardin cogently describes as an incestuous palimpsest.

"Palimpsest" is a term which could easily be used to describe the output of Renata Litvinova, "one of the most creative and provocative talents in Russian cinema since the collapse of the Soviet Union", as David Gillespie observes. Present throughout her writings, both her screenplays and her prose fiction, is the figure of Marguerite Gauthier, the heroine of Alexandre Dumas's 1848 novel *La Dame aux Camélias*. In his chapter, Gillespie analyses how Litvinova reworks the story of "Rita", time and again updating her to the harsh realities of modern Russia. At once "femme fatale" and tragic heroine, this most multi-talented of artists becomes nothing less than a Marguerite Gauthier for post-Soviet Russia.

Above all, perhaps, the three centuries of cultural dialogue between Russia and Western Europe have been driven by actual physical encounters. It is such meetings which are the focus of the fourth and final section of the volume. Rodolphe Baudin, for example, looks at Nikolay Karamzin's experience of revolutionary violence in Strasbourg in 1789. As he demonstrates, the Russian writer's interest in the rebellion of an adventurer claiming to be the Count of Artois can be explained by the fact that it reminded him of the Pugachev rebellion fifteen years earlier, something which he had witnessed at first hand. What is especially noteworthy is the fact that, as Baudin observes, the narrative and semiotic resemblance between the two uprisings—two impostures—confirmed Karamzin's belief in the universality of mankind and the equality of all civilizations. Crucially, the fact that the ersatz Count of Artois could be seen as an "Alsacian Pugachev" was enough to convince Karamzin of Russia's status as a fully European culture.

The categories of "us" and "the other" are thus very slippery, at least for Karamzin. In her chapter on Napoleon's Russian campaign of 1812, Maya Gubina points out just how porous these concepts were for entire sections of Russian society in the early nineteenth century. This was hardly surprising, given the fact that the Russian nobility in particular were so steeped in French culture that they learnt Russian as a foreign language. Gubina demonstrates how the attitude of the French, who positioned themselves as adversaries of the Russian state, threatening its integrity and its very existence, undoubtedly had the effect of forcing the Russians to ask themselves questions about their own identity. In particular, Gubina examines the rhetorical devices used by Russian observers of the Emperor's occupying force to affirm the alterity of the French. At the same time, she shows through a careful reading of fascinating historical documents that the enemy within, the internal "other" embodied in the

muzhik or an ethnic minority was feared by many far more than the "foreign" invader. The Russia of 1812 emerges as a deeply divided society, in which class and ethnicity was as much a determinant of identity as nation was. A case of "plus ça change"? Be that as it may, few can doubt that Napoleon's invasion stimulated debate in Russia on the issue of national identity, on the vexed dual question of "us" and "them".

Exactly a century after 1812, Dmitry Merezhkovsky contacted the French politician and theatre critic Léon Blum, with a view to having his play *Paul I* produced on the French stage. The exchange was made possible by Sof'ya Balakhovskaya and Eugène Petit, both of whom were politically active in France and Russia, and were close to Russia's Socialist Revolutionary Party. In her chapter, Anna Pondopulo looks at the very different ways in which these political and cultural ties between the two countries were regarded by the socialist Blum on the one hand, and the anti-Bolshevik Merezhkovsky and his wife Zinaida Gippius on the other. In doing so, she poses a number of important questions. How did political ties contribute towards the creation of cultural links between Russia and France at the beginning of the twentieth century? What part did politics play in the interest which Russian men and women of letters demonstrated towards France? And to what extent did those networks already in existence when they emigrated to France meet their needs and expectations? Pondopulo's answers to these and other questions demonstrate the limits of cultural dialogue between Russian and French intellectuals in the 1910s. Her chapter also helps us understand why certain groups of Russian intellectuals paradoxically sought to distance themselves from Western Europe on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution.

The Revolution of 1917 is the historical starting point for Olga Tabachnikova, in her chapter on the correspondence between two Russian émigrés in Paris, Lev Shestov and Boris de Schloezer. In 1920, just three years after Lenin's coup d'état, Shestov, one of the most fascinating thinkers of Russia's Silver Age, left Russia for France. While there, he developed a particular brand of philosophy that had much in common with Sartrean existentialism. As Tabachnikova observes, he also influenced the French perception of phenomenology, and as such can be said to have had a significant impact on twentieth-century French thought. Boris Schloezer, literary critic and Shestov's translator, also emigrated to France in 1920, settling in Paris where he took an active part in French intellectual life (unlike most Russian émigrés), contributing to French journals such as *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. The private correspondence of these two men, between 1923 and 1928, offers invaluable insight into Russian émigré life

and the French cultural scene during one of the most turbulent decades of the twentieth century.

At the very end of that same century, the British novelist Malcolm Bradbury wrote *To The Hermitage*, which contains a fictionalized account of the meeting between the writer Diderot and the Russian Empress Catherine the Great, following her acquisition of the Frenchman's library. Bradbury's novel is not just a story about the meeting of great minds, however; it is also testimony to the fact that cultural dialogue between Russia and Western Europe goes on (indeed, as a work of fiction produced by a Briton, about a Frenchman's visit to Russia, it embodies that very dialogue). As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, the need for such exchange is as great as ever. It can only flourish, however, if we destroy the cliché, go, in other words, beyond the Hermitage. If this book contributes to that process, it will have achieved its main purpose.

PART I:

PERSPECTIVES

DUMAS IN RUSSIA AND THE CAUCASUS: THE MYTH AND ITS CONTEMPORARY ECHOES*

J. DOUGLAS CLAYTON

Alexandre Dumas *père* can without exaggeration be called one of the most popular foreign authors in Russia. Throughout the Soviet period his historical novels have appeared in large editions and were indispensable reading for Russian children, who are very likely to have read *The Three Musketeers*, *Queen Margot* and other historical romances as part of their upbringing. (Dumas the dramatist appears to be unknown to present-day Russians despite the early popularity of his plays: romantic melodrama is obsolete.) André Maurois's book *Les Trois Dumas* (1957) about General Dumas, his son Alexandre *père* and grandson Alexandre *fils*, was translated into Russian quite soon after it appeared (1962) and has run through many reprintings in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.[1] The Russian popular writer on Dumas, Mikhail Buyanov, claims that it could be found on the bookshelf of any Soviet family.[2] In addition, at least eight films or television series have appeared in Russia during the late Soviet and post-Soviet period based on themes from Dumas.[3] Thus, it is fair to say that through his historical novels Dumas has played a large role in what one might call the myth of France in the Russian imagination, a myth made all the more powerful because for a long time few Russians could travel there. Indeed, in an odd way, Dumas is at least as much alive in

* The research for this article was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, whose generosity is here gratefully acknowledged.

[1] André Maurois, *Les Trois Dumas*; Andre Morua, *Dyuma*.

[2] M.I. Buyanov, *Dyuma v Dagestane*, 64.

[3] *D'Artagnan i tri mushketera* (1979, dir. Georgy Yungval'd-Khil'kevich); *Uznik zamka If* (1988, dir. Georgy Yungval'd-Khil'kevich); *Mushketery dvadtsat' let spustya* (1992, dir. Georgy Yungval'd-Khil'kevich); *Taina Korolevy Anny* (1993, dir. Georgy Yungval'd-Khil'kevich); *Grafinya de Monsoro* (Vladimir Popkov, 1998); *Favorskii* (2005, Dmitry Svetozarov); *Vozvrashchenie mushketerov ili sokrovishcha kardinala Mazarini* (2008, dir. Georgy Yungval'd-Khil'kevich); Dumas's travels in the Caucasus are also the object of a film: *Dyuma na Kavkaze* (Khasan Khazhkasimov, 1979).

Russia today as he is in France, even though his remains were recently transferred to the Pantheon.

Nevertheless, a strange double image of Dumas subsists in Russian culture. On the one hand, Dumas is revered as a novelist. The large print runs of his novels began in the Soviet era, and indeed the cult of Dumas has a certain Soviet ring to it. This is mostly due to his Republican sentiments, his descriptions of the dark side of the tsarist regime, especially the Decembrist uprising, and perhaps also his partly African heritage, an interesting echo of the national poet, Aleksandr Pushkin. Dumas the novelist is thus a cult figure. It is his novels that constitute the basis of his popularity in Russia and explain the special attitude towards France prevalent among Russians and the central role France, French history and especially Paris occupy in Russian culture. Yet paradoxically, one of Dumas's most important works has had an indifferent fate in Russia; this book his son, after the elder writer's death, was to recommend to George Sand as quintessential reading: "When you have a sleepless night, have someone read you something you have probably never read: the journey to Russia and the Caucasus. It's marvellous. You will travel breathlessly three thousand leagues across the country and through history and not be tired at all…"[4] I am referring to his *Journey to Russia* (*Voyage en Russie*) and its companion volume, *Journey to the Caucasus* (*Voyage au Caucase*).[5]

In 1858 Dumas visited St Petersburg at the start of his journey through Russia and the Caucasus. The timing was important: it was only after the death of Nicholas that Dumas could contemplate visiting the Russian Empire. Dumas, an avid collector of honours from heads of state, had approached Nicholas in the 1830s in the hope of feeding his vanity with a Russian honour. His plays had become a staple of the Russian theatre repertoire, beginning with *Henry III and his Court* (*Henri III et sa cour*), which was translated and staged in St Petersburg as early as 1829, about eight months after it took Paris by storm.[6] Throughout the 1830s his romantic melodramas had dominated the Russian stage, and his stories and novels had been translated into Russian and published by journals of every political stripe, and even the socially progressive critic Belinsky translated some of his prose.[7] Gogol', writing in 1837, commented: "It is already five

[4] Maurois 370; all translations from Russian and French in this article are by the author.

[5] Quotations and references in this article are to the most recent republications: Alexandre Dumas, *Voyage en Russie* and *Voyage au Caucase*.

[6] Maurois, 297.

[7] See Yu.D. Levin, "Belinsky teoretik perevoda."

years since melodramas and vaudevilles took possession of the world's theatres. What a ridiculous fashion! One would not mind if this trend were the product of the mighty efforts of a genius. When the whole world tuned its lyre to Byron's poetry there was nothing absurd about it; the craze was even somewhat reassuring. But now the Dumases, Ducamps and others have become the arbiters of world taste!... I swear the nineteenth century will feel ashamed of these five years."[8]

Gogol's disaffection notwithstanding, Dumas continued to be in vogue in Russia, and translations of his work appeared throughout the 1840s. In 1839 Dumas, desirous of adding to his collection of honours, sought to receive a distinction from Nicholas. Charles Durand, a French journalist in the pay of the Russian secret service and an acquaintance of Dumas, wrote to Count Uvarov, Nicholas's Minister of Education, at the French playwright's instigation to suggest that he be awarded an honour—Durand suggested the Order of St Stanislas, second class—in exchange for the dedication of his play *The Alchemist* (*L'Alchimiste*) to the Russian emperor. The honour, a Polish one, was intended by Durand as a studied affront to the Polish nationalists, whose influence had been dominant in France since the uprising of 1830 and the flight of political refugees to that country. Granting an honour to the most popular French writer of the time would, Durand reasoned, contribute to restoring Russia's image in France, and besides, Dumas would not be averse to using the political situation to add to his own vainglory. There was, moreover, a precedent, since the French painter of battle scenes Horace Vernet (1789-1863) had been so honoured by the emperor in 1836. Since Uvarov's response had been guardedly optimistic, Dumas decided to forge ahead. Through diplomatic channels he sent Uvarov a copy of the play in his own hand with illustrations by the painter Eugène Isabey and others, together with a fawning and transparent letter to the emperor:

> Sire!
>
> It is not simply to the autocratic ruler of a great empire that I dare to offer this expression of my admiration, but to a most enlightened monarch and spreader of civilization, who has through his personal qualities amidst a turbulent era obliged the whole of Europe to respect his knowledge, his restraint and his love of all the works of education.
>
> Sire, in our so materialistic age poet and artist ask themselves whether there remains on earth a single protector of the arts who might give magnificent and disinterested service its due – and it is with astonishment

[8] Quoted in S. Durylin, "Aleksandr-Dyuma-otets i Rossiya," (1937: 31-32) / (1963: 493).

> and delight that they learn that divine providence has deigned to place on the throne of the great empire of the North a genius capable of understanding them and worthy of being understood by them.
>
> Sire, I allow myself, with respect and in the hope that my name is not unknown to him, to present his majesty the Emperor of all Russia this manuscript written in my very own hand.
>
> When I was writing it, I was inspired by the hope that the Emperor Nicholas, protector of the sciences and of literature, will not look with indifference on a writer from the West who counts himself among the number of his first and most sincere admirers.
>
> I remain with respect, sire, your majesty's most humble servant.
>
> Alex. Dumas.[9]

To reinforce the request, Dumas added a letter addressed to Uvarov at the end of which, to make things crystal clear, he signed himself "Alexandre Dumas, knight of the Lion of Belgium, of the Legion of Honour, and of Isabella the Catholic [of Spain]", all honours he had recently garnered. Uvarov passed on Durand's proposal and the material from Dumas to the Emperor, reducing the suggested rank from second to third class (the same as Vernet had received). Nicholas, however, was not an admirer of Dumas. As Maurois writes: "All these heroic malcontents (Antony, Kean) who declare war on society and are hostile to marriage made official circles uneasy."[10] No doubt sensing in the French writer a loose canon and suspicious of Durand, he decreed that the gift of a ring with the Emperor's insignia would be sufficient. Dumas, in dudgeon, pointedly dedicated the published version of the play to his mistress and future wife the actress Ida Ferrier, who played a leading role in the Paris production of the play, rather than to the Russian monarch.

The Emperor's suspicions about Dumas were confirmed when less than a year after the affair of the ring Dumas published a novel about Russia titled *The Fencing Master* (*Le Maître d'armes*), purportedly related to him by his acquaintance the fencing master Augustin-Edmé François Grisier, but with considerable detail derived from other sources, notably François Ancelot's *Six Months in Russia* (*Six mois en Russie*, 1838). The novel was an embroidered account of the adventures of a well-born young French woman Pauline Gueble, who had gone to Russia as a milliner. There she fell in love with a Russian nobleman and guards' officer Ivan Annenkov (in Dumas's account "Waninkoff"). When Annenkov was arrested and sent to Siberia for playing a minor part in the Decembrist uprising of 1825, Gueble, who had borne a child to her lover, petitioned

[9] Translated from Durylin, 504-05.
[10] Maurois, 297-98.

Nicholas for permission to follow him to Siberia, where they were married and lived until Alexander II's amnesty of 1856. Polina Annenkova, as she is known in Russia, is a genuine folk-heroine, and became the object of a popular Soviet film *The Star of Enchanting Happiness* (*Zvezda plenitel'nogo schast'ya*, 1975). Dumas's shameless appropriation of the story was the source of a great deal of consternation when news of it reached the exiled Decembrists in Siberia. Polina, who was offended by the cavalier treatment of the details of her life and her relationship with Annenkov, was led to write her own account of her life in refutation.[11] Beyond the romanticized version of Pauline's adventurous life, the novel offers a surprisingly detailed portrait of the Russian capital largely lifted from Ancelot's *Six Months in Russia*. The novel was inevitably banned in Russia because of its description of the Decembrist revolt, a taboo subject in Russia (and the reason why Dumas could not visit the country until Alexander II came to the throne). The prohibition only served to make it obligatory reading (in French) in the drawing rooms of upper-class Russians. Famously, according to Dumas himself, Nicholas found the Empress reading a book and guessed it was his. In *Journey to Russia* Dumas describes a conversation he had with Princess Trubetskaya, who had been a friend of the Empress:

> One day the tsarina went off into one of her most remote boudoirs for a reading of my novel. While the reading was going on the door opened and the emperor Nicholas I came in. Princess Trubetskaya, who was the reader, quickly hid the book under a cushion.
>
> The emperor approached and, stopping in front of his most gracious other half, who was trembling more than usual, asked:
>
> "Were you reading?"
>
> "Yes, sire."
>
> "Do you want me to tell you what you were reading?"
>
> The empress was silent.
>
> "You were reading Dumas's novel *The Fencing Master*."
>
> "How do you know that, sire?"
>
> "Well now! It is not difficult to guess. It's the novel that I have most recently banned."[12]

As Maurois observes, the publication of the novel had the effect of

[11] See Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour, "Dumas's Decembrists: *Le Maître d'armes* and the Memoirs of Pauline Annenkova". Pauline's memoirs were recently republished in Russian, together with a translation of Dumas's novel: P. Annenkova, *Vospominaniya*.

[12] *Voyage en Russie*, 480.

making Dumas *persona non grata* in Russia as long as Nicholas was on the throne, and contributed to the negative image of Russia in France during the Second Empire. The ban on its publication in Russia lasted until after the Russian revolution; a Russian translation of the novel appeared only in 1925 to mark the hundredth anniversary of the events of the Decembrist uprising. It has since been republished together with Polina Annenkova's account of her life, so that readers can appreciate the difference between the two. The affair of the novel came up again during Dumas's journey through Russia, when he visited Nizhny Novgorod. Unknown to him, the Annenkovs had moved there from Siberia when Alexander II, upon his accession to the throne, issued a general pardon to the former Decembrists and appointed Annenkov governor of the city. As Elizabeth Beaujour points out, the encounter between Dumas and his Russian victims could hardly have been as cordial as he makes it out to be in his account of his journey. If Dumas had rendered a service in publicizing the facts of the Decembrist uprising, the bungled hanging of the five ringleaders and the fate of those sent to Siberia, his cavalier disregard for details made his literary embrace a somewhat dubious pleasure. Thus, in Dumas's account Annenkov's hard-hearted mother, who refused to have anything to do with her son after his arrest, is turned into a generous and caring figure. In particular, his portrayal of "Louise" (i.e., Polina) as a déclassée adventuress offended her family pride, and in her account of her life she is at pains to portray herself as of noble birth, albeit obliged to live in straitened circumstances owing to the Revolution.

If the novel was Dumas's revenge for the slight he had received from Nicholas, it was perfectly on target. Apart from the description of the sufferings of the Decembrists, Dumas dwells on the cruelty of the ruling class in Russia, including a harrowing description of the beating to death of a serf for daring to flirt with the peasant lover of a minister (a reference to Arakcheev and his peasant mistress Nastasya Minkina) and scenes of nobles gambling away thousands of serfs at the gaming tables. He also airs a great deal of the dirty linen of the Romanovs, such as the murder of Peter III, Catherine's affairs with Potemkin and others, the fate of the prisoners in the Fortress of Peter and Paul who drowned during the flood of 1824, and so on. In short, the novel was a foretaste of what was to come when *Russia in 1839* (*La Russie en 1839*), Astolphe de Custine's account of his journey to Russia, appeared in 1842, creating a major scandal. Not surprisingly, Dumas remained on Nicholas's suspicious mind, and when in 1852 a rumour circulated that Dumas had written a pamphlet or satirical novel denouncing Nicholas as "the Nabob of the North", the Russian secret agent in Paris, Yakov Tolstoy, was ordered to investigate and

discover whether all the copies had been confiscated and destroyed. The Parisian police were alerted, but no such publication was found.[13]

Eighteen years after the publication of *The Fencing Master*, with the Crimean war over and Nicholas safely in his grave, Dumas was able to contemplate a trip to Russia. It was something he had planned to do for more than ten years. Dumas had been ever mindful of Russia, and when the Russian actor Vasily Karatygin, who had translated both *Henri III and His Court* and *Antony*, visited Paris with his wife Aleksandra Kolosova in 1845, he made sure to invite them to a rehearsal of his stage version of the *Three Musketeers*. He told the visitors of his ambition of visiting Russia. They persuaded him that this would be impossible for the time being. However, in the early 1850s his son Alexandre Dumas *fils* became enamoured of two Russian ladies in succession—first Lydia Nesselrode, daughter-in-law of Nicholas's Minister of Foreign Affairs Karl Nesselrode, and then Nadezhda Naryshkin, whom he eventually married. Russia became, so to speak, a part of Dumas's life. The decisive moment came in June 1858, when Dumas was spending the evening with the fabulously wealthy Count Grigory Aleksandrovich Kushelev-Bezborodko and his wife at their hotel suite in Paris. He had come to make the acquaintance of Daniel Douglas Home, an English spiritualist who interested Dumas. The Russian couple collected odd individuals, and Home enjoyed the company of the rich and famous. It was there that the Kushelev-Bezborodkos invited Dumas to come with them to Russia and be a witness at the marriage of Douglas Home to the sister of Count Bezborodko. Dumas, who had planned a trip to the near East, was given two minutes to decide. With characteristic impulsiveness he opted for the trip to Russia. And so it was that Alexandre Dumas *père* left Paris on June 15th, 1858 in the company of the Russian couple and their entourage—dogs, cats and spiritualist, among others—first by train to Stettin, and then by boat (appropriately enough, the *Nicholas*) to St Petersburg.

Dumas's lengthy voyage was to take him, among other places, to St Petersburg, Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, Astrakhan, Derbent and Tbilisi. He left Russian territory from the port of Poti in the Caucasus on a Russian steamer on February 13th, 1859, returning to France via Trebizond and Marseilles. Dumas's objective was to gather material to keep his readers happy. This was not the first time he had published travel impressions. As early as 1837 he had published a book of impressions of Switzerland, followed by one on the South of France (1840) and *From Paris to Cadiz* (1847). The first few weeks in St Petersburg were in many

[13] Durylin, 517.

ways crucial. First, Dumas was a guest of one of the richest couples in Russia. Count Grigory Aleksandrovich Kushelev-Bezborodko (1832-1870) had inherited fabulous wealth, and used it to support a variety of causes, as well as pursuing a desultory literary career. Dumas milked his aristocratic hosts to the limit, as he did those who furnished him with grist for his literary mill. Again and again we find in the pages he wrote ecstatic remarks concerning Russian hospitality. Russia was a great place for a Frenchman with an international reputation and extravagant tastes but little or no ready cash. Thus, throughout his trip it is the wealthiest aristocratic circles that he frequents. One wonders if his hosts were always as delighted to cater to his whims as he makes out in his text. More important, Russia had changed significantly since Nicholas's death. A new, engaged form of writing with a heavy element of social commentary had appeared in Russia; the question of the day was Russia's future, social reform, revolution. Dumas was perhaps a literary star for the average reader who turned to his novels as a form of literary escape. True, he had written *The Fencing Master* with its exposure of the events of 1825. But the sensational nature of his writing was far from being in tune with the new literature in Russia. At Home's wedding Dumas had met the writer Grigorovich, who became his principal source for information about Russian literature and helped Dumas translate the poetry of Pushkin and Lermontov into French. In the information he provided Dumas, Grigorovich seems to have focussed mainly on the Romantics, so that we find the Frenchman taken with such minor Romantic writers as Bestuzhev-Marlinsky and Lazhechnikov, whose story *The Ice House* (*Ledyanoi dom*) Dumas had had translated and then published under his own name (a notoriously frequent practice). Grigorovich was the closest Dumas came to contemporary Russian writers; true, through this acquaintance he met the poet and publicist Nekrasov and visited him at a dacha outside St Petersburg, but Nekrasov claimed not to speak French and thought this Frenchman with his gargantuan appetite a nuisance.[14] Nekrasov was close to the progressive circles of writers who found nothing of interest in Dumas's writing and disapproved of a literature that sought simply to entertain. The exiled writer Aleksandr Herzen wrote in the journal *The Bell* (*Kolokol*), which he published in London: "We read with shame and regret about the way our aristocracy is prostrating itself at Dumas's feet

[14] "The French writer was a frequent guest of N.A. Nekrasov, as A. Ya. Panaeva recalls. However, their relations were chilly. Dumas did not develop any other literary ties in Russia. The only writer he became friendly with was D.V. Grigorovich, who turned into his best guide around St Petersburg" (N.A. Kostyashkin, *Valaam v zhizni i tvorchestve zamechatel'nykh lyudei*, 110).

and running to behold the 'great curly-headed man' through the grillwork around Kushelev-Bezborodko's garden and pleading to stroll in the latter's park. No, it is clear that joining together several aristocratic families and ruining several thousand serfs will not make you an educated man. 'A nation of flunkies,' declares the *Daily Telegraph* describing all this. Our aristocrats really do resemble a household of lackeys, and for this reason they have no more tact than you will find in the servants' quarters."[15] The hero of the day seems to have been totally blind and insensitive to such subtleties, and indeed the lionizing that he received from his admirers went easily to the head of someone with such a large ego. On the other hand, he was also oblivious to the sensitivities of official Russian circles, and his reports from Russia in the *Monte-Cristo*, beginning with the history of the career of his host's grandfather, the servant of Paul I, and the details of the latter's murder as related by Kushelev-Bezborodko, began to create consternation as they reached St Petersburg. Clearly, Dumas was to follow his own practice (and that of Custine and others before him) in revealing the dark secrets of the tsarist regime. As the material, including (to add insult to injury) some taken from *The Fencing Master*, was printed in Paris in Dumas's own journal, he was beyond control of the Russian authorities. The best one could do was to try and limit the damage by hemming Dumas in through surreptitious police surveillance.[16] Sergey Durylin is adamant: for him the trip—banquets, visits to potentates, spectacles—was "organized" by the heads of police in the various destinations along the way. A case in point is the incident where Dumas claimed to have been in a skirmish with Chechen rebels, which was later revealed to have been staged by his host Prince Dundukov-Korsakov: "After a series of feasts and drinking sessions, he [the Prince] rode out with a small troop to accompany his guests, i.e., the group of travellers that included Dumas. At the first edge of the forest the prince had had the idea of amusing himself with a simulated rebel attack; for this purpose several dragoons had been sent into the forest to act out a skirmish with an imaginary Shamyl. After the shooting was over the novelist was fed various tall tales about a battle in the forest and as evidence was shown some rags drenched in the blood of a sheep that had been slaughtered for dinner."[17] In fact, Dumas was unable to keep a promise to the readers of the *Monte-Cristo* to meet the rebel leader Shamyl.[18] For Durylin, Dumas was from start to finish in a

[15] Quoted in Durylin, 523.
[16] The secret reports were first published in Durylin, 532-45.
[17] Ibid., 556.
[18] Nevertheless, Dumas does provide considerable interesting material on Shamyl derived from eye-witnesses (a Russian officer who had been in captivity and the

"golden cage". This is perhaps an exaggeration. In fact, Dumas had considerable freedom, especially in St Petersburg and Moscow, where he was the guest of noble families and beyond the day-to-day surveillance of the police. The ultimate result is inscrutable: was Dumas aware of the surveillance? Was he unaware of the "Potemkin village" aspect to his trip? Or was he a silent accomplice in his own deception, glibly handing on to his readers his experiences at face value?

Dumas's Russian impressions first appeared as a series of articles in his magazine *Le Monte-Cristo*, and then were published in book form. His descriptions of his trip are among the most enjoyable books about Russia. The two works are somewhat different. *Journey to the Caucasus* in fact appeared first, and is the more coherent to read, since it was written mostly during and at the immediate end of the trip, so that it has greater immediacy. The volume *From Paris to Astrakhan* contains less descriptions of places and scenery, and almost half comprises historical accounts of different events in Russian history, generally evoked by visits to the places where they took place: the fortress of SS Peter and Paul, Uglich, Borodino (site of the battle of 1812) and so on. Nevertheless, both texts share a basic organizing principle, comprising a string of descriptions of Russian life and landscape, anecdotes, documents, short translations of Russian poetry, historical sketches and commentaries. None is too lengthy—usually a page or two—and each ends with a *pointe* of some kind. The success of the enterprise rests entirely on Dumas's talent as a narrator and a sort of picaresque hero whose presence, perspective and voice are the unifying factor. The journey is the fundamental organizing principle of Dumas's text, as the hero moves from place to place. In the Russian section, originally known as *From Paris to Astrakhan*, the dynamism of the journey is slowed by the weight of historical material, which is greatly reduced in the *Caucasus*. In the latter much of the narrative is a breathless progression across a horizon that is constantly receding; the obstacles and accidents that intervene to hinder the hero from reaching his next destination serve only to underline the urgency of the trajectory.

Alexander II is reported to have reacted with rage to the publication of Dumas's book. No doubt this official hostility lay partly at the bottom of the negative view of the book that Russians have long held. Dumas, who never let the facts stand in the way of a good story, was himself no doubt partly to blame, since official critics could condemn him for inaccuracy. In fact, Dumas does indeed garble many names and facts; for example, he

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account by a French woman hired to teach the children of a family who were captured by Shamyl). In particular, the question arises of the possible influence of Dumas's descriptions of Shamyl's family life on Tolstoy's tale *Hadji Murad*.

repeats in *Journey to Russia* an error already present in *The Fencing Master*, asserting that the Tauride Palace in St Petersburg was a surprise gift from Potemkin to Catherine II, when in fact it was a present from the grateful Empress to the general who captured the Crimean peninsula (Tauris). Does it matter? Not terribly, for although Dumas includes a lot of history in the two books, it is *histoire romancée* – somewhere between history proper and fiction. It is in this middle ground that Dumas stakes out his territory. His descriptions of historical events in the books include, for example, the murder of the Emperor Paul *with dialogue*. Was Dumas there? How does he know? The answer is that he doesn't, but the dialogue makes the history exciting, which is what matters for the reader. In this sense Dumas is a true disciple of Walter Scott, with the difference that his work has aged better than Scott's, no doubt because Dumas had begun by writing romantic melodramas and had mastered the technique of dialogue and situation. It was, nevertheless, Scott's invention of the romantic historical novel that set the scene for all who were to follow. Pushkin, commenting on reading Nikolay Karamzin's *History of the Russian State*, wrote, "C'est palpitant comme la gazette d'hier", for Karamzin had grasped Scott's technique and applied it to the writing of history proper. Pushkin's formula could be applied equally to Dumas's historical romances and travel notes.

Despite the popularity of Dumas's novels in Russia, no translation into Russian of his travels was forthcoming in Tsarist times, except for an abbreviated one of the Caucasian segment that appeared in Tiflis in 1861. This was evidently because it revealed unmentionable details of Russian history. Indeed, it was only in 1993, in the post-Soviet period, that the full text of Dumas's journey through Russia was translated. Nevertheless, every Russian, whether he has read it or not, has an opinion about it, for the books are generally regarded as a wildly inaccurate description of the country, typical of the slapdash attitude of French visitors; suspicions about them were reinforced by the revelation by Soviet scholarship of the level of control exercised by the secret police over his visit. Until recently, most Russians knew about the works in question only from the supposed gaffe by Dumas of the *razvesistaya klyukva* ("spreading cranberry tree") that was erroneously attributed to the volume.[19] Every Russian knows this proverbial expression, used to describe any fantastic nonsense told by foreigners about Russia and supposedly used by Dumas to describe a picnic where he sat under such an apocryphal feature of the Russian

[19] On the real origin of the expression, see Vadim Serov, *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar' krylatykh slov i vyrazhenii*.