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# Guilt, Victimhood, and the Emotional Pleasures of the Literary Tableau in Radishchev's Letters to Count Vorontsov

This paper examines Alexander Radishchev's letters from Siberia to his patron count Alexander Vorontsov. After he was exiled for publishing his incendiary *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow* (1790), Radishchev initiated a bilingual correspondence with his patron, which lasted until his return to Russia in 1797 and beyond. In his letters to Vorontsov, Radishchev used various rhetorical means to diminish and even erase his guilt, in order to self-fashion himself exclusively as a victim. While doing so, he resorted to short epistolary narratives about his and his family's misfortunes, meant at moving his patron and securing his durable protection. The paper contends that these short narratives intentionally reminded of visual representations of virtue tormented or rewarded, taken from the sentimental repertoire of Jean-Baptiste Greuze's canvases, a French painter whose work was popularized throughout Europe by countless engravings and commented on in contemporary Russian journals. Radishchev's aim in favouring visual narratives was to enhance the emotional and moral pleasure of Vorontsov by offering him the status of consumer of moving tableaux, a particularly enjoyable position for eighteenth-century men of feelings.

## Introduction

The remaining correspondence of Alexander Radishchev (1749-1802) was published in 1952 as volume 3 of the Soviet edition of his *Complete Works* (Radishchev 1952). Out of the 108 letters known to the coordinators of the volume, 89 were addressed to his administrative superior and patron Aleksandr Vorontsov (1741-1805), the president of the College of Commerce under whom Radishchev made most of his career as a civil servant.

The bulk of the published correspondence, and definitely its most interesting part, is formed by the 48 letters written by Radishchev to Vorontsov from his Siberian exile, between 1791 and 1797. In his letters from Siberia, Radishchev, who survived through the ordeal of exile mainly thanks to his patron's material support and administrative protection, addressed a large variety of topics.

These topics are the state of Siberia, its geography and geology,


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its natural resources, fauna, and inhabitants. This variety of topics was meant to entertain Voronstov intellectually, which was one of the unofficial missions assigned to literati by their patrons. As such, Radishchev's letters could be read by Vorontsov as an account of Siberia, very much in the same way as Denis Fonvizin's letters to Nikita Panin's brother were an account of France (Offord 2005: 56-65). Besides their value as a travelogue of inhabited lands, Radishchev's letters also provided information and insights on Russia's commercial ties with China, which made them valuable as a report on commerce, the field of Vorontsov's professional activity.

This double informational value fulfilled a double pragmatic function: keeping Vorontsov's entertained in order to earn his enduring protection; supporting Radishchev's efforts to preserve social capital, in order to avoid losing his status as a noble and as an intellectual during his years away from civilisation. In other words, Radishchev made considerable efforts to retain value in his patron's eyes as well as in his own in order to resist the punishment which had been inflicted on him by the State.

Yet, besides their intellectual value, Radishchev's letters also strove for significance as an emotional document. Indeed, entertaining Voronstov meant not only speaking to his head, but also to his heart. By appealing to the humanity of his patron, Radishchev helped Vorontsov fulfil his moral duty as an enlightened man and a mason. Discussion is ongoing as to whether Radishchev or not was a mason. However, Vorontsov did belong to the lodge Urania, which Radishchev visited in 1774, possibly on his patron's suggestion (Bakounine 1967: 432, 592). As brotherhood carried an important value in masonic morals, we can suppose that helping Radishchev, whether he was a brother in the masonic sense of the term or just an enlightened man who had become victim of a brutal regime, was a means of self-improvement for his former patron.

But helping Vorontsov improve himself by fulfilling his duty as a mason was not the only emotional value of Radishchev's letters. Just as they were both informative and intellectually entertaining, they also had to be both edifying and emotionally entertaining. In other words, the emotions expressed in Radishchev's correspondence were also

meant to make his letters enjoyable reading so as to guarantee the continuation of the epistolary exchange.

Among the various emotions depicted by Radishchev in his letters to Vorontsov, guilt played a major role. Indeed, not only had Radishchev been declared guilty of threatening the throne by the Criminal Court and the Senate (McConnell 1964: 119), but he was also guilty of damaging his patron, whose position he had endangered by forcing him to show public support to his former employee (Humphreys 1969: 91). Finally, Radishchev was guilty of hurting his family, whose ruin he had caused by losing his position and most of his capital, much of which his sister-in-law had spent in an attempt to buy the benevolence of his prosecutor Stepan Sheshkovskii (1727-1794) during the writer's imprisonment and trial.

As I argue in this paper, however, the way in which Radishchev expressed guilt in his letters to Vorontsov was highly selective and did not reflect all the emotional ties and nuances one would expect to find in his correspondence. Through a process of selection, the writer progressively expelled from his letters, or at least from those that have reached us, the expression of guilt when he could not mediate it through familiar cultural forms and/or in accordance with established emotional patterns. This process of selection was a highly normative one and followed various gender, rhetorical, and linguistic requirements. As a result, Radishchev's letters produced a narrative about guilt that was both acceptable and enjoyable for his main reader Alexander Vorontsov.

In the first part of this paper, I show how Radishchev tried to conceal his real guilt by euphemizing it, displacing it, or even contesting it. In the second part, I demonstrate how the writer further erased his guilt by self-fashioning himself as a victim. Finally, I show how Radishchev's letters to Vorontsov were meant to be read and visualized by their addressee as a drama about victimhood, in a sophisticated device by which Vorontsov was presented as both spectator and actor. As I will argue, Radishchev's letters shared this device with the virtuous visual narratives developed by the French painter Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805). In conclusion, I will reflect on the specificity of this device of Radishchev's in order to stress how it illustrates the

gendered and economic logics underpinning Russian patronage in early Imperial Russia.

## I. Radishchev's epistolary strategies for minimising guilt:

In the various documents Radishchev wrote from his cell in the Petropavlovsk fortress in Saint Petersburg during his trial, he admitted that he had done wrong to all the people affected to any extent by the publication of his inflammatory book. In a letter to Sheshkovskii from July 26th, 1790, written in archaic language in order to imitate the style of a religious confession, Radishchev admitted that he had wronged his parents, wife, and children, as well as the empress:

> В смирении моем лобжу прошение твое. Г'осподи! Согреших и днесь необычайно. Согреших, возмечтав мудрствовати; согреших, прогневав милосердую государынию; согреших, втащив в печаль, скорбь и нищету невинных младенцев и жен и родителей престарелых. Согреших, привлекши на себя всех омерзение (Radishchev 1952: 341-342).
>
> It is with humility that I ask for forgiveness, ô Lord! I have sinned and sinned beyond measure, thinking that I could be wise; I have sinned, by causing the anger of our merciful empress; I have sinned, by bringing sadness, affliction and poverty upon innocent children and women, as well as upon my old parents. I have sinned, by brining upon myself everyone's loathing.

This quotation clearly shows that the writer was well aware of the scope of his guilt, in terms of both the number of people impacted and the social and political consequences of what he had done. By comparison, Radishchev's letters to Vorontsov minimized both the extent of his guilt and the number of people affected by the publication of the *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow*. The first strategy used in the letters to achieve this goal was to euphemize his crime with the help of two different linguistic tools.

The first was bilingualism. Radishchev wrote most of his letters to his patron in French,

which, as Ekaterina Dmitrieva has shown, was a way to soften harsh topics in epistolary communication in aristocratic Russian culture (Dmitrieva 1994: 83). By conferring on the correspondence the lightness of high-society conversation, French tended to erase Radishchev's status as a convict. In this regard, French seems to be the antithesis of the archaic form of Russian used by the writer in the letter to Sheshkovskii quoted above.

The use of French also facilitated the deployment of the second linguistic tool: the use of euphemisms to refer to the cause of Radishchev's unhappiness. Characteristically, the French terms used by the writer in his letters to Vorontsov all tended to mitigate his guilt by referring to his crime using light-hearted signifiers. In letter 37, from March 8th, 1791, Radishchev mentioned 'une étourderie impardonnable' [an unforgivable blunder] (Radishchev 1952: 351). Radishchev used the same term again in letter 61, from February 17th, 1792: 'en maudissant de tout coeur mon étourderie' [cursing my blunder with all my heart] (Radishchev 1952: 426). According to the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie françoise*, published in Paris in 1799, an 'étourderie' is the action of an 'étourdi', i.e. of a man, 'qui agit sans considérer ce qu'il fait' [who acts without considering what he is doing] (Dictionnaire 1799: 535). Nothing in this definition suggests any serious wrongdoing. The same goes with the other French term used by Radishchev to refer to his crime in his letters to Vorontsov. In letter 75, from June 3rd, 1795, the writer used the term 'imprudence' [carelessness]. The relative neutrality of this second term is stressed in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie françoise* by the fact that, in all the examples provided, the word needs to be associated with adjectives to lose connotations of triviality: 'Il s'est conduit en cela avec une *grande*, avec une *extrême* imprudence' [he behaved in this respect with great carelessness, with extreme carelessness] (Dictionnaire 1799: 715).

Besides lexically alleviating his crime, Radishchev's letters to Vorontsov also tended to displace his guilt. Whereas he acknowledged that he had wronged an entire gallery of people in his letter to Sheshkovskii, his Siberian letters drastically reduced the amount of people towards whom he should feel guilty. Characteristically, his letters to Vorontsov never mention the empress, or Radish-

chev's mother. Beyond the rational absence of the empress in letters addressed to a man who had been in conflict with her, her absence, as well as the absence of Radishchev's mother, also bears a gendered significance, which I will address in conclusion. As for now, enough is to say that, whenever Radishchev finally expresses guilt through proper terms, the only person whom he professed to have felt he had wronged was Vorontsov. In letter 36, from March 1st, 1791, the writer acknowledged being guilty of concealing from his patron his project to publish *The Journey from Petersburg to Moscow*:

> Чего же я себе не прощу, то что я попал в беду, в которую бы себя не ввергнул, если бы в сем случае не потаил от вас моего безразсудства (Radishchev 1952: 350).
>
> What I cannot forgive myself for is the fact that I brought misery upon myself which I could have avoided if I had not hidden my folly from you.

Similarly, Radishchev's discourse on his relationship with Vorontsov was the only place where he used terms unambivalently related to the lexical field of guilt, such as 'vinovnik' in letter 38, from March 15th, 1791 (Radishchev 1952: 355), or sentences like '[…] que Votre Excellence ne croie pas que je veuille me disculper' [I beg your Excellency not to believe that I am trying to exonerate myself] in letter 43, from May 8th, 1791 (Radishchev 1952: 375), or 'vis-à-vis de Votre Excellence je n'ai aucune excuse' [Regarding your Excellency, I have no excuse] in letter 63, from April 4th, 1792 (Radishchev 1952: 437). Thus, whereas Radishchev's references to his true crime were covered by the use of euphemisms, his use of terms unambivalently referring to guilt related exclusively to his failing attempts at satisfying his patron's demands, for instance by writing more often from Irkutsk (Radishchev 1952: 437).

As I have argued elsewhere, another sign of Radishchev's feeling guilty at the idea of disobeying his patron was language shifting. Whenever the writer feared to have displeased Vorontsov, for instance when he kept delaying his departure from Tobol'sk, which might be reported to the empress and anger her (letter 44, from May 29th, 1791, in Radishchev 1952: 379), he left French, a linguistic code meant to suggest an equality of status

between the two men, to shift back to Russian, the language of government service, used here as a sign of the obedience Radishchev owed, as a civil servant, to his former administrative superior (Baudin 2015: 127).

Vorontsov's position as Radishchev's only legitimate judge led to him standing in for God himself. Whereas the letter to Sheshkovskii, written in archaic, liturgical-like Russian, was addressed to God and only secondarily to Sheshkovskii, who was invited to witness Radishchev's repentance and prayer, the writer's Siberian letters multiply comparisons between Vorontsov and God. In letter 40, from April 5th, 1791, Vorontsov is referred to as 'celui à qui je dois le petit souffle, qui me fait vivre' [he, to whom I owe the breath of life that keeps me alive] (Radishchev 1952: 361). In letter 43, from May 8th, 1791, Vorontsov is granted the ability to see Radishchev's soul as an all-seeing God (Radishchev III, 374). Finally, in the same letter, Radishchev equates his patron with God and even gives Vorontsov priority over God by writing 'Dieu fait lever le soleil pour éclairer l'univers; mais c'est à vous que je dois mon existence' [God commands the sun to rise and shine over the universe, but it is to you that I owe my existence] (Radishchev 1952: 374).

By granting Vorontsov the position of sole moral authority deemed able to judge him, Radishchev denied the legitimacy of any other authority, especially the authority of the State. As a consequence, he denied the legitimacy of his punishment and the logics that had brought it down upon him. In letter 37, from March 8th, 1791, he wrote that he was 'emmené par un concours de circonstances inexplicables presque à moi-même jusqu'au bord du précipice' [brought to the edge of the abyss by circumstances almost inexplicable to me] (Radishchev 1952: 350), thus emphasizing his inability to understand his own motivations, of course, but also what followed and what brought him to Siberia. Similarly, in letter 60, from February 6th, 1792, in response to Vorontsov's exhortations to show repentance to the authorities, he answered:

> Votre Excellence dans la dernière de vos lettres m'exhorte à me repentir de ce que j'ai fait, en ajoutant qu'un repentir sincère et bien marqué pourrait contribuer à l'adoucissement de ma situation présente. [...] Mais quel peut

> être ce repentir sincère ? N'a-t-il pas été bien vif, bien caractérisé, du premier moment, que j'ai été privé de toute communication avec les miens ? (Radishchev 1952: 417)
>
> In your last letter, Your Excellency urges me to repent for what I have done, adding that sincere and unequivocal repentance could soften my present situation. […] But what could this sincere repentance sound like? Has it not been strong enough and clear enough from the very moment I have been deprived of any means of communication with my loved ones?

As this sentence clearly shows, Radishchev failed, or pretended to fail, to understand how to express repentance in any way other than that of his own suffering. By doing so, he pretended not to understand his wrongdoing. Additionally, expressing suffering did not qualify him as a criminal, but rather as a victim, a role he was eager to embrace as it allowed him to represent his situation and emotional state according to popular positive literary models. While letting him embrace the cultural role of the victim, Vorontsov, by exhorting him to repent, embraced that of the benevolent brother or father, a middle position between the official world of politics and the law and the imaginary world of virtue in which Radishchev was staging himself, letter after letter, and which he was inviting Vorontsov to join in order to form an idealized emotional community.

## II. Victimisation and the search for alternative identities

Despite the fact that Vorontsov urged him to express repentance, all Radishchev was able, or willing, to express in his Siberian letters was his own suffering. By confusing the cause of his misery with his misery itself, Radishchev stressed his condition as a victim, not as a criminal — a condition he would save for other individuals, as this paper will later demonstrate. Characteristically, his infatuation with his own suffering prevented him from understanding how others could look upon Vorontsov's protection as too favourable a treatment for a state criminal. In letter 55, from November 26th, 1791, he wrote:

> On m'a assuré que quelqu'un veut dénoncer au Sénat que je suis traité ici mieux que je ne le devrais. Si on voyait ce que mon cœur souffre quelquefois, mon ennemi même n'aurait pas envié mon état. (Radishchev 1952: 405)
>
> I have been assured that someone wants to report to the Senate that I am being treated here better than I should. If people saw what my heart sometimes endures, not even my enemy would envy my situation.

The expression of Radishchev's sufferings in his letters to Vorontsov was constant but diverse. Its first and main cause was his separation from his children, a matter he kept complaining about, as in letter 33, from October 20th, 1790, where he wrote:

> Если бы не несносная сердцу моему печаль разлучения моего от детей моих толико отяготительна, то верьте, что опричь сего мне кажется, что я нахожусь в обыкновенном каком либо путешествии. (Radishchev 1952: 345).
>
> If the sadness which my heart endures from being separated from my children were not so unbearable, then, believe me, I would feel as if I am on an ordinary journey.

If the writer was eventually joined in his exile by his sister in law and younger children, he did not see his older children during his years in Siberia, which led him to keep on lamenting about their absence, as in letter 59 from January 20th, 1792, where he complained about not receiving letters either from his father or his children:

> Point de lettre de votre Excellence, point de lettre de mes enfants, point de mon père… Si on se sent encore quelque attachement à la vie, vous l'avouerez qu'un pareil état est bien pénible (Radishchev 1952: 411).
>
> No letter from your Excellency, no letter from my children, nothing from my father either… You have to admit that, for someone who has not yet become entirely indifferent to life,

> such a situation is very distressing.

Stressing the suffering caused by his separation from his children helped Radishchev to self-fashion himself as the 'bon père', a figure valued by the literature and visual culture of sentimentalism. As family and the representation of its intimacy grew increasingly popular in the second half of the 18th century under the development of bourgeois values in Western Europe, separation from one's children tended to be perceived as an unbearable suffering. This is obvious, for instance, in Nikolai Karamzin's mute pantomimic Basel scene in *Letters of a Russian Traveller* (1791-1797), where the reformation of a family, after the first burst of French revolutionary violence in August 1789 led to its fragmentation, is considered the very image of happiness (Karamzin 1987: 99-100; Baudin 2011: 155-158).

The ever-growing importance of family as an ideal social community and a utopian space of happiness also relied on the new value associated with children under the influence of Rousseau's ideas. Children were now seen as innocent, and Radishchev seems to have used them as a metonym of his own supposed innocence by associating them with the representation of his own unhappiness. Complaining about his poor health, the second cause of his suffering in Siberia, Radishchev often associated the illnesses of his children with his own, as in letter 47 from July 16th, 1791:

> Depuis que je suis ici, j'ai essuyé différentes attaques de maladie, ma sœur de même, et mes enfants n'en ont pas été exempts. (Radishchev 1952: 382)
>
> While I have been here, I have suffered from various illnesses; my sister and my children have not avoided them either.

As they physically embodied innocence, children could similarly physically embody suffering. In letter 69 from December 7th, 1793, Radishchev shared with his patron his agony at seeing goitres developing on the necks of his sons:

> Mais j'avoue que je ne suis pas assez Hercule pour en faire autant de l'éloignement où je vis, et du chagrin de voir des goitres aux cols de mes enfants. (Radishchev 1952: 457).

> But I must admit that I lack Hercules' strength when I think about the remoteness of my present life or when I see the goitres on my children's necks.

At no time did Radishchev blame himself for taking his children with him to Siberia, where they developed such a disease. Instead of seeing in his children's affliction further evidence of his fault, he used it as an additional visual representation of innocence tormented. Thus the depiction of the writer's psychological and physical torments, as well as of his children's physical agony, was offered to Vorontsov as a moving picture of his position as victim.

Depicting others as tormenters helped Radishchev to further secure this symbolic position. If Radishchev constantly diminished his culpability in his Siberian letters, he never failed to describe others as guilty. The people of Ilimsk, for example, were presented as the embodiment of human evil in letter 75 from June 3rd, 1795, where he wrote:

> Le paquet de Votre Excellence nous est bien venu à temps pour verser du beaume dans des coeurs excédés d'un des tristes spectacles que nous présente souvent la faible humanité. La cabale, l'envie, la perfidie, la trahison, toute renégation de moralité ne sont que des traits du tableau, qui est journellement sous nos yeux. (Radishchev 1952: 476)
>
> The package sent by Your Excellency arrived just on time to pour some balm on our hearts, which are exasperated by the sad images offered to us by the weakness of men. Conspiracy, envy, treachery, treason, and the negation of all morality are just some of the features continually under our eyes.

Within a year, Radishchev wrote again:

> Au sujet des juges de notre district, je me reserve d'en parler une autre fois à Votre Excellence, ce que je puis dire pour le moment d'à present, c'est qu'il n'y a point de milieu quand on a affaire avec le rebus de la société. C'est le plus vil intérêt qui fait agir les gens

> d'une trempe pareille. (letter 78, from June 9th, 1796, Radishchev 1952, 485)
>
> Concerning our district judges, I would rather discuss them with your Excellency some other time; for now, all I can say is that there is no middle ground when dealing with the scum of society. People of this kind are moved exclusively by the vilest interest.

By presenting as evil both the inhabitants of Ilimsk and the local judges, Radishchev did more than just resort to the classic narrative about provincial backwardness offered by popular literary works such as Fonvizin's *Minor* (1782). He also constructed an opposition between the inner world of family virtue and the outer world of social evil. This opposition, however, excluded Radishchev's brother Petr from the family idyll. Indeed, in his letters to Vorontsov, Radishchev repeatedly alluded to his brother as a threat to the moral education of his older sons, who had stayed behind in European Russia. In letter 33, from October 20th, 1790, he wrote:

> Большия мои дети, если ваше сиятельство изволите их вопросить наедине, могут уже сказать, что сообщество с братом моим Петром Николаевичем для них вредно. (Radishchev 1952: 346)
>
> My older sons, if Your Excellency wishes to interrogate them, will tell him that the company of my brother Petr Nikolaevich is harmful to them.

Similarly, in letter 35, from December 21st, 1790, he wrote:

> [Брат] почитает таковым желание мое, чтобы он не был с моими детьми. Сие желание есть и будет всегда во мне, и я почту себя сугубо несчастным, если бы прежде их совершеннолетия он мог быть с ними. (Radishchev 1952: 349)
>
> My brother considers it my wish that he should be kept away from my children. It is my wish indeed and will always remain such, and I would consider myself utterly miserable if he were to be in their

company before their coming of age.

This second allusion to Petr's pernicious moral influence ended up with Radishchev's hope that his brother could be reformed, if Vorontsov helped to secure a position for him:

> Сделав ему благодеяние, мне окажете найвеличайшее, и он, опомнясь, прилепится к доброму, к чему природа его составила. (Radishchev 1952: 349)
>
> By obliging him, you would oblige me even more, and he would come to his senses and return to the good for which Nature created him.

Therefore, in Radishchev's scenario of benevolence and the restoration of the family idyll, the only one in need for moral correction was his brother. By emphasizing Petr's possible evil influence on his children, Radishchev stressed again his status as a good father, the 'linchpin of the moral order' in sentimental culture (Barker 2007: 113), and used it to dissimulate his official status as a convict.

This alternative identity was only one of several imaginary social roles that Radishchev resorted to during his Siberian exile. As I have argued elsewhere, the writer repeatedly tried to self-fashion himself as a traveller on a mission of exploration, which is why he often referred to his growing interest in geology and natural history (Baudin 2007: 237-238). In letter 48, from July 24th, 1791, he wrote:

> Mais pourquoi ne me représenterai-je pas comme un voyageur, qui, satisfaisant à la fois à deux passions favorites, la curiosité et l'amour de la gloire, entre d'un pas ferme dans des sentiers inconnus, s'enfonce dans des forêts impénétrables, franchit des précipices, surmonte des glaciers et, parvenu au terme de ses entreprises, contemple d'un œil satisfait ses peines et ses fatigues? (Radishchev 1952: 386)
>
> But why wouldn't I fancy myself as a traveller who, seeking to satisfy both his favourite passions, curiosity and the love of fame, steps assuredly onto unknown paths, enters impenetrable forests, walks

> across ravines and glaciers and, reaching the end of his endeavours, contemplates with a satisfied eye both his past trouble and his tiredness?

This kind of self-fashioning strategy, however, was superficial and Radishchev rapidly admitted its failure (Radishchev 1952: 386). It was more efficient in the case of two additional roles he embraced in his Siberian letters. The first one was the role of offended nobleman. Besides providing information on the lands he travelled through, Radishchev fulfilled his obligations as Vorontsov's *protégé* by sharing with him his impressions as a reader. In letter 62, from March 24th, 1792, he discussed Benedikt Franz Johann von Hermann's *Statistical Description of the Russian Empire*, a book published in German in Saint Petersburg and Leipzig in 1790:

> Et puis, que penser de ce raisonnement : en parlant de la liberté accordée à tout le monde d'avoir des imprimeries et de débiter des livres, il dit : sans doute le dessein de la Sage Souveraine était en donnant de l'extension à cet art (imprimerie) d'enflammer l'amour pour les sciences, mais… il finit son article par ce *mais*, et croit faire du sublime en réticence, tandis qu'il ne dit qu'une injure. (Radishchev 1952: 432)

> And what of this way of reasoning: speaking of the liberty granted to all people to run private printing presses and to publish books, he says: no doubt the goal of the Wise Sovereign was, by supporting this craft (print), to boost the love of sciences, but… he finishes his article with this but and thinks that his restraint is sublime, whereas it is merely insulting.

Radishchev's reaction clearly shows that he felt offended by the idea that the introduction of the right to print books for private individuals had been misused by some, including, of course, himself. Here he reacted as a nobleman whose pride had been insulted by the innuendo that his goal was not the one expected by the empress, that is the advancement of Enlightenment values in Russia. By reacting as a gentleman whose reputation might be tarnished, Radishchev once again negated

his status as a convict, this time on an emotional level, as he resorted to a feeling – pride – which was considered in Montesquieu's popular political theory and Aleksandr Sumarokov's literary discourse as a defining feature of the nobility, a social group Radishchev did not officially belong to since his condemnation.

The last alternative identity to which Radishchev turned also has a deep emotional resonance. In letter 79, from January 1797, Radishchev rejoiced at the happy beginning of emperor Paul's reign and wrote:

> L'empereur commence son règne par des bienfaits. Veuille le Ciel lui être propice dans toutes ses entreprises. On bénit déjà son règne. Les recrues sont retournés dans leurs foyers. Tel qui gémissait d'avoir été arraché des bras de ses parents, s'enivre de joie, et d'une joie d'autant plus grande qu'elle était inespérée. Ah ! qu'il est doux de revoir les lieux qui nous ont vu naître… Ah ! qu'il est cruel d'espérer souvent en vain. (Radishchev 1952: 489)

> The emperor begins his reign with all kinds of good deeds. May Heavens support his endeavours. People are already praising his rule. Recruits are coming back home. He, who moaned because he had been torn from his parents, is now overwhelmed with joy, and his joy is all the greater as he did not expect it. Ah! How sweet it is to see again the place where one was born… Ah! How cruel it is to feed false expectations.

This quotation obviously shows Radishchev's identification with the soldiers returning to their homes and families. Again, this identification helped him to fashion himself as something other than a convict, especially since it associated him with the image of the soldier, the very embodiment of the dutiful subject. It also made use of a fashionable motif from the sentimental culture of the time, widely illustrated in visual arts, from Sigmund Freudenberg's *Return of the Swiss Soldier* (1778-1780) to Jean-Baptiste Isabey's diptych *The Departure* and *The Return* (1794).

Illustration 1: Sigmund Freudenberg, *The Return of the Swiss*

*Soldier* (1778-1780), coloured engraving © collection of Rodolphe Baudin

Illustration 2: Jean-Baptiste Isabey, *The Departure* and *The Return* (1794), aquatints © collection of Rodolphe Baudin

Radishchev's triggering of visual associations with moving popular representations of the time was the final strategy displayed in his letters to Vorontsov to erase his guilt. It was also meant to entertain his patron by playing with his emotions, an aspect I will focus on in the third and final part of the present study.

## III. Victimhood as visual delight

What Radishchev built with his moving depiction of the soldiers' return to their homes was a *tableau*, a fashionable aesthetic form at the end of the eighteenth century, which had been actively promoted by supporters of sentimental aesthetics such as Diderot. Popular in drama as well as in prose, as mentioned earlier in reference to Karamzin's *Letters of a Russian Traveller*, this form relied heavily on graphic sources, whose visual delight it was meant to expand to literature. One of the masters of the visual sentimental aesthetics and a direct inspiration to Diderot and other supporters of the tableau was the painter Jean-Baptiste Greuze, whose fame conquered Russia, where aristocrats and the imperial family were eager to purchase his original works (Novosel'skaia 1991: 15-19), while engravings contributed to his reputation among wider audiences (Michel 1986: 39).

Greuze's paintings focused on the intimate life of modest but virtuous families, alternatively developing dramas of conflict and solidarity (Barker 2007: 111, 114). No wonder then, that Radishchev's melodramatic tableaux of his life in Siberia were reminiscent of the 'melancholic fictions', as Nicolas Wagner characterised them, of the French master (Wagner 1986: 25).

Radishchev's insistence on referring to his children in his letters to Vorontsov echoes their constant presence in Greuze's works, for instance in his 1769 painting *Les sevreuses*, where they embody innocence, or in numerous family portraits where they figure, according to Emma Barker, as the future perpetuation of family happiness (Barker 2007: 112) — a topic dear to

Radishchev's heart, as shown by letters 52 from October 29th, 1791 (Radishchev 1952: 395) and 66 from September 14th, 1792 (Radishchev 1952: 446).

Illustration 3: Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Les sevreuses* (painting, 1769), engraving © collection of Rodolphe Baudin

Children in Greuze's paintings are also represented as actors in an educational process inside the family, as in the 1755 painting entitled *La lecture de la Bible*, which anticipates Radishchev's depiction of his moral tutoring of his children in letter 40, from April 5th, 1791.

Illustration 4: Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *La lecture de la Bible* (painting, 1755), engraving © collection of Rodolphe Baudin

They are also associated with the representation of innocent happiness and parental benevolence, as in the 1774 painting *Le gâteau des rois*, which echoes Radishchev's evocation of his children's joy when they received presents from Vorontsov, an emotional moment mentioned in letter 61 from February 17th, 1792:

> Mes petits enfants ont été transportés à la vue des petits almanachs que Votre Excellence a daigné leur envoyer. (Radishchev 1952: 424)
>
> My children were overwhelmed with joy at the sight of the small almanacs Your Excellency cared to send them.

Illustration 5: Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Le gâteau des rois* (painting, 1774), engraving © collection of Rodolphe Baudin

Besides children, Greuze's paintings also represent the elderly, especially father figures suffering from health issues brought by age — a motif that the painter used to represent filial piety. *L'Aveugle trompé*, a painting from 1755, echoes Radishchev's worry about his aging father becoming blind, an issue he referred to in letter 70 of June 1794 (Radishchev 1952: 460). Radishchev's concern about his father was also addressed in letter 74, dated January 1st, 1795 (Radishchev 1952: 475) and in letter 70, quoted above, in which he expressed his wish to see his father again (implicitly, before his father dies), thus echoing the exact subject of Greuze's famous 1763 painting *La piété filiale*.

Illustration 6: Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *L'Aveugle trompé* (painting, 1755), engraving © collection of Rodolphe Baudin

Illustration 7: Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *La piété filiale* (painting, 1763), engraving © collection of Rodolphe Baudin

Finally, Radishchev's Siberian letters repeatedly refer to Vorontsov's charity, as in letter 37, from March 8th 1791 (Radishchev 1952: 351-352), 61, from February 17th, 1792 (Radishchev 1952: 423), 74, from January 1st, 1795 (Radishchev 1952: 474) and 79, from January 1797 (Radishchev 1952: 488). Thanking his patron for his enduring financial support, the writer repeatedly stressed the emotional significance, to him and his family, of Vorontsov's almsgiving, a theme at the centre of Greuze's painting of 1773, *La dame de charité*.

Illustration 8: Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *La dame de charité (bienfaisante)* (painting, 1773), engraving © collection of Rodolphe Baudin

There is no formal evidence that Radishchev had a special interest in Greuze. The only contemporary French painter he mentioned in his work was Claude Joseph Vernet (1714-1789), in the chapter 'Chudovo' from his *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow* (Radishchev 1938: 235). However, Radishchev's patron Vorontsov may have possessed a painting by Greuze, as suggested by the catalogue of his rich art collection.[1] Besides, the French artist was popular not only among Russian art collectors, who would frantically purchase his famous 'heads' (Novosel'skaia 1992: 63): he was also popular among *literati* close to the aesthetics of sentiment, from the anonymous author of a paper dedicated to Greuze published in *Sankt-Peterburgskii vestnik* in 1779 to the already mentioned Karamzin, who referred to him in *Letters of a Russian Traveller* (Kochetkova 1994: 203-204). The French painter was also popular with the poet Ivan Khemnitser, who visited his studio in Paris in 1777 with the architect Nikolai L'vov, and later

[1] I thank Maia Lavrinovich for this information. The canvas in question, entitled *Dying old man surrounded by his family* (*Umiraiushchii starik v nedre semeistva*) is mentioned in the *Opis' Andreevskogo doma* of 1806. See RGADA, f. 1261, op. 11, d. 3458, l. 27. It is likely that this canvas is the 1763 painting by Greuze called *The paralysed man* (*Paralitik*), now in the collections of the Ermitage: https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/01.+Paintings/37493/?lng=ru <accessed 31 December 2021>.

wrote two fables directly inspired by his canvases (Sechin 2018: 275-278).

Whether Radishchev knew Greuze or not, what really matters is that the French painter's work shared a common grammar of sentiment with the Russian writer's epistolary depictions.[2] This grammar was so popular as a form of emotional mediation among contemporaries that other subjects treated by Greuze could also apply to situations which happened to Radishchev, but which he preferred not to mention in his letters to Vorontsov. Besides filial piety, Greuze's visual narratives of father-son relationships also depicted intergenerational conflicts, as in the famous 1778 diptych *The Ungrateful Son* and *The Punished Son*. Strikingly, this diptych could also be applied to Radishchev's biography. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, Radishchev's father was ashamed of his son's condemnation, as well as of his almost incestuous relationship with his sister-in-law in Siberia, which prompted the old man to call his son a 'Tatar' (Baudin, 2008b: 170). This antagonism between father and son was close to the subject of Greuze's canvases and suggested their use as an illustration to Radishchev's fate. If Radishchev knew them and ever considered them that way, they might have offered him some comfort, as they offered a double narrative of condemnation *and* pardon, of family lost *and* family restored, which would obviously be meaningful to the exiled writer.

As historians of Greuze have argued, the economy of feeling developed by the painter relied on the presence of an ideal observer. As Janie Vanpée put it, Greuze's paintings 'posit a viewer, anticipate and map his gaze, and [...] actively engage his participation' (Vanpée 1988: 51). Like the French painter's canvases, Radishchev's textual tableaux needed the participation of an ideal viewer/reader, whose role Vorontsov was invited to play. In order to secure Vorontsov's proper participation in the device, however, the exiled writer first needed to portray his patron as the ideal sentimental observer.

In order to do so, Radishchev repeatedly mentioned Voron-

[2] This grammar of feelings was also developed in contemporary drama, an issue addressed in Andrei Zorin's monograph *Poiavlenie geroia* (Zorin 2016). As Diderot's interest in both painting and drama suggest, the two art forms were closely connected in the aesthetics of sentimentalism.

tsov's sensibility, as in letter 34, from October 22nd, 1790, where he wrote: 'Извините, ваше сиятельство, долготу моего письма. Изливаю скорбь свою пред сердцем чувствительным' [May Your Excellency excuse the length of my letter. I am pouring out my sadness before a tender heart] (Radishchev 1952: 348), or in letter 63, from April 4th, 1792, where he wrote: 'Je connais votre coeur sensible et ce qu'il vous en aura coûté' [I know your tender heart and know what this must have cost you] (Radishchev 1952: 436).

As a man of feeling, Vorontsov was also supposed to enjoy moving stories, which Radishchev was eager to provide, as in letter 38, from March 15th, 1791, in which he told Vorontsov about the generosity of people from the countryside, who fed the inhabitants of Tobolsk when they were left without bread after a fire (Radishchev 1952: 358).

Better still than written anecdotes were the visual ones provided by drama. Any true man of feeling, therefore, was supposed to be moved by the theatre, which prompted Radishchev to suggest that good men, including – of course! – his patron, had a taste for tragedy. In letter 63 from April 4th, 1792, he wrote:

> Celui qui n'a jamais senti une larme humecter le bord de sa paupière, est près d'être atroce, il est dur. (Voilà, par parenthèse, ce que l'on peut dire des personnes qui n'aiment pas les tragédies). (Radishchev 1952: 437)
>
> He who never felt a tear watering the border of his eye is not far from being atrocious: he is hard. (By the way, this can be said of the people who don't like tragedies).

This emphasis on the importance of tragedy was aimed at asserting the superiority of visual narratives over strictly verbal ones, especially for narratives about victimhood. Indeed, letter 48, from July 24th, 1791, clearly showed the writer's opinion about the limitations of textual accounts of suffering:

> Mais en évitant d'être ennuyeux, je pourrais bien ennuyer Votre Excellence; ainsi je fais trève à mes jérémiades. (Radishchev 1952: 386)
>
> Trying not to be boring, I could very well end up boring Your Excellency; so

> I'll just bring my jeremiads to an end.

A true man of feeling, sensible to moving anecdotes, especially of a visual kind, Vorontsov was ready to participate in Radishchev's sensible tableaux. This participation included entering the action depicted in the exiled writer's visual anecdotes. Indeed, as Emma Barker explains, elaborating on Janie Vanpée's intuition about the dynamic role of the observer of visual sentimental narratives, Greuze's canvases 'draw the viewer into the scene' (Barker 2007: 116), turning him into an actor of the action depicted. In Radishchev's Siberian letters, this 'work against [the barrier] separating the work of art from the observing subject, fiction from reality' (Barker 2007: 111), is clearly visible. It was activated through a specific two-step mirroring device, which the end of this study will address in detail.

Radishchev started by suggesting that Vorontsov was himself an actor in moving tableaux, very similar to the ones the writer was drawing about his own life. In letter 63, from April 4th, 1792, he offered his correspondent the sentimental tableau of Vorontsov's supposed behaviour in the moving instant of his sister Ekaterina Dashkova's death:

> Je me représente comment, assis auprès du lit de la douleur, vous cherchiez à consoler et celle qui se sentait mourir pour alléger ses souffrances, et ceux qui restaient après elle et la larme du cœur s'ouvrait un passage dans vos yeux. (Radishchev 1952: 436-437)
>
> I can picture how, sitting next to her bed of sorrow, you tried to comfort both her, as she was feeling herself dying, in order to soften her suffering, and those who were to remain after her, and how a tear from the heart found its way up to your eyes.

After having shown that Vorontsov too could be an actor in moving tableaux, Radishchev invited his patron to enter his own tableaux by identifying with his *protégé*. Here, Radishchev was building on an urge frequently experienced by viewers of sentimental canvases. As Barker has shown, many viewers of Greuze's work in the eighteenth century wished they were characters from his paintings: 'Yes, I would desire to be either the

son-in-law or the father', exclaimed the narrator of a poem on Greuze by Abbot Aubert (Barker 2007: 117). In Radishchev's case, this process had been prepared by the writer's efforts to erase his guilt and stress his status as a victim, as well as by his self-fashioning as the hero of a narrative about family virtue, all of which made him an acceptable figure for identification in the eyes of Vorontsov.

The second aspect of Radishchev's mirroring device concerned the use of the father figure inside and outside the world depicted by his visual narratives. Just as the writer's tableaux presented him as a good father, loving his children and protecting them from the evil people of Ilimsk and striving to help his brother Petr improve morally, the mirroring effect of the writer's correspondence presented Vorontsov as a good father to Radishchev, protecting him from the evil people of Ilimsk and inviting him to improve morally. Letter 37, from March 8th, 1791, had Radishchev ask Vorontsov for 'des conseils d'ami, de père' [friendly, even fatherly advice] (Radishchev 1952: 351), a metaphor which the writer kept on using throughout his whole Siberian correspondence, calling news from his patron in letter 77, from January 30th, 1796, 'une exhortation, une correction paternelle' [an exhortation, or a fatherly scolding] (Radishchev 1952: 483). As for letters 76, from November 20th, 1795 and 78, from June 9th, 1796, they both stressed the importance of Vorontsov's (fatherly) protection against ill-intended local officials (Radishchev 1952: 478, 485).

This identification turned Radishchev into Vorontsov's local doppelganger, as suggested by the writer's claims that his benevolent activity as an amateur physician in Ilimsk was only the implementation of his patron's benevolence, since he was the one who had sent a medical kit to Siberia:

> La caisse de médecine intacte presque, est à présent souvent visitée; et puisqu'un effet n'existerait pas sans sa cause suffisante, pensez que c'est à vous dans un éloignement de 1/7 de toute la périphérie de la terre, il y aura des êtres, sinon de raison, au moins des êtres sensibles et souffrants, qui vous devront tantôt un membre, tantôt l'usage de tous, et quelquefois le prolongement des jours [...]. (Letter 61, from February 17th,

1792, Radishchev 1952: 424)

> The medical kit, which had remained almost untouched until recently, is now largely in use; and for there is no consequence without a proper cause, think that it is thanks to you that, one seventh of the surface of the earth away, creatures, if not reasonable, at least sensitive and suffering, will be in your debt, sometimes for a limb, sometimes for use of all their limbs, and occasionally for the very preservation of their life [...].

The mirroring device developed by Radishchev in his letters to Vorontsov fulfilled the goal pursued by Greuze's sentimental visual narratives. As Barker puts it, 'on a schematic level, the tableau [...] involves a fundamental drive toward fusion; it aims at the dissolution of the barriers separating entities' (Barker 2007: 111). A similar dissolution characterizes Radishchev's letter 61 from February 17th, 1792. First, the letter depicts the writer's tears flowing out from his eyes onto Vorontsov's heart, in a movement abolishing the distance between the tableau and the viewer:

> Celles qui coulent de mes yeux au moment que je vous écris, vous en dirai-je le principe? Non, toutes pleines du sentiment qui les fait couler, qu'elles se versent sur votre cœur généreux! (Radishchev 1952: 424).
>
> Shall I tell you of the cause of the tears, bursting out of my eyes as I am writing these lines? No, may they simply flow on your generous heart, full of the feeling, which drew them in the first place!

Second, in a reverse movement, from the viewer to the tableau, the letter suggests that a dissection of Radishchev's body after his death would reveal Vorontsov's portrait engraved on his heart:

> Si nos sentiments moraux pouvaient se graver en traits physiques et déchiffrables, à ma mort en me disséquant on trouverait votre image empreinte dans mon cœur. (Radishchev 1952: 426).

> If our moral sentiments could receive decipherable, human features, on the day of my death, while dissecting me, people would discover your picture engraved on my heart.

This dissolution of the fourth, invisible wall of the stage helped to complete the establishment of a community of men of feeling, in which no obstacle could prevent the circulation of empathy and in which 'through identifying with the suffering of a fellow human being, the viewer is drawn into the role of support to the weak and dependent' (Barker 2007: 117).

**Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to highlight the way in which Radishchev conceived his Siberian letters to Vorontsov as a form of emotional entertainment. Not only did the writer use his letters to his former patron as an 'extimate' (Lejeune) diary promising the sort of transparency that men of feeling had been longing for since Rousseau. Using tropes from the sentimental grammar of the time, he turned the verbal expression of his emotional life into a visual delight, comparable with the pleasures provided by the celebrated canvases of Greuze. This helped him offer his patron an immersive experience, aimed at maximising Vorontsov's emotional pleasure in order to secure his lasting political protection and material support. Two features, however, seem to differentiate Radishchev's sentimental device from the model provided by Greuze's paintings. The first one concerns gender. If largely masculine, the narratives of virtue offered by the French painter did include active female characters, as in his celebrated *La Dame de charité*, where the embodiment of benevolence are a young lady and her mother. In other works by Greuze, female characters even had an erotic appeal, meant to attract the male gaze. In Radishchev's letters, as I have argued elsewhere, the body of the writer's public self was used to conceal his real intimacy, including his hidden sexual relations with his sister-in-law (Baudin 2008a: 317-319). As I have tried to demonstrate in the present paper, the narratives of virtue offered by his tableaux fulfilled the same function. The exclusion of active feminine characters from Radishchev's tableaux, however, had one more meaning. It allowed the writer to neglect the benevolent

role of Catherine II who, after all, had commuted his death sentence to exile in Ilimsk (McConnell 1964: 121). This exclusion of active female actors from Radishchev's narrative helped reduce it to a purely masculine tale about virtue, dominated, as we have seen, by father and son figures. Certainly, this testifies to the strong influence of masculine ideas about stoicism and education popularized by Rousseau. It is, however, also typical of the patronage system, which dominated the social life of the serving nobility in eighteenth-century Russia. This specific system also produced the second significant difference between Greuze's and Radishchev's devices. Whereas the economy of feelings programmed by Greuze's paintings was a market one, hypothetically offering the position of viewer to anyone willing to pay for his paintings or the engravings printed after them, the economy of feelings programmed by the former Russian civil servant was a closed circuit, in which the patron directly supported his protégé, just as in the literary economy of court classicism (Humphreys 1969: 91). The only innovation there were the textual tableaux of virtue, which hid this archaic social mechanism behind the enjoyable consumption of narratives about benevolence in a utopian emotional community.

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Illustration 1, Freudenberger, Le Retour du soldat suisse

Illustration 2, Isabey, Le départ à la guerre et Le retour


Illustration 3, Jean-Baptiste Greuze, Les sevreuses


Illustration 4, Jean-Baptiste Greuze, La lecture de la Bible


Illustration 5, Jean-Baptiste Greuze, Le gâteau des rois

Illustration 6, Jean-Baptiste Greuze, L'aveugle trompé


Illustration 7, Jean-Baptiste Greuze, La piété filiale

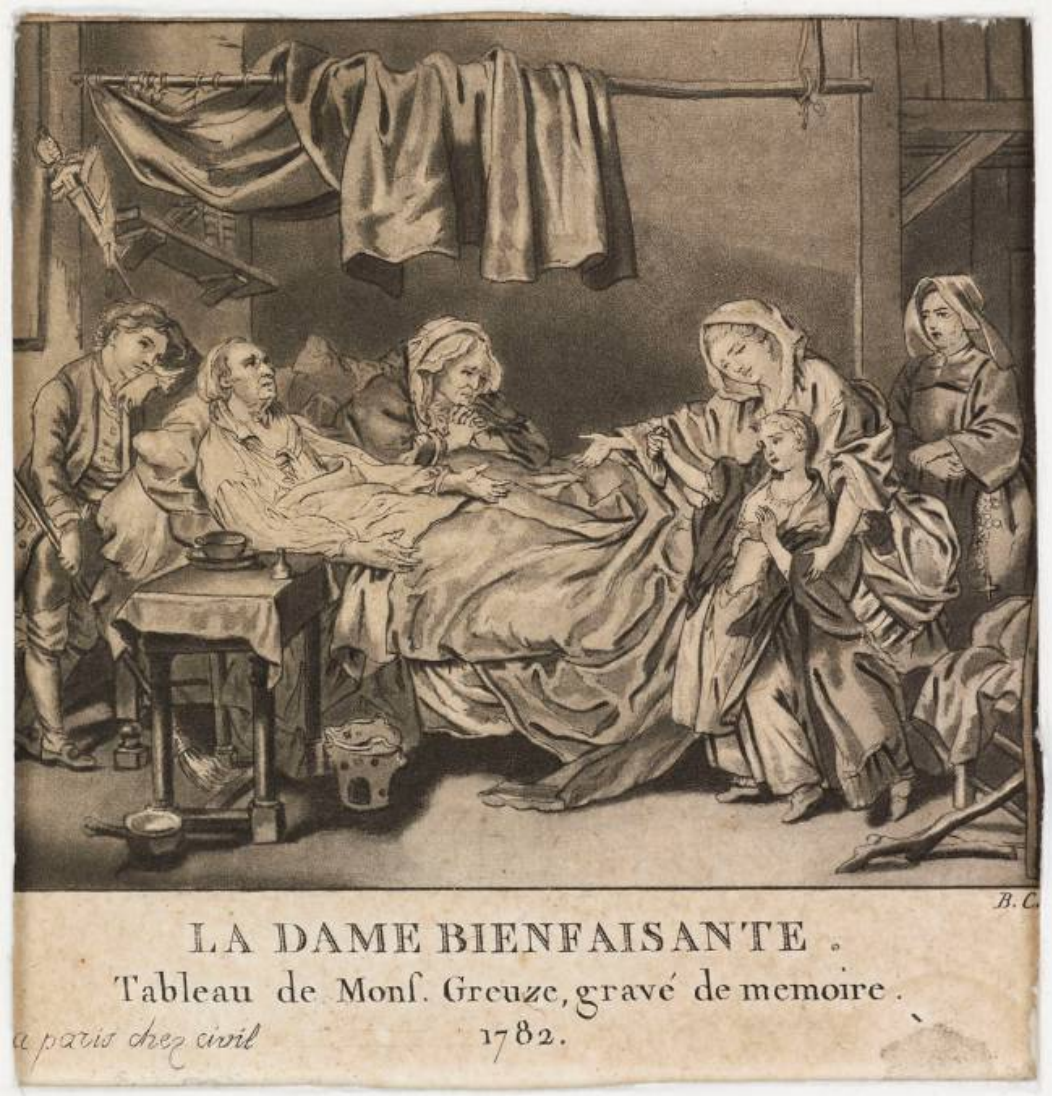


Illustration 8, Jean-Baptiste Greuze, La dame de charité (bienfaisante)